

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, op. 23.....Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky  
*Born in Votkinsk, 7 May 1840; Died in St. Petersburg, 6 November 1893*

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto is an example of his reaction to the musical tug-of-war which divided Russia in the late nineteenth century. St. Petersburg was the home of the *Kuchka* or "Mighty Five," the composers Cui, Balakirev, Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov. This group had little or no formal training in composition and sought to develop a strongly nationalistic style by the use of folk music in their works. Many of their compositions were based on Slavic legends and fairy tales. Moscow was the base for Nikolai Grigoryevich Rubenstein and his friends. A teacher and virtuoso pianist in his own right, Rubenstein was the brother of Anton Grigoryevich Rubenstein. These two composers had been exposed to Western musical ideas and used compositional/formal techniques abhorrent to the *Kuchka*.

Tchaikovsky found himself figuratively in the crossfire between Moscow and St. Petersburg. On one hand, he had studied with Anton Rubenstein and now taught at the Moscow Conservatory with Nikolai Rubenstein. . . on the other hand, he also had close ties to the *Kuchka*. It was none other than their leader, Balakirev, who had outlined the musical program for Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. When Tchaikovsky wrote his piano concerto in 1874, he tried to keep peace with Balakirev by using Ukrainian folk music in the first and third movements. He managed to upset the *Kuchka* by developing these themes with

Western techniques and by using a *French* folk-song in the second movement of the piece. Nikolai Rubenstein was upset that Tchaikovsky (no real virtuoso himself) had not consulted him about the technical aspects of the solo part.

The First Piano Concerto was originally dedicated to Nikolai Rubenstein, but he refused to perform it unless Tchaikovsky made drastic revisions to the work. Pyotr Illyich remained stubborn. Instead of revising the concerto, he revised the dedication. . . to Hans von Bülow. The renowned German virtuoso gave the concerto its first performance on 25 October 1875, in Boston, Massachusetts, conducted by Benjamin Johnson Lang. Tchaikovsky and Rubenstein remained friends, but it was not until after Rubenstein's death that the composer revised certain portions of the concerto.

The opening of the first movement is one of the two most familiar or famous such sections, sharing the spotlight with the first movement of the Grieg Concerto in *A* minor for audience recognition. The concerto as a whole is one of the most popular works ever written. Even though Tchaikovsky wrote two other very fine concertos for piano and orchestra, this is the only one performed with any regularity. The main theme for the first movement comes from a Ukrainian folksong called *The Song of the Blind Ones*. The second movement is written as a tripartite movement with a flowing song-like character. This movement utilizes the French folk song *It's Necessary to Have a Good time, to Dance, and to Laugh*. The finale is a Rondo based on Ukrainian folkdances Tchaikovsky had found in a

collection at his sister and brother-in-law's estate at Kamenka in Ukraine several years prior to composing the concerto

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, op. 47.....Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich

*Born in St. Petersburg, 25 September 1906; Died in Moscow, 9 August 1975*

Until January 1936 Dmitri Shostakovich held a position of honor and respect in Soviet music. His symphonies and chamber music had not only achieved public acclaim and official recognition in his homeland, but were widely performed in the West. His opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was staged in Prague, London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, and New York, and had become standard repertoire in the opera houses of Moscow and Leningrad. All was going well for the thirty-year-old composer until the night Josef Stalin went to see *Lady Macbeth*.

On 28 January 1936 an article appeared in the official Party newspaper *Pravda* that would influence and follow Shostakovich for the rest of his life. Titled "Muddle Instead of Music," it viciously condemned *Lady Macbeth* and its composer, accusing Shostakovich of "decadent formalism" and other heinous crimes against the People. It was the beginning of an unofficial campaign on Stalin's part against Shostakovich. The composer was to be disgraced, humiliated, and publicly denounced at every opportunity, but never arrested.

Shostakovich became aware that each of his new works was being carefully scrutinized by government officials for their political content and accessibility to the People. This feeling of being constantly watched and evaluated haunted the composer until his death.

Shostakovich brought himself out of immediate disgrace and earned an eleven-year reprieve on 21 November 1937. The Symphony No. 5 in D minor, op. 47, was premiered by the Leningrad Philharmonic, conducted by Evgeny Mravinsky, the first of many collaborations between the composer and the conductor. Shostakovich had written the symphony in only three months, more quickly than he had any other work of comparable size. He attended the first performance with anxiety and trepidation, as Stalin's persecution campaign was working all too well. The new symphony was an instant success with the audience, critics, and Party officials alike. A Soviet ghostwriter posing as Shostakovich once described this work as "a Soviet artist's reply to just criticism." The earlier criticism was *not* just, stemming as it did from a dictator's attempt to control the creative process of an individual, but the symphony did demonstrate that it was possible to convey thoughts of great value in a musical language and style accessible to all people. While there is no specific program to the work, Shostakovich wrote that there is a central idea behind its conception:

The theme of my Fifth Symphony is the making of a man. I saw man with all his experiences in the center of the composition which is lyrical in form from beginning to end.

In the finale the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements are resolved in optimism and joy of living.

The symphony is in four movements and reflects the influence of Gustav Mahler in its use of martial tunes and extreme juxtaposition of materials, as well as the sarcasm of the Scherzo movement. Like the minor-keyed fifth symphonies of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Mahler, Shostakovich ends this work triumphantly in the major mode.

Shostakovich scored this work for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, four percussionists, harp, piano (doubling on celeste), and strings.

Program Notes by Bruce Gbur  
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