

TCHAIKOVSKY

1812 OVERTURE

THE TEMPEST
HAMLET

James De Preist
Oregon
Symphony

DE 3081



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's neuroses, one major nervous breakdown, and borderline alcoholism have been excessively played up by some biographers; having read their accounts, one would find it almost impossible to imagine Tchaikovsky transcending his problems long enough to compose an occasional waltz. In truth, he was one of the most industrious of the great composers, a man who carefully planned a daily schedule to allow for extended periods of creative working time. Tchaikovsky travelled a great deal to meet other composers and performers, and also conducted his own music on many occasions, which frequent activities would have been impracticable had his depressions been as debilitating as the sensationalists would have us believe. Balance his considerable catalog of achievements against the fact that he only started composing in earnest when in his mid-twenties and that his whole life lasted a mere 53 years, and a much more accurate picture of the composer comes to the fore. A gem of a quote from Ingmar Bergman's recently-published autobiography "The Magic Lantern" asserts: "It is dereliction of duty to allow personal afflictions to obtrude at work." Tchaikovsky would have heartily agreed.

Tchaikovsky was bitten by the

Shakespeare bug several times during his life, and ended up using three of The Bard's plays as the inspirations for four works. (Unfortunately, his tentative plans for a symphonic poem or opera based on *Othello* never materialized.) The first attack was due to his friendship with composer Mily Balakirev, who urged (some would say bullied) his younger colleague into composing *Romeo and Juliet*. The eager (some would say overbearing) Balakirev even offered such helpful hints as tonality, a structural outline, and a theme or two; it's a testament to Tchaikovsky's strong sense of musical identity that the early *Romeo and Juliet* (1869) is unmistakably his own work.

Left to his own devices, Tchaikovsky did quite nicely when he tackled **The Tempest** in 1873. A more complex work than *Romeo*, it was fully sketched in a mere eleven days; the splendid orchestration was achieved in an equally impressive span of time. Of special interest is the introduction, which evokes the ebb-and-flow of the ocean via conflicting rhythms in the string groups (duplets vs. triplets vs. syncopations). The individual groups' rhythms are indistinguishable, but what a totality — a striking example of something felt rather than heard.

Given the strength and boldness of this piece — certainly Tchaikovsky's most original orchestral work up to that time, even including his first two symphonies — its cold

reception took the composer very much by surprise. In a letter to his brother Modest, Tchaikovsky indicates that the general public, his own friends, and several prominent critics were either deprecatory or “silent as the grave” regarding *The Tempest* (Modest himself is upbraided for his silence). Particularly galling were the remarks of critic Hermann Laroche, cited in the same letter, which accused Tchaikovsky of “filching from Litolff, Schumann, Glinka, Berlioz, and some others.” Today the criticism seems wholly unfounded; there isn’t a bar in *Tempest* which doesn’t contain that unique quality we now recognize as “Tchaikovskian.”

By the time Tchaikovsky composed his fantasy-overture **Hamlet** in 1888, he was more sure of his theatrical and dramatic instincts than ever. Behind him were such works as the operas *The Voyevoda*, *The Oprichnik*, *Eugene Onegin* and *The Sorceress*, the ballet *Swan Lake*, the literature-inspired symphonic poems *The Storm*, *Francesca da Rimini* and those already discussed, and many songs based on such poets as A. K. Tolstoy, Goethe, and Heine. In *Hamlet*, Tchaikovsky managed a neat bit of propheteering: he foreshadowed Sir Laurence Olivier’s epigrammatic summation of Shakespeare’s (anti-)hero as “a man who couldn’t make up his mind.” The classically-oriented Tchaikovsky, whose symphonic poems generally started and ended

in the same key or pursued a logical dominant-tonic course, begins *Hamlet* in E Major and concludes in the far-off key of F Minor — a veritable musical representation of indecision! (Tchaikovsky’s leading English-language biographer David Brown even describes *Hamlet* succinctly as “[an articulation of] a series of psychological or emotional states.”) When Tchaikovsky contributed incidental music to a production of *Hamlet* in 1891, the present overture was recycled in a condensed and altered form; several original bits of underscoring, scene-change accompaniments, and vocal numbers rounded out the suite.

An outspoken critic of others’ music (his dismissal of Brahms as a “giftless bastard” is representatively gentle), Tchaikovsky could be just as ruthlessly self-critical. Some of his most glorious and beloved pieces — *Swan Lake*, *Manfred*, the Symphony No. 5, and *The Nutcracker* are a few examples — were recipients of his disparaging remarks. (At least these works survived his wrath; he was not averse to consigning some of his “failures” to the fire.) He regarded the composition of the **1812 Overture** (1880) as supplying a ware for its sponsors, much as a contemporary composer might casually view the provision of a functional background score to a documentary film. The commission may have been made more attractive to Tchaikovsky by the promise of

a grand outdoor performance with cannons and church-bells augmenting his orchestration, but this tempting spectacular came to naught; the initial performance of *1812*, an indoor orchestra-only affair in 1882, was a no-shot deal.

Tchaikovsky would have lost any bets on the enduring qualities of his self-proclaimed “very noisy piece.” Cannons, a military band, and/or a pyrotechnical display of fireworks have lured tens of thousands of music lovers to numerous outdoor summer concerts over the years, rendering *1812* Tchaikovsky’s best-known composition. But, the condiments aside, listeners are privy to some wonderful music before the inevitable aural and visual assault: the opening, a heartfelt setting of “God Preserve Thy People” for four cellos and two violas (with occasional woodwind interjections) is one of the composer’s most sensuous inspirations, as is the achingly beautiful outpouring following the first hints of battle. Tchaikovsky’s lyricism rarely failed him

(even the notoriously bombastic *Marche Slave* has its long-lined treasures), and such moments as these haunt the memory long after Napoleon’s Grand Armée has been routed, the smoke has cleared, and victory has been duly celebrated.

For this recording, we have used our modern-day technology to bring Tchaikovsky’s original and highly theatrical conception to life. Rather than confining all the cannon-fire to a front-row-center position, the Russians’ artillery has been placed in the front and a bit to the left; their adversaries’ retaliatory salvos are heard on the right and from a distance. Special attention was given to the placement of each shot on the exact beat indicated by Tchaikovsky, as opposed to a series of random discharges. Also, with no prejudice and with history as a guide, we admit to affording the Russians the more impressive artillery; the French shots, especially their very last effort, decidedly anticipate the raising of a white flag.

Adam Stern

1812 OVERTURE

Orchestral Music of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

- 1 **The Tempest, Op. 18** (symphonic fantasy after Shakespeare, 1873) (23:57)
- 2 **Hamlet, Op. 67** (fantasy-overture after Shakespeare, 1888) (19:56)
- 3 **1812 Overture, Op. 49** (festival overture, 1880) (16:50)
David Christensen, carillonneur
Black Rose Artillery, Frank Curley, director

JAMES DePREIST, conductor
OREGON SYMPHONY

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 61:00

The cannon used in this recording of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture is a reproduction of a Revolutionary War cannon, made at La Pans Foundry in Glen Falls, New York. Its barrel is a replica of one found in Lake George, New York, which was used during the battle at Lake Champlain.

This cannon is a muzzle-loader (that is, loaded from the front of the barrel), and is virtually the same as those used during both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812; major changes in cannon manufacture didn't come about until after the American Civil War (or "The War Between the States," depending on

which side of the Mason-Dixon line you're from). The charges for the shots consist of black powder encased in a plastic bag. To create the necessary back-pressure, we pack the charge in with white styrofoam wadding; while not particularly authentic, it's an effective safety precaution since styrofoam will not support combustion.

Assisting me in firing the cannon were Doug Murray and Peter Newman, both members of my regular firing crew.

*Frank Curley, Artillerist
Black Rose Artillery, Wilmington, Massachusetts*

Executive Producer: *Amelia S. Haygood*
Recording Producer: *Adam Stern*
Recording Engineers: *John Eargle;*
Andrew Dawson (cannons, carillon)
Assistant Engineers: *Peter Alward, John Frazee,*
Laura Wirthlin
Design: *Tri-Arts, Inc.*

Recording Dates and Locations:
Oregon Symphony: September 7 & 8, 1988,
Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Portland, Oregon
Black Rose Artillery: December 26, 1988,
Wilmington, Massachusetts • Carillon: January 2,
1989, University of California, Riverside

Recording System: *Colossus / Sony PCM-1630,*
DMR-4000
Editing System: *Sony DAE-3000*
Console: *Soundcraft Series 200B*
Monitor Loudspeakers: *JBL 4412 (recording),*
B&W 801 Matrix Series 2 (editing)
Monitor Amplifiers: *JBL 6260 (recording),*
Threshold S/500 (editing)
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Schoeps MK 5, Milab CD 63
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Sommers, Jim Pace



ORIGINAL DIGITAL RECORDING

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*This recording was made possible by a grant from
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