Play Rose Adagio

That was the Rose Adagio from Sleeping Beauty and our subject is Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893)

Although the piece you have just heard is the sort of music for which most people know Tchaikovsky it is by no means the sole representative of the wide spectrum of music he composed. As my title suggests this programme can only give a taste of his music.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born at Votkinsk in the Urals on May 7th 1840, His was a privileged and well-to-do family. His father was a mining engineer and his mother a pianist and singer. She was originally of French descent and was unhappy in Votkinsk and longed for St Petersburg where she had been brought up.

This unhappiness affected the young Tchaikovsky who was a very sensitive child and close to his mother. As he got older he also recognised his homosexual tendencies which were to prove a burden throughout his life.

When his father lost his position, the family suffered financial misfortunes which further affected Tchaikovsky and by the time he was 9 years old he was already suffering from the nervous disorders which would characterise his life and music. He lacked self confidence but found solace in playing the piano.

His parents did not encourage his interest in music because in 19th century Russia the music profession was not an acceptable career for a man from Tchaikovsky’s class.

The family moved to St Petersburg in 1852 and he entered the School of Jurisprudence. He graduated in 1859 and started work as a government clerk. When he was 14 his mother died which had a profound effect on his sensitive nature.

However, by the time he was 21, he was talking of a career in music and this time his father supported the idea. In 1862 he enrolled at the recently established St Petersburg Conservatory from which he graduated in 1866. His studies there included, among other aspects of music, conducting. Tchaikovsky developed a phobia about conducting believing that his head would fall off if he did not hold it with one hand whilst conducting with the other!

After graduating he moved to Moscow and joined the teaching faculty at the Moscow Conservatory. Although Moscow was his base for the next 12 years he was not happy there. It was not as sophisticated as St Petersburg and it was a violently homophobic city.

Our next musical example was written in 1871 and is from his First String Quartet. We will hear the 2nd movement.

String Quartet No1 Movement 2

In the next year he produced his 2nd symphony which is subtitled “The Little Russian” because he incorporated several Ukrainian folk tunes into the work. From this we will hear the 3rd movement.

Symphony No2 Movement 3

He was becoming more proficient and more confident and in 1874 he produced his 1st Piano Concerto. Tchaikovsky was nervous about this first venture into concerto style so he consulted Nikolay Rubinstein, a colleague at the Conservatoire. Rubinstein was totally negative in his comments and considered it unplayable. Fortunately Tchaikovsky ignored his comments and changed not a note. He did, however, change the dedication from Rubinstein to Hans von Bulow. Von Bulow conducted the first performance in Boston in the USA where it was a great success.

From this piece we will sample the 3rd movement.

Piano Concerto No1 Movement 3

His compositions were coming quite regularly now and in 1876 he produced his 2nd string quartet. This was also the year when Nadezhda von Meck entered his life. She was a wealthy widow and became Tchaikovsky’s patroness for the next 14 years. They never met but frequently corresponded and she supported him both emotionally and financially. We will now hear the 4th movement from his 2nd string quartet.

String Quartet No2 Movement 4

In 1877 he married Antonina Milyukova, a former student of his at the Conservatory. The marriage was a disaster from the start and he could not cope with his wife’s physical demands. He fled to his brother’s house and later attempted to commit suicide. His wife had not realised that he was homosexual and this failed marriage convinced him that it was men he craved not women.

In this period he completed Swan Lake and it was premiered in 1877. The first performance was a disaster but it quickly became part of the standard repertoire where it remains today.

We will now hear the opening Scene 1 and then the Finale from Swan Lake.

Swan Lake Opening scene 1 and finale scene

In 1878 he left Moscow for St Petersburg and worked on his Violin Concerto. This gave him several problems, particularly with regard to its dedication. Initially he wanted to dedicate it to Yosif Kotel. A former lover of his, but he feared malicious gossip. He there approached Leopold Auer but Auer considered it unplayable. Finally he approached Adolf Brodsky who accepted and gave its first performance.

Once again the premier was a fiasco and the critics savaged the piece. However within a few years it had become a mainstay of the repertoire and Leopold Auer later apologised and became one of its greatest champions.

Here to lead us up to the interval is the slow movement which lasts just over 7 minutes.

Violin Concerto Movement 2

Interval

We are now in 1880 and Tchaikovsky is established as a composer with an international reputation. He continued to feel guilt and fear over his increasingly promiscuous sex life and he suffered from chronic depression.

However, during this year he produced one of his masterworks, the Serenade for Strings. It was one of his own favourite pieces and Anton Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky first tutor, considered it to be his best work to that date. From this piece we will hear the first two movements.

Serenade for Strings Movements 1 & 2

Now we come to what is one of one of Tchaikovsky’s most popular pieces in modern times, the 1812 Overture. It was composed to inaugurate the *Cathedral of Christ the Saviour*. Tchaikovsky described it as “*a lot of noise about nothing*!” You can judge for yourselves as we listen to the piece.

1812 Overture

For our last work we come to Tchaikovsky’s last composition, his 6th Symphony. It is sub-titled ‘Pathetique’. Tchaikovsky’s failure to come to terms with his own nature seems to be the theme of this despairing Symphony. It is a deeply subjective work which can be regarded as his personal requiem. We will listen to the last movement.
Symphony No6 Movement 4

Tchaikovsky died only 9 days after the first performance of his 6th symphony.

For 100 years it was said that he died from cholera but then papers became public which showed that he was summoned to a ‘court of honour’ by some of his former school friends and given the alternative of exposure of his homosexuality or death.

I hope that you have enjoyed this Taste of Tchaikovsky and that it will tempt you to explore more of his many works.

Thank you.