



UNIVERSITY OF  
THE THIRD AGE

Benalla & District Inc.



*Programme Notes 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2019*



*1863 - age 23*

*Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky*

*The Earlier Years*

Tchaikovsky is widely considered the most popular Russian composer in history. His work was first publicly performed in 1865. In 1868, his *First Symphony* was well-received. In 1874, he established himself with *Piano Concerto No.1 in B-flat Minor*.



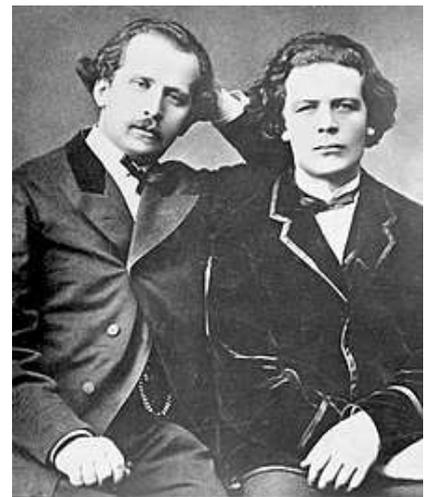
The Tchaikovsky family in 1848. Left to right: Pyotr, Alexandra Andreyevna (mother), Alexandra (sister) Zinaida, Nikolai, Ippolit, Ilya Petrovich (father)

Born on May 7, 1840, in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka, Russia, 600 miles (960 kms) to east of Moscow in the foothills of the Ural Mountains, he was the second eldest of his parents' six surviving offspring. Tchaikovsky's father, Ilya, worked as a mine inspector and metal works manager.

When he was just five years old, Tchaikovsky began taking piano lessons. Although he displayed an early passion for music, his parents hoped that he would grow up to work in the civil service. At the age of 10, Tchaikovsky began attending the Imperial School of Jurisprudence, a boarding school in St. Petersburg. His mother, Alexandra, died of cholera in 1854, when he was 14 years old. In 1859, Tchaikovsky honoured his parents' wishes by taking up a bureau clerk post with the Ministry of Justice — a post he would hold for four years, during which time he became increasingly fascinated with music.

When he was 21, Tchaikovsky decided to take music lessons at the Russian Musical Society. A few months later, he enrolled at Anton Rubenstein's newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory, becoming one of the school's first composition students and which turned a clerk in the Ministry of Justice and man-about-town with a taste for gay affairs into a practical-minded composer.

Finding Anton Rubenstein demanding and critical, Tchaikovsky, shortly after graduating, was quick to accept an offer in 1866 from Rubenstein's brother, Nikolai, of the position of Professor of Composition at the Moscow Conservatorium which he has just founded. Here, his unique ability to look both outwards towards Europe and inwards at Russia, combined with a tendency to gloomy introspection, led his distinctive 'sound' to become, for many, the very definition of 'Russian music'. Back when Borodin was a chemist, Balakirev a mathematician, and Rimsky-Korsakov a naval officer, Tchaikovsky became his country's first successful professional composer.



Anton (right) and Nikolai Rubenstein

Considered suspiciously cosmopolitan by the so-called 'Mighty Handful' (Borodin, Balakirev, Rimsky Korsakov, Mussorgsky and Cui), his translation to Moscow on accepting a Conservatory professorship only served to drive a wedge between himself and the St Petersburg Five.

Tchaikovsky was viciously criticised in his time for many things: “he was not Russian enough”, “a rogue composer” and for “lack of form”. A Leipzig music critic once suggested he should “come to live in Germany for a few years and learn how to compose properly”.

(Acknowledgement: Biography.com and Semyon Bychkov in ‘Limelight’ Magazine – September 2019)

## The Music of the Earlier Years

Tchaikovsky’s compositional life dates from 1863, the year of his graduation from the St Petersburg Conservatorium, until 1893 the year of his death. For the purpose of this exercise the ‘early years’ will be from 1867 – the year following his appointment to the Moscow Conservatorium and the year of his first published work, his Opus 1 – until 1876. The years following being the period of most of his more famous works.

### Scherzo à la russe in B-flat minor, Op. 1, No. 1



The *Scherzo à la russe* in B-flat minor, Op. 1, No. 1 was written early in 1867 in Moscow. It was Tchaikovsky's first published composition. It is based on a Russian folk tune in B-flat major that the composer had earlier used in his first attempt to write a string quartet.

There is one movement: *Allegro moderato* – lasting around 7 minutes in performance.

The *Scherzo* was written early in 1867 at the request of Nikolay Rubinstein, and originally had the title *Capriccio*. The first performance was given by Nikolai Rubinstein at a special Royal Musical Society concert in Moscow on 31 March/12 April 1867. The other piece in the work was called “*Impromptu*” in E-flat minor, Op. 1, No. 2.

The pianist for this performance is not acknowledged. The YouTube link is:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=q41EhPjgduw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q41EhPjgduw)

### String Quartet No.1 in D Major, Op.11

The occasion which led Tchaikovsky to compose *String Quartet No.1* in 1871 was the proposal of an all-Tchaikovsky concert by the Moscow Conservatory at which Tchaikovsky was a meagrely paid professor, by no means well-known either in Russia or abroad. To the contrary, he was virtually unknown. Tchaikovsky recognized that such a concert would bring him to the attention of the general musical public, at least Russia and if well attended, would supplement his negligible professor's salary. His economic distress made it impossible for him to engage an orchestra which ruled out any orchestral works and the necessity for programmatic variety meant that he had to put on something more than just piano solos, or violin and piano sonatas. The offer by his friend Ferdinand Laub, first violinist of the Russian Musical Society Quartet, to play without fee made writing a quartet for the concert an obvious choice.

The Quartet begins *Moderato e semplice*, (Moderately and simply) the first theme is dominated by its syncopated striking rhythm. The second theme, introduced by the viola, is also rhythmically intricate. Near the movement's end, the players are instructed to pick up the tempo gradually and to "play with fire" which gives an exciting flourish to the ending.

The second movement, *Andante Cantabile*, is certainly one of the most famous pieces Tchaikovsky ever wrote. The melody from the midsection became an "international hit" and has become known through various transcriptions to millions the world over, few of whom ever heard it performed in its original scoring. Tolstoy, however, was one of those who did and is said to have been reduced to tears afterwards. The movement is based on a folksong which Tchaikovsky said he had heard from a carpenter. The words to this marvellous melody, however, are somewhat less than enthralling: "Vanya sat on the couch and sat drinking vodka." The melody, as Tchaikovsky set it, begins quietly with muted strings. He makes no attempt to develop the subject before introducing the famous theme of the midsection which is sung by the first violin to the cello's pizzicato accompaniment.



The Kontras Quartet

Next comes an upbeat scherzo, *Allegro non tanto e con fuoco*, full of rhythmic drive and syncopation.

The finale, *Allegro giusto*, opens with a simple but sprightly theme of great energy. The second theme, introduced by the viola, is Russian in character, slower and more noble.

We listen to the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement – *Andante Cantabile* – as played by the Kontras Quartet.

The link to YouTube is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDQuWlz37iw>

## Symphony No.1 in G minor Op.13 (“Winter Daydreams”)

Immediately after graduating from the then newly-established St Petersburg Conservatory, Tchaikovsky was offered a teaching post at the even newer Moscow Conservatory, and it was during his early months there that he composed the First Symphony. The symphony turned out to be a wonderful and original piece, full of natural, spontaneous talent, and containing everything that listeners have always prized in



Tchaikovsky's music. Later works would be more subtly composed; but from the beginning there is colour, drama, melody, and an unmistakable personality in this music.

'Winter Daydreams' is descriptive enough of the general mood of the first movement, though hardly appropriate for the symphony as a whole; nor is 'Land of gloom, land of mists' the appealing description for the lovely slow movement. The titles suggest that he wanted to present the whole work as a sort of Russian landscape, perhaps identifying the symphony with the tradition of Mendelssohn's 'Italian' and 'Scottish' symphonies.



Tchaikovsky didn't give his third or fourth movements any titles, but if he'd wanted to follow the idea of a landscape he might have given some suggestion of sunshine sparkling on crisp snow for the scherzo third movement.

This is actually an orchestral transcription (with modifications) of a movement from a piano sonata he had written a year earlier. (Acknowledgement: Hyperion-Records Co.UK).

We listen to the Scherzo movement played by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Paavo Järvi.

The YouTube link for the complete symphony is:

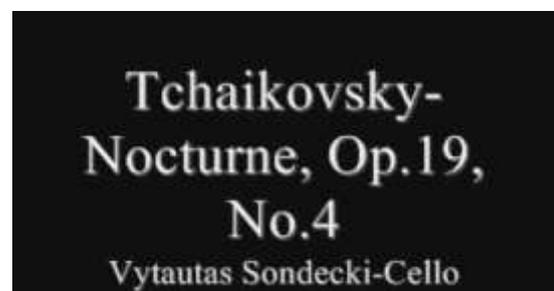
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oclaifkPwyU&t=1826s>

The scherzo movement begins at 23 minutes 7 seconds.

## Six Pieces, Op. 19

'Six Pieces' Op. 19 is the first collection of piano pieces composed by Tchaikovsky in the summer and autumn of 1873 and which contributed significantly to his growing renown as an important Russian composer. The six pieces were composed during his time as professor of theory at the Moscow Conservatoire and are said to have been arranged as a piano suite he quickly tossed off for some ready cash.

The Nocturne is the fourth of the six pieces and while originally composed for the piano, its mournful principal melody works perfectly on a legato instrument such as the cello. Hence fifteen years later Tchaikovsky orchestrated it for a performance at a Paris concert of his music.



The transcription's musical substance doesn't differ at all from the piano original, however. Marked 'Andante sentimentale', the Nocturne begins with a haunting cello soliloquy interrupted by a more flowing, less night or evening-like mid-section. A miniature cello cadenza leads to a reprise of the first section, the cello singing the melody as before, but now with a more ornate accompaniment, the flute providing an involved countersubject.

A portion of the nocturne was borrowed years later by Stravinsky as one of the tunes he incorporated (at a slightly faster tempo) into his ballet score "The Fairy's Kiss".

The cellist for our performance is Vytautas Sondeckis accompanied by the Lithuanian State Orchestra conducted by Saulius Sondeckis.

The link to YouTube is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Qh4kJtKNA>



### Swan Lake Ballet Op. 20

Swan Lake was composed in 1875 after Tchaikovsky received a commission from Vladimir Petrovich Begichev, the intendant of Moscow's Russian Imperial Theatres. The ballet's content is based on a Russian folktale, and over the course of two acts, tells the story of a princess turned into a swan.

Much is unknown about the original production of Swan Lake – no notes, techniques, or instructions concerning the ballet were written down. What little information that could be found exists in a handful of letters and memos. Like The Nutcracker, Swan Lake was unsuccessful after its first year of performance.

Conductors, dancers, and audiences alike thought Tchaikovsky's music was far too complicated and the ballet dancers, in particular, had difficulty dancing to the music. The production's original choreography by German ballet master, Julius Reisinger, was criticized harshly as uninspiring and unoriginal. It wasn't until after Tchaikovsky's death that Swan Lake was revived – and revised (in 1895) by choreographer/dancers of the Russian Imperial Theatre. Performances of Swan Lake today, are likely to feature the revised choreography.



### The Meaning of the Swan

We do know that Tchaikovsky was granted a great deal of control over the story's content. He and his colleagues both agreed that the swan represented womanhood in its purest form. The stories and legends of swan-maidens date as far back as ancient Greece; eg: when the Greek god Apollon was born, flying swans circled above their heads. Legends of swan maidens can also be found in The Tales of the Thousand and One Nights and other writings.

Swan Lake is known for its demanding technical skills and the magnitude of skill required to dance the part of Odette in Swan Lake is why the ballet remains a favourite for many girls. The prestige that comes with performing Swan Lake flawlessly is invaluable and can turn ballerinas into stars overnight.

## The Story of "Swan Lake"

"Swan Lake" is a timeless love story that mixes magic, tragedy, and romance into four acts. It features Prince Siegfried and a lovely swan princess named Odette. Under the spell of a sorcerer, Odette spends her days as a swan swimming on a lake of tears and her nights in her beautiful human form.

The couple quickly falls in love. As in most fairy tales, things are not that easy and the sorcerer has more tricks to play. That brings Odile – the sorcerer's daughter – into the picture. Confusion, forgiveness, and a happy ending with Siegfried and Odette together forever round off the ballet.



We watch the opening scene where Prince Siegfried arrives at his 21st birthday celebration on the palace courtyards. Here, he finds all of the royal families and townspeople dancing and celebrating, while the young girls are anxiously seeking his attention.

We then turn to Scene 2 where, on a hunting expedition for swans, Siegfried has become separated from his friends. He arrives at the lakeside clearing, just as a flock of swans land and as night begins to fall Odette resumes human form. Falling in love they dance an exquisite Pas de Deux.



Meanwhile various subsets of swans, dance, including the memorable 'pas de quartre': "Dance of the Little Swans."

Why has this dance been singled out for enduring fame? Perhaps because of its traditional role in showcasing up-and-coming dancers from the corps de ballet, or the novel choreography requiring four identically-moving dancers. But its fame surely has something to do with its striking instrumentation, which contrasts so strongly with the lush orchestration in the rest of the ballet. The dance highlights the double reed instrument family at their quackiest. The bassoon plays a bouncy bass line while two oboes play the melody in parallel thirds, much like the dancers stepping together.



The choreography—created for the famous revival of Swan Lake in 1895—was meant to imitate the way cygnets huddle and move together for protection.

Four dancers enter the stage in a line and move across with their arms crossed in front of one another, grasping the next dancers' hands. They move sideways, doing sixteen 'pas de chat' (meaning 'cat's step'. It gets its name because the step resembles how a cat jumps). Ideally the dancers move in exact or near-exact unison. At the very end, they break their chain and try to "fly", only to drop to the ground.

(Acknowledgement: [liveabout.com](http://liveabout.com)).

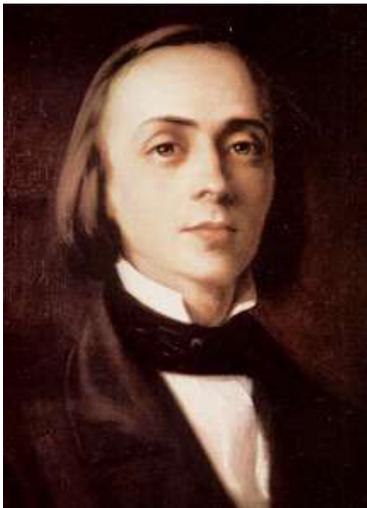
The performance of the opening scene and the Pas de Deux is by the Kirov Ballet, one of the two major ballet companies of Russia (the other being the Bolshoi Ballet). The complete ballet can be found on YouTube at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rJob7y6Ncs&t=3219s>

The Pas de Deux can be found at 42 minutes and 50 seconds into the Ballet. While the Dance of the Little Swans follows straight on, the version we watch is by The Premiers Danseurs du Corps de Ballet de l'Opéra National de Paris and can be viewed separately on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xd2nTXsivHs>

## **Piano Concerto No.1 in B flat minor OP. 23**

Tchaikovsky composed his 1st Piano Concerto during an intensive period of composition at the end of 1874, with the orchestrations then written in the February of the following year. However, after this very productive period, Tchaikovsky evidently wasn't happy: the work was updated some four years later and then revised again as late as 1889



A young Hans von Bulow

The thunderously triumphant opening chords of this mighty concerto are among the most famous in all classical music. At the time of composition, though, they were by no means universally loved. (When Tchaikovsky had a play through of the concerto with Nicolai Rubinstein, Rubinstein declared it to be "worthless, unplayable, hackneyed, clumsy, awkward, trite and vulgar!", which led Tchaikovsky to change the dedication of the work from Rubenstein to German pianist Hans von Bulow).

All three movements of this deeply expressive concerto are sublimely romantic – with both a lower-case and an upper-case R. The expansive, sweeping opening movement is showy; the middle movement, meanwhile, contains soulful melodies with some beautiful interplay between the soloist and orchestra; and the edge-of-your-seat finale is an electrifying thrill from start to finish.

Some eighty-odd years after Tchaikovsky sketched out his initial ideas for his Piano Concerto No. 1, it became the first piece of classical music to sell a million records.

(Acknowledgement: [classicfm.com](http://classicfm.com)).

The form of the concerto is lopsided: possessing a notably large scale introduction, the broad melodies of the first movement run its length out to nearly 25 minutes, more than the length of the two remaining movements combined. Its arresting opening horn call, with bold orchestral chords interrupting, leads immediately to one of the most recognizable and beloved of classical melodies, played by strings with rich harmonic support from the piano solo.

Tchaikovsky initiates a great formal surprise by going straightway into a full-fledged cadenza for the piano solo, a powerful treatment of the theme. The strings then reassert the melody in its original form - and all this is only the introduction to the first movement proper.

A lengthy introduction to be sure, but once it ends that's the last time in the concerto this music is used in any way. The movement proper is a full-scale sonata-allegro



Yefim Bronfman play the B minor concerto  
accompanied by the Orchestra de Paris  
Conducted by Paavo Järvi

treatment of two themes, one reputedly a Ukrainian folk theme, the other a gentle romantic theme.

There is great drama and passion in its working out; when it is all over one realizes that there is also a minimum (for Tchaikovsky) of angst and pathos.

(Acknowledgement : allmusic.com)

We listen to the first movement. The pianist for our performance is Yefim Bronfman. He is accompanied by the Orchestre de Paris conducted by Paavo Jarvi.

The YouTube link (complete concerto) is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eVmp-fhNbE&t=1374s>

## Eugene Onegin Op. 24



Tchaikovsky and Antonina  
on their honeymoon, 1877

Tchaikovsky started work on an operatic treatment of Pushkin's great verse novel, Eugene Onegin, in the spring of 1877, at the same time his extraordinary letter-writing affair with Antonina Milyukova, a former pupil, began. He was deeply struck by the parallels between Tatiana's love and Onegin's treatment of her and the similar letters from Antonina and his own response. Tchaikovsky's revisions of Pushkin reinforce the biographical connections, as life became an odd counterpoint to art in the creation of his new opera, or, as he preferred, "lyric scenes."

The inevitably disastrous marriage of Tchaikovsky and Milyukova took place in July, 1877. The composer almost immediately fled the relationship, although he never divorced Antonina. He completed the sketches for Onegin during his correspondence with Antonina, and, after a break to compose his Fourth Symphony, finished orchestrating the opera in the early months of 1878, while travelling in Italy in the emotionally highly charged aftermath of the marriage.

*Onegin* is a group of telling, deeply felt character portraits in the context of a sharp social critique. Tchaikovsky thought that what he had created was so unusual that it would not be done properly by conventional professional performers, so the premiere took place in March, 1879, with students from the Moscow Conservatory, conducted by Nikolai Rubinstein.

Tchaikovsky created most of the libretto himself (with help from his friend Konstantin Shilovsky), retaining Pushkin's verse wherever possible. It is condensed and episodic; one reason for the "lyric scenes" rubric.



*Onegin*



*Tatyana*



*Lensky*



*Olga*

The first two acts take place on the country estate of the Larin family, where the sisters Tatyana and Olga live. Olga's fiancé Lensky arrives with his friend Eugene Onegin, to whom Tatyana is immediately attracted. At night, Tatyana pours her pent-up feelings in a letter to Onegin.

When he subsequently replies that he can give her only a brotherly affection and that she should be more discreet about revealing so much, she is crushed to silence.



Act II begins with a ball celebrating Tatyana's name day, attended by Onegin and Lensky. Bored and irritated by the soir e, Onegin dances and flirts with Olga. Lensky becomes jealously enraged, Olga exacerbates the situation by telling Lensky he is over-reacting, and the two friends quarrel publicly, to the point that Lensky challenges Onegin to a duel and the ball ends in horrified confusion. The next morning, both men regret the confrontation but are honour-bound to

go through with the duel, and Onegin kills Lensky.

Act III takes place several years later, at a noble house in St. Petersburg – an upscale version of the country party that began Act II. Onegin, returned from an exile self-imposed in remorse, is astonished to find that the beautiful hostess is Tatyana, now married to a prince. Onegin realizes that he does indeed love Tatyana, and now writes a letter to her. When they meet later, Tatyana admits that she does still love him, but refuses to leave her husband, instead leaving Onegin alone and shattered.



(Acknowledgement: John Henken – laphil.com)

The Entracte and Waltz at the beginning of Act 2 are from the film of a 1988 production from the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. The Chorus and Orchestra are conducted by Sir Georg Solti. The complete opera is on YouTube at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1Crz87zAfl>

The 6½ minute clip we watch commences at 49 minutes 40 seconds into the film.

### Marche Slave Op. 31



Csar Alexander III

If Tchaikovsky was not an avowed musical nationalist, he was still patriotic enough to rouse orchestral Russianness when the occasion demanded. The occasion for Marche Slave (Slavonic March) was a benefit concert held in 1876 to raise funds for soldiers wounded in the Turko-Serbian war, a war which, because of Czar Alexander II's sympathy for the Serbs, developed into armed conflict between Turkey and Russia.



For this March, Tchaikovsky drew upon folk materials of the strongest Slavic character, beginning with the dirge-like main theme taken from a Serbian folk song. In the agitated, dynamic middle section, the composer quotes the Russian national anthem, "God Save the

Czar," a theme which also figures prominently in the 1812 Overture. Russians hearing the March in 1876 could hardly have failed to respond to Tchaikovsky's fervent emotionalism as conveyed by his orchestral brilliance, and the piece was, of course, an immediate success.

(Acknowledgement: Orrin Howard - hollywoodbowl.com).

It opens with a theme in the bassoons of a somewhat melancholy character, which is soon changed by trumpet flourishes and the strains of the Russian National Hymn, into an impressive march, purely Slavic in rhythm and colour. While it bears some relation to the "1812 overture," it is a more enthusiastically patriotic composition than the latter.

Our performance is by the Russian National Orchestra conducted by Mikhail Pletnev.  
The YouTube link is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSf8uF5UE-U>