

Program 8

Le Tombeau de Couperin

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Composed in 1917 for piano; orchestrated in 1920.

Premiered on February 28, 1920 in Paris, conducted by Rhené-Baton.

Ravel was tormented by the First World War. He was accepted into the armed forces despite his small stature and delicate health, but his physical constitution was not robust enough to withstand the rigors of combat and he was quickly discharged for medical reasons. Soon after he arrived home, his beloved mother lapsed into her final illness, and the shock of her death nearly prostrated him. His own failed health, his mental anguish over the War, and the loss of his mother kept him from doing much creative work during World War I. *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is his only important work of those difficult years.

The inspiration for *Le Tombeau* came from two obsessions that filled Ravel's mind in 1917 — the sorrow caused by the War and the need to retain the sanity represented by the tradition of French culture. In the piano suite that was the first version of *Le Tombeau*, each of the movements was dedicated to one of six friends of the composer who had fallen on the battlefield, a musical memorial to his countrymen and, perhaps, to his late mother as well. In a similar way, composers of the French Baroque age, François Couperin (1668-1733) among them, paid tribute in music to recently deceased colleagues. Such a piece was called a “*tombeau*,” literally a “tomb,” and Ravel intended such an association here. Beside just a way of eulogizing his comrades, however, the association with Couperin also represented for Ravel the continuity of the logic and refinement of French civilization. It was in this great Gallic tradition that Ravel sought intellectual and emotional shelter from crushing contemporary events. The title of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, therefore, has a triple meaning: it is a memorial to family and close friends; it is a revival of some aspects of the musical style of the French Baroque; and, probably most significant for Ravel, it is a continuation of the venerable tradition of French culture and thought in a time of despair and nihilism.

Despite its heavy burden of associations, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* displays little of Ravel's distraught mental state, especially in its effervescent orchestral version. Rather than a roiling, emotional document, *Le Tombeau* is a vision of the refined and elegant world of Versailles shimmering in retrospect through the medium of the dance, its most characteristic social manifestation. The succulently atmospheric orchestration and rich harmony clearly mark the modern origin of the work, but its buoyant rhythms and crystalline structure show the influence of the music of Couperin's age. “This suite is a garland of musical flowers,” wrote Donald N. Ferguson, “grown from 17th-century seed in a 20th-century hothouse.”

Piano Concerto

Stewart Goodyear

Composed in 2010.

World Premiere.

Commissioned by the Peninsula Music Festival.

The composer writes, “The Piano Concerto, completed on June 4, 2010 and dedicated to Victor Yampolsky and the people of the Peninsula Music Festival, was inspired by the beauty of the state of Wisconsin. The first movement depicts the colors of spring, the second movement suggests sunrise on the water, and the third movement evokes the heat and wildness of summer.

“The first movement, in sonata form, is governed by a series of time signatures: 4/4 for the first theme, and 7/8, 3/4 and 5/8 for the second theme. The strings begin the introduction with rhythmic pizzicatos accompanied by snare drum and tambourine. The horns state the first theme, and the flutes and clarinets give the second theme.

“The second movement begins with a soft, shimmering figure that repeats over and over while the violins and winds in the high register sing the first theme. The middle section is a rocking dance that combines different Caribbean rhythms. The first theme comes back, shimmering again but slowly becoming more present and declamatory.

“This leads to the finale, in rondo form. The piano announces the fanfare-like theme and passes it to each section of the orchestra. Every time the theme returns, the piano writing becomes more virtuosic. The Concerto ends with fireworks.”

Act II from *The Nutcracker*, Op. 71

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed in 1891-1892.

Premiered on December 18, 1892 in St. Petersburg, conducted by Riccardo Drigo.

By 1890, Tchaikovsky was one of the most famous composers in the world, universally regarded as the greatest musician in the history of Russia. He was the author of symphonies, concertos, operas, quartets and occasional pieces, but some of his best successes had come with that most characteristic and beloved Russian art form, the ballet. *Swan Lake* (1876) and, especially, *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889) had proven his mastery of the medium. Late in 1890 he was approached by Prince Ivan Vselvolozhsky, director of the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg, and Marius Petipa, the French dancer and choreographer who created an unprecedented standard of ballet production and execution after settling in Russia in 1847, to compose a full evening's entertainment — a one-act opera and a ballet. The subject for the opera was to be of Tchaikovsky's choice (he picked *King René's Daughter* by the Danish dramatist Hendrik Herz, which the composer's brother Modest turned into a libretto titled *Iolanthe*), but that for the ballet was specified as E.T.A. Hoffmann's story of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, one of the most popular tales in Russia at the time. Tchaikovsky had read Hoffmann's *Nutcracker* in 1882 "with great pleasure," and accepted the commission.

The scenario devised for the new ballet by Petipa, who had also choreographed the premiere of *The Sleeping Beauty*, was based not on Hoffmann's original story, however, but rather on a French adaptation by Alexandre Dumas père that considerably softened the grotesque elements and erotic undertones of the German Romanticist's narrative. Petipa and Vselvolozhsky further diluted the tale by discarding the "sub-plot" of Princess Pirlipat, which justifies dramatically the battle scene in Act I of the ballet, and making Act II simply a *divertissement* — a series of character dances without dramatic continuity. Tchaikovsky objected to the lack of faithfulness to Hoffmann's original, much of whose interest for him lay precisely in its juxtaposition of the naive, idyllic images of youth with moments of *grotesquerie*, but resigned himself to his contractual agreement, and told Modest shortly after starting composition in February 1891 that "I am beginning to be reconciled to the subject."

Early in 1891, just as he was undertaking *The Nutcracker*, Tchaikovsky was invited to the United States to conduct his music at the inaugural festivities for the opening of Carnegie Hall in New York City. He agreed to go, and in March set out on a concert tour that took him en route across Germany and to Paris, where his music was given on programs of the famed Concerts Colonne. Always interested in novel sounds, Tchaikovsky heard in Paris a recent invention of the celebrated harmonium builder, Victor Mustel — an instrument that the composer described to his publisher, Jurgenson, as "something between a piano and a glockenspiel." This was the celesta, patented as recently as 1886 by Victor's son Auguste. Tchaikovsky realized that the ethereal tone of the celesta would be perfect for his new ballet, and urged Jurgenson to obtain one immediately. "Have it sent directly to St. Petersburg," he wrote, "but no one there must know about it. I am afraid Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov might hear of it and make use of it before I do. [*The Nutcracker* was the instrument's first use in an orchestral score.] I expect it to make a tremendous impression." This encouraging discovery in Paris, however, was vitiated by another, tragic, one. From an imported Russian newspaper he chanced to read, Tchaikovsky learned of the death of his beloved sister, Alexandra Davidov, news of which Modest was trying to keep from him until he returned from the New World. "For God's sake, send all the details to New York," he pleaded in a letter to Modest just before embarking from Le Havre. "Today, even more than yesterday, I feel the absolute impossibility of depicting in music the Sugar-Plum Fairy."

The trip in April 1891, his only visit to America, was probably the best antidote for Tchaikovsky's grief. He was surprised and pleased to find in the United States so many admirers and such wide knowledge of his music, which he conducted in four concerts in New York and one each in Philadelphia and Baltimore. He also visited Washington, D.C. and Niagara Falls, and expressed admiration of the cities' skyscrapers while venting his amazement that anyone could live at the dizzying height of the thirteenth floor. "Amazing people, these Americans!" he reported. "The frankness, sincerity and generosity of this country, its hospitality without hidden motives and its eagerness to oblige and win approval, are simply astonishing and, at the same time, touching. This, and indeed American customs, American manners and habits are generally attractive to me, but," he added, with his characteristic melancholy, "I enjoy all this like a person sitting at a table set with marvels of gastronomy, devoid of appetite. Only the prospect of returning to Russia can awaken an appetite within me."

Tchaikovsky was home by May, and resumed work on *The Nutcracker*. He finished sketching the score by the end of the following month, but not without hints of the biting self-deprecation that sprang from his frequent bouts of depression. After lamenting to his nephew Vladimir Davidov that it now took him a fortnight to accomplish what he had previously done in five days, he continued, "No, the old man is breaking up. Not only does his hair drop out, or turn as white as snow; not only does he lose his teeth, which refuse to do their service; not only do his eyes weaken and tire easily; not only do his feet walk badly, or drag themselves along, but he loses bit by bit the capacity to do anything at all. The ballet is infinitely worse than *The Sleeping Beauty*, that much is certain; let's see how the opera will turn out." Like the true professional composer he had become, he labored on despite his misgivings, working on *Iolanthe* during the fall, and completing the orchestration of *The Nutcracker* by the following February.

With the premiere of the new ballet and opera delayed until December 1892, Tchaikovsky decided to display some of his new music at a concert he was scheduled to conduct in St. Petersburg on March 19th. He extracted from *The Nutcracker* a suite of eight numbers, and led the Russian Musical Society in a performance of the music that was so successful, five of the movements had to be immediately encored. The premiere of the full ballet on December 18th, though lavishly mounted, fared less well: Petipa, claiming indisposition, passed final preparations for the production

to his protégé, Lev Ivanov, a capable workman, but lacking his master's fiery genius; the role of the Sugar-Plum Fairy was played by a ballerina of memorable homeliness; and the sophisticated audience was miffed that the precise movements of the crack *corps de ballet* to which they were accustomed were replaced in the first act by a group of scurrying children. Modest rated the evening as only a *succés d'estime*. "The delicate beauty of the music did not appeal to the public at first hearing," he wrote. However, casting changes and the public's increasing familiarity with subject and score soon led to *The Nutcracker's* wide acceptance, and it has remained one of the most popular of all ballets.

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Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (he changed his third named from Wilhelm for love of Mozart), born in 1776, was a German writer, painter and musician whose life and works were enflamed by the ardent spirit of Romanticism. As a young man, he studied law, and held positions in the Prussian bureaucracy until Napoleon overthrew the government in 1806. Thereafter he served as an opera conductor in Bamberg, Dresden and Leipzig, and took up musical composition, producing a symphony, a ballet, some sacred works, a few chamber pieces and twelve operas. He returned to government service in 1816, as a justice of the supreme court in Berlin, a post he retained until his death in 1822. Hoffmann turned to writing late in his career, after he had moved to Berlin. He produced two novels and a treatise on the problems of theater direction, but he is best known for his collections of short stories that explore the fantastic, grotesque and even sinister aspects of the imagination, often with sharp wit and deep psychological insight. (A talented artist, he also illustrated several of his own books.) Hoffmann was a strong influence on Edgar Allan Poe and other 19th-century writers of fantasy, and his tales served as inspiration for such composers as Wagner (*Die Meistersinger*, *Tannhäuser*), Offenbach (*The Tales of Hoffmann*), Delibes (*Coppélia*) and Tchaikovsky.

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Though Tchaikovsky was immediately drawn to E.T.A. Hoffmann's fantastic tale as the subject for a ballet, he had serious misgivings about the scenario that Petipa had derived from it for their collaboration. In his theatrical works, Tchaikovsky felt the necessity for a strong, clear narrative with logical dramatic motivations — a "through-line," as he called it. He found Petipa's scenario almost overly simple:

At a Christmas party given by their parents, Clara (Marie in Hoffmann's original story) and Fritz receive gifts from the eccentric Drosselmeyer which include a grotesque Nutcracker. Much to Clara's distress, Fritz breaks the Nutcracker. The children are sent to bed. Later, after the guests have left and the rest of the family retired, Clara sneaks into the darkened room to see the broken Nutcracker. Magically, the Christmas tree begins to expand to an enormous size; mice appear from the corners of the parlor and challenge a company of toy soldiers, led by the Nutcracker, in battle. Just as the soldiers are about to lose the fight, Clara hurls her shoe at the Mouse King, the invaders flee, and the Nutcracker is transformed into a handsome Prince. The Prince invites Clara to journey to his kingdom. On the way, they stop in a snow-bound pine forest (Act I, Scene 2), and then (Act II) go on to the Kingdom of Sweets (in the Sendak/Stowell production, a seraglio), where Clara is feted with a banquet and an entertainment comprising a series of character dances.

This scenario presented Tchaikovsky with two dramatic problems: 1) the battle in Act I had no compelling motivation, and 2) the story was really finished before the intermission. Since solutions to these problems could not come from the stage, Tchaikovsky turned instead to the orchestra, relying on the mastery of emotional expression and instrumental color that he had developed during his thirty years of experience as a composer.

The extended Scene 1, comprising the party and the battle, is divided into two distinct musical chapters. The first is sweet, sunny, and filled with light and laughter — exactly the kind of music that a young girl on her best behavior might choose to represent herself to her parents and their friends. Only the ominous strains accompanying the entrance of Drosselmeyer bring a darker expressive quality to this portion of the ballet. They are essential to the structure of the ballet, however, because they are used to create a strong emotional and musical link between the opening scene and the dramatic events that follow.

Since the battle scene occurs without explanation in the original ballet, Tchaikovsky chose to release the episode from reality and depict it as Clara's personal fantasy. It is as though he had waited until the adults were safely gone before allowing the young girl's deepest thoughts and feelings to be reflected in the music. Not only does the richly expressive quality of this music hark back to that associated with Drosselmeyer, but the stage picture also reinforces the connection, since the grandfather clock, which strikes twelve just after Clara enters the darkened room, takes on the facial features of the eccentric old man. The highly charged musical language of the "Pathétique" Symphony, composed only a year after *The Nutcracker* was finished, is presaged by this tempestuous music swirling through Clara's mind. She quells the maelstrom by slaying the Mouse King; the Nutcracker is transformed and carries her away — a concise, yet powerful allegory of maturation from childhood to first love, and the feelings thereby engendered.

Following the battle victory, Petipa's story is essentially over, and the ballet thereafter is not dramatic but cathartic. The opulent, ice-bound tableau of Act I, Scene 2 and the whole of Act II are little more than a series of independent

dances — a *divertissement* — that could have been dropped happily into virtually any ballet on a fantastic subject. It was in Act II that Tchaikovsky was most hard pressed to carry on the musical continuity of the work, so, lacking dramatic impetus, he devised as a substitute a breathtaking succession of movements that is one of the greatest exercises in orchestral tone color and melodic fecundity produced during the 19th century, a blazing display of compositional virtuosity. Through dint of sheer talent, Tchaikovsky rose above the original difficulties of *The Nutcracker* to create one of the most enduring and beloved of all musical theater works.

Act II

The Magic Castle. Clara and the Prince arrive in his kingdom, where they are welcomed by the Sugar-Plum Fairy and her attendants.

Clara and the Prince. In the great hall of the castle, lit by lanterns held by twelve pages, the Prince describes to the assembled court how Clara saved his life. At a sign from the Sugar-Plum Fairy, a sumptuous banquet appears. Clara is ushered to a miniature throne at the head of the table, and an entertainment in her honor begins.

Divertissement. The first three of the characteristic dances comprising this scene represent the banquet refreshments: a sparkling Spanish bolero depicts *Chocolate*, a mysterious and exotic Arabian Dance symbolizes *Coffee*, and a bubbling Chinese Dance illustrates *Tea*. There follows a fiery *Trepak*, the traditional dance of the Russian cossacks, which serves as a musical foil for the delicate *Dance of the Mirlitons*, or toy flutes, that follows. The *divertissement* concludes with a merry depiction of *Mother Gigone*, also known as the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, and some antics by a group of clowns.

Waltz of the Flowers. The Sugar-Plum Fairy's retinue pays tribute to Clara.

Pas de Deux comprises four sections: *Dance of the Prince and the Sugar-Plum Fairy*; a *Tarantella* for the Prince alone; *Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy*, with its famous solo for celesta; and *Coda*, for both partners.

Final Waltz and Apotheosis. The entire court joins in a grand waltz, after which the music that accompanied Clara and the Prince on their arrival at the beginning of Act II returns as the Sugar-Plum Fairy pays final tribute to the girl who saved the Prince.