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CONCERT 4 PROGRAM NOTES

by Alicia Mastromonaco ★

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893) SYMPHONY NO. 3, “POLISH,” OP. 29 (1875)

Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is most famous today for his latter three symphonies and his ballet music, including *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*. The composer struggled with his early symphonic works, reworking the first two over and over. With his third symphony, Tchaikovsky was interested in trying to create a piece that displayed his craftsmanship and ability to shape a symphony. In a letter to fellow Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky asserted, “as far as I can see this symphony presents no particularly successful ideas, but in workmanship it’s a step forward.” Perhaps Tchaikovsky sold himself a little short. There are several passages full of inventiveness, lyricism, and of course, the expected Tchaikovsky-esque pathos.

The subtitle “Polish” is attributed to the German conductor Sir August Friedrich Manns when he conducted the English premier at London’s Crystal Palace in 1899. The fifth movement is in fact a Polonaise, a stately Polish dance, but Polonaises had been adopted by Russian Czars in their courtly music, and thus were considered in Russia less in terms of their Polish origins than their regality.

Tchaikovsky composed the symphony in a little over eight weeks during the summer of 1875, despite his bouts with depression. The composer was encouraged by his doctors to take a full vacation, and advised him to stay away from pianos and composition. He fully ignored their advice. Instead, he spent the summer visiting his family and friends, and composing his third symphony. Work on the symphony began at the estate of his friend Vladimir Shilovsky in Usovo, where he sketched out the symphony in a month. He continued work in Nizy, at the estate of Nikolai Kondratiev, a friend and classmate of Tchaikovsky’s at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He then visited his sister Alexandra in Verbovka, where he finished orchestrating the symphony.

The symphony has several distinguishing features among Tchaikovsky's six symphonies. It is his only symphony in a major key (although it begins in D Major's parallel minor, D minor). It is also Tchaikovsky's only symphony with five movements. Perhaps Tchaikovsky modeled this after Robert Schumann's third symphony, "The Rhenish," a piece he adored. The symphony opens with a somber fragment, passed between the strings and horns, until it breaks out into the bright key of D Major. The second movement, *Alla Tedesca* ("In the German Manner"), is a nod to fellow Russian composer, Glinka's *Valse-Fantasia*, and perhaps also to the German folk dance, the *Ländler*. The third movement, the *Andante*, follows the doleful nature of the *valse-triste* of the second movement, but is more elegiac and expansive. The fourth movement is a lively scherzo, with a folk melody played by the solo trombone. The final movement, *Allegro con fuoco—tempo alla Polacca*, contains the famous polonaise. In his desire to create a symphony that stepped beyond his former endeavors, Tchaikovsky turns the courtly dance into a fugue, which reflects his desire to create an erudite symphony.

The Symphony ends triumphantly, and was well-received at its premiere. Later scholars and critics have dismissed it for being overly academic, or not memorable enough. The symphony, disregarding critics and fans alike, helped Tchaikovsky to find his symphonic voice after the frustrations of his first two symphonies, and led to his latter three symphonies, known today as his symphonic masterworks.

DMITRI DMITRIYEVICH SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975) SYMPHONY NO. 15, OP. 141 (1971)

Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich's works have inextricably been tied to Soviet politics, due in part to his vacillating position within Stalin's regime, and in part because Western scholarship often focuses on the control that Soviet leadership exerted on its artists during the twentieth century. It is certainly tempting with Shostakovich to attribute much of his compositional output with his desire to stay in (or find his way back into) the good graces of the political leadership, but as with most

issues within politics, there is always more to the story. Shostakovich's final symphony, his fifteenth, is one of his symphonic works that could be a political commentary, or perhaps a reflection on the arc of his life, perhaps a nod to some of the compositions that had outsize effects on Shostakovich's life, or, perhaps a symphony without an agenda at all.

The fifteenth symphony incorporates several musical quotations from famous works; Gioachino Rossini's *William Tell Overture* is the first, perhaps because hearing it was one of Shostakovich's earliest musical memories. The final movement also opens with quotations from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and then parts of his *Ring* cycle. There are other quotations interspersed throughout the symphony; Shostakovich openly acknowledged some of them, and refused to talk about others.

Shostakovich borrows not only from other composers but from himself as well. The second movement is related to the Adagio of his eleventh symphony, and the final movement could be compared to the bellicose finale of the *Leningrad Symphony*, his seventh. Shostakovich also incorporates his own personal brand into the fifteenth symphony, which he had utilized in several other pieces by that point. In German, E-flat is called Es, and B natural is called H. Therefore, Dmitri Shostakovich could spell out his first initial, D, and first three letters of his surname, (e)S-C-H as a sort of musical monogram. Shostakovich was not the first composer to do this; Johann Sebastian Bach composed themes on his own surname (B-A-C-H), so in a way Shostakovich is paying homage to another of the great composers through his monogram.

Although Shostakovich never explained the symphony or identified the quoted material beyond the "toy shop" reference, thankfully the Soviet government enjoyed the work. Tikhon Krennikov, the chairman of the Soviet Composers' Union in 1972 (Shostakovich had been First Secretary of the Board from 1960-1968), remarked that it was "filled with optimism, affirmation of life, and trust in man's inexhaustible strength." The piece, despite its many references to the music of the West, held up to the restrictions of "socialist realism," the official ideal music within the Soviet Union.

The fifteenth symphony is a piece full of contradictions. For Shostakovich, much of his musical oeuvre served the purpose of placing him in the good graces of Soviet leadership, or keeping him out of trouble. Shostakovich's music could never be politically explicit unless it was in praise of the Soviet Union, but he found ways to subtly introduce subversion. Or at least so certain scholars think. As with most pieces written by famous composers with troubled lives, it would be easy to read into the work and explain it as a metaphor for Shostakovich's own life. The symphony contains the joviality of innocent-sounding toy shop melodies, the gravitas of one's knowledge of mortality in the *Tristan* quotations and heavy pondering of the brass in the opening of the second movement. It contains, if one chooses to look for it, the arc of a human life in symphonic form. Whether or not Shostakovich actually meant this to be true is unknowable. But that it is a work that contains multitudes is undeniable. ★



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Alicia has played with the Monterey Symphony since 2007. She is also a member of the Carmel Bach Festival and Marin Symphony. A San Francisco native, she began her music studies at age seven on the piano, and took up the horn after switching from the trumpet in her middle school band program. She earned Bachelors of Music

degrees in Horn Performance and Musicology from Boston University, and did graduate work at the Universität der Künste Berlin before returning to California to continue her studies. She earned a Masters of Music degree at UCLA in Horn Performance, a Masters of Arts degree in Musicology at UCSB, and is currently working on her PhD at UCSB. Alicia's dissertation is focused on the daily lives of orchestral musicians and the organizations in which they play, and she is using her dissertation to explore the relationships between regional orchestras and their communities. Alicia is also an avid outdoorsperson and animal lover. ★