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FRIDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2021, 7.30pm THE HELIX
Culture Night

PROKOFIEV *Peter and the Wolf*

TCHAIKOVSKY *Symphony No. 4*

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Chief Conductor **Jaime Martín**

Tommy Tiernan narrator

Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm



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PROGRAMME NOTES

Peter and the Wolf

Sergei Prokofiev was a Russian composer whose relations with the directorate of the Soviet Union were volatile. Prokofiev, despite the stern and remote character of much of his music, had a deep respect for folktales and the imaginative mythical world which they evoked. And he was very fond of children, enjoying their playfulness and innocence.

Prokofiev lived away from Russia during the early years of the Soviet Union (1917-36) but returned in 1936, running, like so many of his compatriot composers (such as Shostakovich), a severe risk of Stalinist purges for not following the diktats of the regime.

Natalia Satz, the director of the Moscow Children's Musical Theatre (who was in her turn sentenced to exile on a *gulag* after her lover was shot for treason), knew of Prokofiev's interest in folktales, and approached him to discuss a possible work for children which would involve animals and humans. She stipulated that it should be a "symphony" but in a form that would "cultivate musical tastes in children from the first years of school". The result is that Prokofiev not only composed the music for *Peter and the Wolf* but wrote the script himself. And he did it in a remarkably short space of time: less than a week for the original version on piano and another week to complete the orchestration.

In this connection one could perhaps think of Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* or Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. All of these works are designed to appeal to younger listeners and to be entertaining, so that they are introduced in a playful way to the instruments of the orchestra and their relative sounds.

The piece is finely balanced between the age-old, mythical theme and the expectations of the Soviets, who had established a system of boy scouts known as "Pioneers" who were being trained as future communists. Pioneers were expected to develop vigilance, bravery and resourcefulness. In Prokofiev's story, Peter is one such Pioneer, with all

of these desired characteristics, but there the connection with the party line evaporates. Peter's view of the world is that there is much wrong that should be set right. There was nothing in that with which a Soviet inspector could argue; it was typical of the way Prokofiev survived the Stalinist regime by writing music for films with dramatic themes, but in such a way that he could incorporate a "hidden message" of defiance against the system.

Prokofiev gave each instrument a character of its own: the flute is a little bird; the oboe represents a duck; the clarinet is a slinky cat. The wolf is conjured up by three horns. Peter's grandfather is the bassoon, and Peter himself is represented by the strings – on the surface calm and obedient, but allowing Peter to register a well-concealed suspicion of authority by challenging an adult (his rather old-fashioned grandfather) in order to right a wrong. Each instrument-animal has a distinctive tune.

It was Prokofiev himself who introduced the Wolf, who represents Nature, so that Peter's conquest of the Wolf represents the Soviet virtue of Man triumphing over Nature.

Peter lives at his grandfather's house in a forest clearing. Peter goes out, leaving the gate open; the duck takes the opportunity of getting out to swim in the nearby pond. The grandfather scolds Peter, warning him about the Wolf, but Peter disregards the warning. And now a wolf indeed enters, and the cat takes refuge in a tree with the songbirds. The duck doesn't make it, and is swallowed alive. Peter acts: he persuades the songbird to fly around the wolf's head to disorient it, while he slips a rope around the wolf's tail, tying the other end to a tree. Although some hunters (signalled by the timpani and bass drum) arrive and want to shoot the wolf, Peter persuades them to take it to a zoo in a victory parade. While nature is tamed, this allows Peter and the hunters to display magnanimity.

At the end, the narrator tells us, you can still hear the duck quacking inside the wolf's belly.

The first performance was given by the Moscow Philharmonic in 1936 to an audience of Young Pioneers, with Satz herself narrating. Since then, many famous people have taken the role of the Narrator – among them Sean Connery, Eleanor Roosevelt, Alec Guinness, Boris Karloff, Peter Ustinov and Sting. In addition, Walt Disney made a film (after meeting Prokofiev in Hollywood in 1938), parallel to his music-film *Fantasia*, and the work has inspired many other film and television adaptations, right up to the present day.

Note by Richard Pine © RTÉ

PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY 1840-1893

Symphony No. 4 in F minor

- i. Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima (in movimento di valse)*
- ii. Andantino in modo di canzone*
- iii. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato – Allegro*
- iv. Finale: Allegro con fuoco*

1877 was a memorable year for Tchaikovsky – for the best and worst of reasons that went to the very heart of the composer's personal and professional life.

In March, the Bolshoi Ballet gave the first performance of his ballet *Swan Lake*. Woefully ill-prepared, it was panned by critics unaware that they had witnessed the dawn of Russian ballet's golden age. Much of the rest of the year was given over to the composition of Tchaikovsky's opera masterpiece, *Eugene Onegin*, and his Fourth Symphony, the writing and meaning of which became inextricably embroiled in relationships newly formed with two women.

The first of those women was Nadezhda von Meck, the wife of a railway magnate, who had written to Tchaikovsky offering financial support. During their 14-year association, the composer never met his generous patron, the relationship conducted entirely by letter. Such a missive also

re-introduced him to Antonina Milyukova, a former student who wrote declaring her undying love for him.

At the beginning of June, Tchaikovsky interrupted work on the symphony to visit Milyukova. Within 48 hours he had proposed to her; within the month they were married. And separated less than three months later. The experience threw Tchaikovsky into turmoil – his motives for the disastrous marriage, many now believe, to put an end to rumours of his homosexuality, a crime then punishable in Russia by death. It also obliged him to become more circumspect with the jealous-from-afar Meck.

In truth, the Fourth Symphony, for all its turbulent, unabashed emotion, seems unlikely to have been a direct commentary on the unfolding relationships, least of all with Milyukova, who was to die in an insane asylum in 1917. Lingering suspicions that it was have been fuelled by a letter Tchaikovsky wrote to Meck in which he said: ‘We cannot escape our Fate, and there was something fatalistic about my meeting with this girl’. The comment led some to embroider the Fourth Symphony with the title ‘Fate’, suspecting the music illustrated some sort of agenda or narrative.

The ‘kernel’ of the symphony, the composer later wrote to Meck, is its introduction (heard on blaring brass) which repeats throughout its four movements. ‘This is Fate,’ Tchaikovsky declared, ‘the fatal power that hinders one in the pursuit of happiness from gaining the goal...’. Continuing at some length, he complained that Fate ‘poisons continuously the soul’, is ‘overpowering and invincible’ and in response to which ‘there is nothing to do but to submit and vainly complain’. That complaint is voiced with the utmost eloquence in what he described as ‘the melancholy, syncopated shadow-waltz of the [movement’s] main theme, heard in strings’.

Perhaps to persuade Meck that his affections (albeit strictly platonic) were hers and not Milyukova’s, the second movement – with a forlorn oboe solo at its opening extended by aching, searching strings that rise heroically to meet something that never arrives – ‘shows another phase of sadness’, he said, while the third movement evinced ‘no determined feeling, no exact expression’.

Indeed, there is something intoxicated about a movement in which ‘there are disconnected pictures which come and go... [and] have nothing to do with reality; they are unintelligible, bizarre’. If such abstracted metaphors were meant to disguise any explicit autobiographical meaning, they, like the music itself, serve to illustrate the emotional and psychological turmoil Tchaikovsky had found himself in.

The contrasting lightness of the opening of the finale – ‘the picture of a folk holiday’ – finds Tchaikovsky seeking escape in the supposed idyll of simple pastoral life. That aspiration is underlined by the use of the folk song *A Birch Stood in the Meadow*, introduced by woodwinds after the bright, brilliant beginning. But brute reality soon intrudes and the composer’s sense of otherness, perhaps of happiness undeserved, finds Fate interrupting the vision of innocent Arcadia. In a bittersweet coda to Meck’s letter, Tchaikovsky (as much to himself one suspects) wrote: ‘Rejoice in the happiness of others – and you can still live’.

Whatever the meaning of the Fourth Symphony, it remains one of Tchaikovsky’s most immediate, lyrical and personal compositions. Heard on its own terms, it is a masterly and deeply humane work, all the more powerful for its conflicted head and heart. In the end, perhaps the most revealing comment Tchaikovsky made in his letter to Meck explaining the symphony was to quote the poet Heinrich Heine: ‘Where words end, music begins’.

Note by Michael Quinn © RTE