
Stop, Look, and Listen!

Musical Diversions and Commentary — by Rodney Flora

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Issue 05



What is this? Now that I am retired here in Castine, this is an outlet for the skills and passions that I have developed and honed during my career as a classical music broadcaster and, during this period of social isolation, to share a wider world of classical music with my readers, and give all of us something to focus on other than dreadful news and the tedium of isolation. Besides, music is itself a healthy preoccupation and a source of enjoyment and fulfillment. I hope this will make a small contribution to that.

If you need more convincing of the power of music to move, heal, and uplift us, check out this story from NPR: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/02/13/965644120/music-therapy-brings-solace-to-covid-19-patients-and-healers>

TCHAIKOVSKY - Winter Dreams and other favorites



Can you be TOO popular? Practically everybody knows at least some of Tchaikovsky's music. The Nutcracker, Romeo and Juliet, the violin concerto and the first piano concerto, and good grief, the 1812 Overture! Lord have mercy! And indeed all of these are wonderful pieces, maybe even the 1812. More on that later. Indeed over the years Tchaikovsky's music seems to have suffered something of a fall from grace, possibly as a result of overexposure. One hundred or so years ago it was held in the highest esteem, and enjoyed overwhelming popularity. Some of the "tunes" became almost musical clichés, and perhaps that is part of the problem.

As the musical modernists came to the fore in the early 20th century they tended to dismiss Tchaikovsky's music (and that of other Romantics too) as too easy, too sentimental, too *pretty*, altogether implying that it lacked depth or intellectual respectability. To them it was old fashioned. "That's SO last century!" It's taken some time to recover from that dismissal but thankfully in more recent times there has been something of a re-appraisal of Tchaikovsky's music and a renewed appreciation for what it has to offer.

I hope to get you and Tchaikovsky reacquainted here, in my own small way. I hope to show you that there is more to him and his music than you may have thought. and while I don't entertain any ambitions of single-handedly restoring his reputation, I don't think I need to, I think he can do that for himself, through his music.

The fabulous movie, Dr. Zhivago, showed us the epic landscape of the Russian Winter. Tchaikovsky's First Symphony is something of an epic depiction of Winter too, but cozier and minus the starvation and the Bolshevism.



Here is Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1 in g minor, Op. 13 "Winter Daydreams" Mariss Jansons conducts the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQDZ4XaTbuU>

The first two movements are titled "Dreams of a Winter Journey", and "Land of Desolation, Land of Mists". The remaining two movements are simply designated Scherzo and Finale.

All of Tchaikovsky's six symphonies are wonderful in their different ways. Four, five, and six are the more famous, but I really like Symphony No. 2, known as the "Little Russian Symphony". Even though it is his shortest symphony there's nothing "little" about this music. "Little Russia" is the (perhaps slightly disparaging) name that Russians used to call the Ukraine.

Symphony No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 17 "Little Russian" - Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm3F8SVaTls>

Tchaikovsky's ballet scores contain a lot of his most famous and beloved music. The Nutcracker of course, (which I talked about in my December newsletter), but also Swan Lake, and Sleeping Beauty. All are gorgeous to see or just to listen.

As I watched this performance of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake with the Kirov Ballet, I admit I was quite lost most of the time as far as the storyline was concerned, but I also realized I didn't care. I thought "beautiful music paired with beautiful movement, what's not to like!?"

Tchaikovsky: Swan Lake with The Kirov Ballet
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rJoB7y6Ncs>



If you would prefer the more condensed, "ears-only" version (although it is a concert video so you can watch the orchestra if you like) but with all of the great melodies:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSVSIddJMn8>

Also among Tchaikovsky's justifiably most famous and popular pieces are his Violin Concerto

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vHL0UNCa1Q>

and his Piano Concerto No. 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHMrELwaj4>

The very first public performance took place in Boston's Music Hall, the predecessor to Symphony Hall, in October 1875. Hans von Bülow was the soloist. (He married Liszt's daughter Cosima who later left him for Richard Wagner, but that's another story.)

Tchaikovsky also wrote 2 other piano concertos, although the third was unfinished. Here's Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 2, not as well known as the first, but I like it a lot.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXY_qU7bKPQ&t=73s

And, despite my obligatory dismissal of the 1812 overture, I still can't resist it. Here it is, as Tchaikovsky intended, not blasting cannons with an incidental musical background, as it is sometimes presented, but orchestra and chorus, with cannons as "punctuation" in the finale. Just think of them as percussion. It's a different 1812 Overture than you've probably heard before. Actually, it's pretty thrilling!



Ouverture solennelle "1812", Op. 49 - Choral Version St.Petersburg Chamber Choir, Leningrad Military Orchestra, St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, Vladimir Ashkenazy, cond.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrsYD46W1U0>

And just one more that I think is an absolute must...

Perhaps by now you have divined that I really like piano concertos (piano plus orchestra) and chamber music for piano and strings (piano trios, quartets, etc.). More about that later. Tchaikovsky contributed one of my all-time favorites to the genre, his Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 50. It also has a great story...

It was the only work Tchaikovsky ever wrote for this combination of instruments. In 1880, his benefactress Nadezhda von Meck, had asked for such a piece, but he declined, writing in his letter to her of November 1880:

"You ask why I have never written a trio. Forgive me, dear friend; I would do anything to give you pleasure, but this is beyond me ... I simply cannot endure the combination of piano with violin or cello. To my mind the timbre of these instruments will not blend ... it is torture for me to have to listen to a string trio or a sonata of any kind for piano and strings." (adapted from Wikipedia article)

A year later he wrote just such a trio, entirely on his own initiative, and it is truly amazing! He dedicated it to the memory of his dear friend and mentor Nikolai Rubinstein. It has always sounded rather "symphonic" to me, a bit like a piano concerto with a very reduced orchestra, but it actually is a beautifully balanced chamber work and the violin and the cello have lots of good stuff to play too. He achieves a very BIG sound with only 3 instruments.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qigMRy22m6A&t=103s>

Also the very lengthy Theme and Variations is one of the clearest, best examples I know of its kind. If you pay a little attention you can easily follow the many ways in which the theme evolves. It's really fascinating to witness a genius at work.

Nadezhda von Meck was an influential patron of the arts, especially music. She is best known today for her artistic relationship with Tchaikovsky, supporting him financially for thirteen years, so that he could devote himself full-time to composition, but stipulating that they were never to meet. The two did meet each other on one occasion, purely by chance, in August 1879, while Tchaikovsky was staying at the von Meck estate. He had gone for his daily walk in the forest somewhat earlier than usual, unaware that she was late for her daily drive through that same area. As a result, they came face to face for a few moments; he tipped his hat politely, she was nonplussed, but no words were spoken. He wrote to her the same evening to apologise for the inadvertent breach of their arrangement. She responded, saying there was nothing to apologise for, and she even invited him to visit her home to see her new paintings, but at a time when she would be away. (Adapted from the Wikipedia article on von Meck. Which you can see here in its entirety: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadezhda_von_Meck)



"DISCOVERIES" - PIANO PLUS

Tchaikovsky may have initially hated the instrumental combination of the piano trio but, as I said above, I love it. I also love piano concertos (good ones of course). I find that the sound of piano with strings (and other instruments too, but especially strings) contrast beautifully, and yet compliment each other perfectly. I love their varied sounds and colors, the articulation of the piano and the lyrical flow of the strings, how the piano can shimmer with the utmost delicacy or overawe with its percussive power. Likewise, the strings can shimmer soothingly or growl and shout and declaim. They can have a wonderful dialogue, a dynamic back and forth, or they can all combine forces and sound almost symphonic. Anyway, I do love it!

Here are a few gems I've recently encountered:

This is the Piano Quintet in E minor, Op. 3 by Josef Labor. I've listened to it several times and I still like it a lot. Labor was an Austrian pianist, organist, and composer of the late nineteenth century. He had many important musical connections in Vienna and was very highly regarded. In fact, Paul Wittgenstein's brother, the philosopher and writer Ludwig Wittgenstein, praised Josef Labor as one of "the six truly great composers" along with Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms. Posterity has not been quite so kind, but he certainly deserves better than the obscurity that has overtaken him.

A bit inconveniently I'm afraid, there are separate links for each of the four movements. So I've put just the first movement here. If you find that it draws you in and you want to listen to the rest of it, links to the other three movements appear down below in the "More to Explore" section.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4h2BZqTwzc&list=OLAK5uy_kzFtD0K25lj9h-IuH2uGQw-IVDDmD9N3s&index=1

William Hurlstone was an English composer active around 1900. He was one of many young composers who showed tremendous talent and potential but died much too young. He left behind a tantalizing body of work when he died in 1906 at the age of thirty. Here is the first movement of his Piano Concerto in D major from 1902.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQFDeG_axl4&list=OLAK5uy_n892qmL1OMwr2-PPivDwWMWLLCjihOOKk&index=1

Links to the other movements appear in the "More to Explore" section, below.

And let us not be keyboard exclusionists! In those pre-piano days before about 1770 the harpsichord was the Queen of keyboard instruments.

Here is the quite lovely Harpsichord Concerto in E major by Marianna Martines.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWYYk3sWqU8&list=PL9EN-YGoVyRPsQMet_pcdIIJ7dQKhNV-Q&index=15



Martines, (also rendered as Marianne Martinez, and as Marianne von Martinez) had a truly pan-European background. *Marianna Martines's paternal grandfather was a Spanish soldier who had settled in Naples. Her father, Nicolo Martines, grew up there and for a time pursued a career as a soldier. He later changed careers, serving in Vienna as Maestro di Camera at the papal nuncio; that is, the Pope's embassy to the Austrian Empire. For service to the Empire, Marianna's brothers in 1774 acquired a patent of nobility, hence the "von" in the family surname.*

In his youth in Italy, Nicolo had befriended the poet Pietro Trapassi, who wrote under the name Metastasio. The latter had risen in eminence, to the point that in 1730 he was called to Vienna to serve as the Poet Laureate of the Empire. Metastasio resided with the Martines family for the rest of his life (from about 1734 to 1782). His presence would prove crucial to Marianne's career.

The Martines family lived in rooms in a large building on the Michaelerplatz in Vienna, "a stately building still standing in the Kohlmarkt". As was common in the days before elevators, the floors of the building corresponded to the social class of the inhabitants. On the lowest floor were the rooms of the dowager princess of the wealthy Esterházy family. The Martines family were on the third floor. Another resident of the middle floors was Nicola Porpora, a well-known Italian singing teacher and composer. At the very top, in a cold and leaky attic room, lived a struggling young composer, Joseph Haydn, who was trying to make his way as a freelance musician. The lives of all of these people ultimately came to be connected, in part through Marianna Martines. (Adapted from the Wikipedia entry for Marianna Martines)

Her harpsichord Concerto in G is delightful too. (Link is in "More to Explore" below.)

Here's one from the late classical period. Piano Concerto in C major by Muzio Clementi. It reminds me a little of late Haydn/early Beethoven. Although Clementi was born in Rome, he spent most of his life in London and was a major presence on the London musical scene (which was the most vibrant and international in Europe), as composer, pianist, teacher, conductor, music publisher/editor, and piano manufacturer. Was there nothing the man couldn't do?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XRrWAZEDUY&list=PL9EN-YGoVyRNC5dSr25wFdMbEWwYJUBbv&index=36>



And not to forget the wind instruments...

Here is the very nice Sextet for Piano and Winds by Austrian composer Ludwig Thuille (1861-1907).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A1hVu_kCG0&t=1084s

Actually Thuille is one of those lesser known composers who is worth exploring further. He wrote lots of quite lovely stuff. I think his Piano Concerto is worthy of your attention.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po1ei8rb2x8&t=1589s>

As is his Trio for Violin, Viola, and Piano which is slightly unusual in substituting the viola for the cello. This is the first movement. Links to the other three appear down below in the "More to Explore" section.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L80II4aFfNk>

YOUNG ONES TO WATCH

I know what a prodigy is, at least by definition, but this really brings it home! Jaw dropping! and delightful.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zW9pv4j00Dk>



Surely, he couldn't be more than 8 or 9 years old in this video, could he? Such a BIG sound from such a small boy!

Which, oddly, reminds me of a story about the great violinist Jascha Heifetz. Backstage, after one of his concerts, a woman from the audience gushed to him "Mr. Heifetz, your violin sounds wonderful!" Whereupon Heifetz held the instrument up to his ear and said "I don't hear anything." To put it another way, Michaelangelo was great because he was Michaelangelo, not because he owned a good chisel.

Another truly amazing talent, who will be fascinating to watch the next few years is Alma Deutscher. This young woman (who just turned 16) is not only a highly proficient soloist on both the piano and the violin, but has written her own concertos for both, and they are pretty wonderful! And even though she's clearly very serious about what she does, she looks like she's having a great time too!



Here is her Piano Concerto:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-SaujEBIvs>

...and her Violin Concerto:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFEC8NDffzk>

Both of these were written when she was between 11 and 13 years of age.

Let us hope she can retain her love of melody, even as she develops a more mature and original voice. I, and many others, hope to hear a lot

more from her.

and A BIT of FUN!

TAKE OUT YOUR SACKBUT! (Not to forget your shawm, crumhorn, and hurdy-gurdy!)*
No, this is not a lewd suggestion, but an allusion to this next collection of music, which is just a bit of good old-fashioned (VERY OLD-fashioned!) fun.



Early Music to Drive the Cold Winter Away...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGUD9HEdFhg&t=969s>

Even though some of this is Christmas music some of it was originally conceived simply as Winter music. It's also good to remember that in many places in the Middle Ages New Year was celebrated on March 25th. So you won't have to wait very long if you want another excuse to drink Champagne. The Vernal Equinox works too but as we know only too well, here in Maine it's often just a bit disappointing. Cheers! Spring is out there somewhere.

*(Those of you who are inclined to look very, very closely may notice that there aren't really any sackbuts in this, nor shawms nor hurdy-gurdys. There are a couple of crumhorns though,..and rauschpfeife too!)

MORE TO EXPLORE (More links for the indefatigably intrigued)



Here are movements 2, 3, and 4 of the Josef labor Piano Quintet:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fm4KgivJ2so&list=OLAK5uy_kzFtD0K25lj9h-IuH2uGQw-IVDDmD9N3s&index=2

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fckFzhzMyW4&list=OLAK5uy_kzFtD0K25lj9h-IuH2uGQw-IVDDmD9N3s&index=3

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ayaP2Z2mwc&list=OLAK5uy_kzFtD0K25lj9h-IuH2uGQw-IVDDmD9N3s&index=4

Labor's Piano Quartet from the same recording is also quite good.

Marianne von Martinez: Harpsichord Concerto in G major

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPcv4Qrhx3g&list=PL4bxWaf_0I4en6tznNkdHiNzug1SfN0J&index=3

Here's another performance of the Tchaikovsky Piano Trio that I also really like:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qigMRy22m6A&t=103s>

Here are movements 2, 3, and 4 of Ludwig Tuille's Trio for Violin, Viola, and Piano

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrNbrX1smBU&list=PLW40OcCxCDgzJYmap8wZsloREtMQa0XOo&index=12>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05BjTFriIdc&list=PLW40OcCxCDgzJYmap8wZsloREtMQa0XOo&index=25>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzEbMToz8YI&list=PLW40OcCxCDgzJYmap8wZsloREtMQa0XOo&index=20>

And of course there's nothing to prevent you from using some of these as starting points and engaging in your own further musical explorations.

A LITTLE TRAVELIN' MUSIC! (Well, just traveling really.)

It's several years old now, but a wonderful series about exploring the canals of Great Britain (and further afield, too, in later episodes) is Great Canal Journeys. It is the sedate way to explore England, Scotland, and Wales. Timothy West and Prunella Scales are wonderful guides, and although Timothy can be a bit of an old grump at times, Prunella is always charming and delightful (and the exact opposite of the infuriating Sybil Fawcety character she played opposite John Cleese on the justly acclaimed Fawlty Towers TV series!).

Here is a link to the first episode of Great Canal Journeys:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zRI7xwN_mU

Quite a few more episodes are available, and you can probably find them pretty easily on your own.

If you just can't get enough of grumpy old men, here are Peter Davison and Christopher Timothy from the original series of All Creatures Great and Small, (and they're not really all that grumpy) driving a classic car around Britain: Vintage Roads Great and Small - Episode 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sk60R0D42As&list=PL9EN-YGoVyROCrWRip4tVzBOelYqiFULE&index=14&t=25s>

And, if you are pining for warmer climes (and who can blame you?) check out...

Spectacular Spain with Alex Polizzi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSoQNQR50FE>



Again, if you like what you see, there are several more episodes of each of these programs currently available on YouTube. Just search on the program title.

As sometimes happens with YouTube, programs can suddenly disappear, probably because they were removed at the insistence of the copyright owners, who may not have been the ones who posted them in the first place. This is well within their rights, but doesn't much help us viewers. So fair warning, I always try out these links to make sure they are working when I post them, but with no guarantees as to how long the content will remain available.



WHAT'S NEXT?

March is, of course, Women's History Month. Now ordinarily I'm not driven by these kinds of external themes, but in this case it just happens to coincide with something I wanted to do anyway, which is to feature some of the amazing women composers I have stumbled upon in my musical explorations.

I'll try to get the March edition out before April. It may be a bit shorter and less ambitious, but I never know until I start researching and writing. No one has ever accused me of an excess of brevity. As Oscar Wilde famously said: "All things in moderation,...including moderation."

Please send me your opinions and reactions to this newsletter and its contents. Also share your own discoveries. I haven't necessarily listened to ALL of the available recordings of the pieces I recommend, so if you know of a better one share that too.

If you prefer not to receive this newsletter in the future let me know or just delete it from your inbox. Likewise if you know of anyone who might like to receive it send me their email address or give them mine so they can request it.

Cheers!