



TCHAIKOVSKY

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (May 7, 1840 to November 6, 1893) was a Russian composer of the Romantic era. His wide-ranging output includes symphonies, operas, ballet, chamber music and songs. From these genres come some of the most popular concert and theatrical music in the repertoire, including the ballets *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, the *1812 Overture*, his first Piano Concerto and last three symphonies. Born into a middle-class family, Tchaikovsky was educated as a civil servant. Yet against the wishes of his family he enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory to pursue a musical career. This step also set him apart from many of his contemporaries (such as Balakirev and the Five), who spurned Western-oriented formal training in favour of nationalistic (Russian) inspirations. Tchaikovsky's personal life was often marred by emotional turmoil. He was known for sensitivity even as a child, and he carried this emotional instability well into his adult life. Contributing factors to bouts of depression include the abrupt end of a 13-year relationship with his patron, a wealthy widow named Nadezhda von Meck. Despite his private turmoil his reputation grew and he enjoyed many popular successes. He was honoured by the Tsar, awarded a lifetime pension and lauded in concert halls around the world. His sudden death at age 53 is generally attributed to cholera, but some suspect suicide. Tchaikovsky's music was for a time dismissed by American music critics as being vulgar and lacking in elevated thought. By the end of the 20th century and into the 21st, however, Tchaikovsky's status as a significant composer is regarded as secure.

The **Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23**, was written between November 1874 and February 1875. Tchaikovsky's desired pianist, Nikolai Rubinstein, heavily criticized the work, although he would much later take back his previous accusations and champion the work. One of the best known piano concerti in the repertoire, the concerto famously opens with an extended introduction. Despite its very substantial nature, this first theme is only heard twice, and it never reappears at any later point in the concerto. This enigma had confounded analysts and critics alike, until Russian music historian Francis Maes explained that, in fact, Tchaikovsky cleverly linked all the themes: These themes include the Ukrainian folk song "Oy, kryatshe, kryatshe..." as the first theme of the first movement proper, the French *chansonette*, "Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire." (Translated as: One must have fun, dance and laugh) in the middle section of the second movement and a Ukrainian *vsnyanka* (or greeting to spring) which appears as the first theme of the finale; the second theme of the finale is derived from the Russian folk song "Podoydi, podoydi vo Tsar-Gorod" and also shares this motivic bond. "Selecting folkloristic material," Maes writes, "went hand in hand with planning the large-scale structure of the work." A standard performance lasts between 30 to 35 minutes, the majority of which is taken up by the first movement.