PENINSULA MUSIC FESTIVAL
PROGRAM 5

Thursday, August 16, 2018, 7:30 p.m.

Victor Yampolsky, Conductor
Tessa Lark, Violin
Chris Wild, Karen Smuda Emerging Conductor†

ST. PETERSBURG TO MOSCOW I

BORODIN  
* In the Steppes of Central Asia†

SCRIABIN  
Symphony No. 1 in E major, Op. 26*
  Lento
  Allegro dramatico
  Lento
  Vivace
  Allegro

— INTERMISSION —

TCHAIKOVSKY  
Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35
  Allegro moderato
  Canzonetta: Andante —
  Finale: Allegro vivacissimo

* first PMF performance

This concert is sponsored by Tony & Prilla Beadell
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Ms. Lark appears by arrangement with Sciolino Artist Management.

Photography and audio recordings of this concert are strictly prohibited.
Please, no cell phones during the concert.
Program 5

In the Steppes of Central Asia

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)

Composed in 1880.
Premiered on April 8, 1880 in St. Petersburg, conducted by Rimsky-Korsakov.

Early in 1880, two men with the elocution-endangering names of Korvin-Kryukovsky and Tatischchev approached Alexander Borodin and eleven other composers with a proposal to write some music for a production they were planning. A few months hence, it seemed, Alexander II would be celebrating the 25th anniversary of his coronation as Tsar, and this intrepid pair of impresarios envisioned an extravaganza of twelve tableaux vivants that would celebrate the major events of his reign. Having been immersed for years in the music, history and lore of Central Asia as background for Prince Igor, Borodin chose the tableau set on the vast Russian plains where the opera takes place as the subject of his contribution. He completed In the Steppes of Central Asia in a few weeks, but the projected production never took place, so the work was introduced on April 8, 1880 at a concert of the orchestra of the Russian Opera in St. Petersburg, conducted by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The piece had an immediate success at its premiere, and it was the first composition to carry Borodin’s name to western Europe after it was heard at the Antwerp Exhibition in 1885. The American premiere, by the Brooklyn Philharmonic conducted by Theodore Thomas, followed within a year of the Antwerp performance. Of the international prestige that the composition brought to him, Borodin wrote to a friend in 1886, “The most popular of my works abroad is my symphonic sketch, In the Steppes of Central Asia. It has made the rounds of Europe from Christiania to Monaco.... The composition has been encored almost everywhere and often repeated by request, as at the [Johann] Strauss concert in Vienna and the Lamoureux concerts in Paris.” The score was dedicated to Franz Liszt, the inventor of the symphonic poem, who encouraged Borodin in his composing and helped him make a four-hand piano transcription of the piece.

A note in the score explains the program of In the Steppes of Central Asia: “In the silence of the monotonous steppes of Central Asia is heard the unfamiliar sound of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance, we hear the approach of horses and camels and the bizarre and melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A caravan approaches, escorted by Russian soldiers, and continues safely on its long way through the immense desert. It disappears slowly. The notes of the Russian and Asiatic melodies join in a common harmony, which dies away as the caravan disappears in the distance.”

The structure of this small masterpiece is simple, and follows exactly the program Borodin outlined. A motionless note high in the violins suggests the featureless immensity of the vast prairie, over which the song of the Russians is chanted softly by clarinet and horn, as if from a great distance. Pizzicato basses enter, imitating the steady gait of the caravan animals, as an accompaniment for the Oriental melody intoned by the English horn. The clarinet and horns again quietly sound the Russian melody before it is played by the full orchestra. The Oriental theme returns in the English horn and cellos and then combined with the Russian song. Waning fragments of the Russian theme escort the caravan across the shimmering horizon.

Symphony No. 1 in E major, Op. 26

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

Composed in 1899-1900.
Premiered without finale on November 24, 1900 in St. Petersburg, conducted by Anatoly Liadov; complete premiere on March 29, 1901 in Moscow, conducted by Vasily Safonov.

According the old style Julian calendar then in effect in Russia, Alexander Scriabin was born in Moscow on Christmas Day 1871 (January 6, 1872 in the modern Gregorian calendar), which he took as a portent of his exceptional life. His mother, a gifted pianist, died from tuberculosis before his first birthday. His father remarried and spent most of his life abroad in the diplomatic service, so Alexander was brought up (and thoroughly spoiled) by a grandmother and an aunt whose piano lessons revealed an exceptional musical talent in the boy. The family deemed a military career appropriate for him, so Alexander was duly enrolled at the local cadet school when he was nine, but piano lessons with the noted Moscow theorist and composer Georgi Conus and with Tchaikovsky student Nikolai Zverev (at whose resident music school Sergei Rachmaninoff was then a pupil) kindled his musical ambitions, as did theory lessons with Sergei Taneyev, and Scriabin began to compose and to plan for a life as a virtuoso. He gave up on the military when he was eighteen to enter the Moscow Conservatory, and found in the school’s director, pianist and conductor Vasili Safonov, a supportive and influential mentor. (Scriabin flunked Anton Arensky’s fugue class, however, and he never received a degree.) Soon after leaving the Conservatory in 1892, Scriabin began appearing as a concert pianist and had some of his piano pieces issued by Jurgenson, Tchaikovsky’s publisher. In 1894, the rival publisher Mitrofan Belaiff heard Scriabin play some of his own music and secured the rights to issue his Piano Sonata No. 1. Belaiff supported the promising pianist-composer generously by rewarding him with high publishing fees and competition prizes and by underwriting the European debut tour in late 1895 that culminated in a triumphant recital of Scriabin’s own works in Paris in January. Soon after returning to Moscow, Scriabin began a piano concerto, his first work with orchestra, as a vehicle for his own performances. He completed the score early in 1897 and successfully gave its premiere in Odessa on October 23; Safonov conducted. Scriabin joined the faculty of the Moscow Conservatory the following year.
Scriabin was encouraged by the success of the Piano Concerto to write a four-minute Réverie for orchestra in 1898 and, never one to deny his apparently insatiable desire to express the transcendent, followed that with his first symphony a year later. (Margarita Kirillovna Morozova, the prominent Moscow philanthropist, editor and later director of the local branch of the Russian Musical Society who was then studying privately with Scriabin, recalled, “He was very expansive, ready to give his art to all…. He loved the illusion of the titanic.” Following his death, Mme. Morozova established a Scriabin museum in the Moscow apartment in which he lived the last three years of his brief life.) This First Symphony was not a succinct student exercise, however, something comparable to Prokofiev’s “Classical” Symphony of 1915, but an ambitious composition for large orchestra with chorus and vocal soloists in the last of its six full-scale movements. He completed the score early in 1900 and submitted it to Belaiff for publication, but the editorial committee found the finale “unperformable” because of the perceived difficulty of the vocal parts (though Beethoven’s “Choral” Symphony is harder for the performers) and declined to issue it. One of the committee’s members, however, long-time St. Petersburg Conservatory faculty Anatoly Liadov, liked the piece well enough to conduct its premiere in St. Petersburg on November 24, 1900, though without its closing choral movement; Safonov led the first performance of the complete work in Moscow four months later. Belaiff published the score before the end of the year.

Though Scriabin disposed his First Symphony in an unconventional six movements, it is constructed around the Classical core of four movements — sonata-form opening movement, Lento, scherzo, finale — framed by an atmospheric prelude and a grandiloquent choral epilogue extolling the elevating spirituality of the musical art. (Because of the logistics of assembling a large chorus and two soloists for such limited use and the sufficiency of the fifth movement to provide a satisfying conclusion for the work, the finale is often omitted in performance, as it is at this concert.) The Symphony opens with soft, rustling music whose languid, luminous atmosphere suggests French Impressionism, but its rich harmonic palette bears the influence of Richard Strauss and its arching, yearning clarinet theme of Wagner. The sonata form of the Allegro drammatico is built around an impetuous main theme musically descriptive of the movement’s title and a lyrical second subject initiated by the clarinet. Both ideas figure in the development section and are recapitulated to round out the movement. The following Lento is passionate music of almost Italianate lyricism, modestly expressed in its outer sections but more animated, though no less melodious, in its central episode. Next comes a featherweight scherzo, lithe in spirit and deftly scored, nowhere more so than in the charming music-box evocation of the twittering birds of spring in the trio. The Vivace takes as the principal theme of its sonata structure a striding, turbulent melody and as its contrasting subject an expressive strain again initiated by the clarinet. Both themes are treated in the development and properly reprise before they return in the movement’s powerful, tragic coda.

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed in 1878. Premiered on December 4, 1881 in Vienna, conducted by Hans Richter with Adolf Brodsky as soloist.

In the summer of 1877, Tchaikovsky undertook the disastrous marriage that lasted less than three weeks and resulted in his emotional collapse and attempted suicide. He fled from Moscow to his brother Modeste in St. Petersburg, where he recovered his wits and discovered he could find solace in his work. He spent the late fall and winter completing his Fourth Symphony and the opera Eugene Onégin. The brothers decided that travel outside of Russia would be an additional balm to the composer’s spirit, and they duly installed themselves at Clarens on Lake Geneva in Switzerland soon after the first of the year.

In Clarens, Tchaikovsky had already begun work on a piano sonata when he heard the colorful Symphonie Espagnole by the French composer Edouard Lalo. He was so excited by the possibilities of a work for solo violin and orchestra that he set aside the sonata and immediately began a concerto of his own. By the end of April, the work was finished. Tchaikovsky sent the manuscript to Leopold Auer, a friend who headed the violin department at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and who was also Court Violinist to the Czar, hoping to have him premiere the work. Much to the composer’s regret, Auer returned the piece as “unplayable,” and apparently spread that word with such authority to other violinists that it was more than three years before the Violin Concerto was heard in public. It was Adolf Brodsky, a former colleague of Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory, who first accepted the challenge of this Concerto when he premiered it with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1881.

The Concerto opens quietly with a tentative introductory tune. A foretaste of the main theme soon appears in the violins, around which a quick crescendo is mounted to usher in the soloist. After a few unaccompanied measures, the violin presents the lovely main theme above a simple string background. After an elaborated repeat of this melody, a transition follows that eventually involves the entire orchestra and gives the soloist the first opportunity for pyrotechnical display. The second theme begins a long buildup leading into the development, launched with a sweeping presentation of the main theme. The soloist soon steals back the attention with breathtaking leaps and double stops. The sweeping mood returns, giving way to a flashing cadenza as a link to the recapitulation. The flute sings the main theme before the violin it takes over, and all then follows the order of the exposition.

The Andante begins with a chorale for woodwinds that is heard again at the end of the movement to serve as a frame around the musical picture inside. On the canvas of this picture is displayed a soulful melody for the violin suggesting a Gypsy fiddler. The finale is joined to the slow movement without a break. With the propulsive spirit of a dashing Cossack trepak, the finale flies by amid the soloist’s show of agility and speed.

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