

**Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra Concert Program Notes, by Geoffrey D. Decker
February 23, 2019**

Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60, by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Coming in between two giants of the entire symphonic repertoire – Beethoven’s Symphonies No. 3, the “Eroica,” and No. 5 – his *Symphony No. 4* is perhaps the least popular of all his symphonies and was undoubtedly already so by the end of the nineteenth century. Sadly, it is often relegated to the pile of works considered lacking in gravity, heroism, and drama, a heap on which few of Beethoven’s works should ever belong. This is because the work is misunderstood.

Richard Wagner once referred to the Beethoven’s Fourth as “cold music” (although he thought the Scherzo third movement “glorious”). Hector Berlioz understood it better when he said that, in the Fourth, Beethoven had abandoned “ode and elegy . . . in order to turn back to the less sublime and less stormy, but no less difficult, style of the Second Symphony.” He goes on to say, “The character [of the Fourth] is generally lively, fresh, serene or celestially delicate.”

Berlioz’s characterization of Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony, as lively, fresh, and serene is very accurate. Performances of the work have not helped. Performances given in the style and with the heaviness characterized by the Third and Fifth Symphonies hide and defeat Beethoven’s purpose in this work. Performances imbued with the right rhythmic vitality and focusing on its delicate characteristics, displayed especially in its many delicate woodwind passages and solos, help to elevate the work to its rightful place among the Beethoven symphonies.

With the Fourth, Beethoven clarified everything he composed in a glance back to Joseph Haydn. In fact, the orchestra of the Fourth is that of Haydn, and the length is the same as Beethoven’s own First and Second Symphonies. Beethoven’s desire for the transparency of Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart led even to sacrificing a second flute! In the words of Robert Schumann, Beethoven composed a work of “Grecian slenderness.” Yet, in spite of his efforts, every chord and every note bears the stamp of Beethoven, a characteristic that is one of the wonders of this score.

Unlike the Third Symphony, which immediately launches into something of great momentum, the Fourth opens with a slow introduction like that of Haydn’s late symphonies. But, from the very beginning, one is taken aback by the weight and expansiveness of the introduction, one that, as annotator Stefan Kunze writes, “at once indicates that the symphony will yield nothing in either aspiration or achievement to any of the others.” Like the first, the remaining three movements prove to be as uniquely Beethovenian as anything he composed before or after; but, as said before, they are imbued with a strong sense of rhythmic vitality, a life-or-death characteristic of this work needing great emphasis for any successful performance.

The first semi-public performance of this symphony was before “a very select company” in the palace of Prince Lobkowitz in Vienna in March of 1807. On January 14, 1808, August von Kotzebue’s journal *Der Freimütige* (The Outspoken) states that “Beethoven has written a new symphony which was liked by, at most, his rabid admirers.” This level of distaste for Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony is taken to a new level by Carl Maria von Weber, who published a scathing

satire of the work telling of a dream in which the instruments of the orchestra are complaining about the work. Of course, it is important to remember that Weber was the one who pronounced Beethoven “ripe for the madhouse” after hearing Beethoven’s beloved Seventh Symphony for the first time!

Violin Concerto, by William Walton (1902-1983)

Commissioned by the great violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz, Sir William Walton’s Violin Concerto was composed between 1938 and 1939, a period during which some of his greatest masterpieces were written. The oratorio *Belshazzar’s Feast*, his *Symphony No. 1*, the *Viola Concerto*, and the *Violin Concerto* are works upon which Walton’s reputation is built.

Although Walton made a trip to visit Heifetz in the United States in 1939 to work out some of the concerto’s details, by the time of the work’s premiere on December 7, 1939, with Heifetz and the Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Artur Rodziński, England was at war with Germany and Walton’s attending was out of the question. Although he ended up reorchestrating the concerto in 1943, it was a success at its first performance and has been part of the violin concerto repertoire ever since.

After surgery in 1938, Walton’s partner, Alice Wimborne, took him to Ravello, Italy to recover. Having known Italy since his early adulthood, he considered the country his spiritual home. It was here that he began work on the concerto and his love of the area is reflected in the composition. The work is, as described by annotator John Pickard, “suffused with Italianate warmth and a lyrical, singing quality reflecting not only the influence of *bel canto* opera, but, perhaps even more prominently, Italian popular song.” Pickard goes on to describe that the work is not only lyrical and song-like but also has sudden and unexplainable changes of mood characteristic of a Latinate volatility.

The work is in three movements with full orchestral accompaniment, including harp. The first movement, *Andante tranquillo* (slowly and calmly), opens with one of Walton’s greatest and most memorable melodies. The calm tranquility is almost nocturnal, with the main tune marked *sognando* (dreaming) but, as mentioned above, the peace and tranquility is suddenly interrupted by an outburst from the orchestra with snarling brass and typical Waltonian aggressive cross-rhythms. The movement ends with the peace and tranquility returning.

As in his other two string concertos, the middle movement is a scherzo, or playful, movement. Titled *Presto capriccioso alla napoletana* (fast and capricious in a Neapolitan style), the movement begins very personally with a tarantella, a dance said to mimic the movements of a person bitten by tarantula spider!

The work’s final movement, titled *Vivace*, or lively, is exactly that. The soloist, supported by harp and strings, plays hints and memories of themes from earlier in the concerto. The work ends with an accompanied cadenza which harkens back to Sir Edward Elgar’s *Cello Concerto* and which returns briefly to the movement’s opening that soon gives way to a coda with a rather royal-

sounding flourish from the brass finished by an upward run by the soloist and final punctuations from the orchestra.

1812 Overture, Op. 49, by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Certainly one of the biggest warhorses and party pieces of all, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* remains a favorite of audiences around the world today, more than 136 years after its first performance in Moscow on August 20, 1882. Its popularity in the United States began when Tchaikovsky famously conducted the work himself at the dedicatory concert for the newly built Carnegie Hall in New York City on May 5, 1891.

Tchaikovsky was himself dismissive of the work, written to commemorate the disastrous retreat of Napoleon and his "grande Armée" from Moscow after their defeat by the Russians and the Russian winter in 1812. When one of Tchaikovsky's friends said she liked the work, the composer asked, "But what do you see in it? The thing was written to order." Nonetheless, he knew audiences loved it and, like Sergei Rachmaninoff and his *Prelude in C-sharp Minor* for piano, he simply accepted the fact that he had to perform it in order to satisfy his public.

When asked in 1880 to write a festive work for an upcoming arts and industry exhibition, Tchaikovsky, then the most popular composer in Russia, showed an utter lack of interest and enthusiasm. His colleague Nikolai Rubenstein gave him some options. He could write an overture to inaugurate the exhibition itself, an overture celebrating the silver jubilee of Tsar Alexander II's accession to the throne, or a cantata dignifying the long-overdue opening of the huge Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer. Being that the original idea for building the cathedral was to give thanks for the Russian defeat of Napoleon and the French army, Tchaikovsky chose the latter.

Throughout the year, Tchaikovsky grumbled and in July 1880 wrote to his publisher, Jurgenson, "It is impossible to tackle without repugnance this sort of music which is destined for the glorification of something that, in essence, delights me not at all." That autumn he wrote to his patroness Nadezhda von Meck, "There is nothing more antipathetic to me than composing for the sake of some festivities or other. What, for instance, might one write on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition apart from banalities and generally noisy passages?" He then "diligently set about" composing and completed the *1812* in only a week! After its premiere in Moscow, Anton Rubinstein, Nikolai's brother, conducted a second performance of the work in St. Petersburg, and it was an instant success.

Tchaikovsky's orchestration causes problems. For example, how are the cannon shots synchronized to the score's needs, how can the right bells be found to simulate those of Moscow's churches, and where does the optional military band fit into the picture? Tchaikovsky did his best to create a picture of the Battle of Borodino and Russia's triumph over the French invaders. To inspire Russian patriotism, he used some of his own themes from previous works, most notably his opera *The Voyevoda*, the Russian Orthodox chant *Spasi, Gospodi, lyudi Tvoya* ("God, Preserve Thy People"), the Russian folk tune *U vorot* ("By the Gates"), and the Russian imperial national anthem *Bozhe, tsarya khrani* ("God, Save the Tsar"). And even though it was banned during

Napoleon's reign and did not become the French national anthem until the 1870s, he used the *Marseillaise* to represent the enemy. ("God, Save the Tsar" had also not been written by 1812!)

Despite the composer's antipathy towards its composition and for the work itself, the *1812 Overture* is, in our country, a beloved addition to our own Independence Day celebrations every Fourth of July. The addition of thousands of dollars of fireworks and sometimes real cannon fire provided by local military installations brings the work even closer to our hearts. Tchaikovsky might be happy to know that even the most anti-classical-music audience will recognize his *1812 Overture* and tell you they love it and when and where they last heard it.

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