

Program Notes for VSO Concert – January 31-February 1, 2025
Beethoven – Violin Concerto; Tchaikovsky – Symphony #6 (Pathétique)

By Jonathan Berkowitz

The program for this concert puts together the two greatest symphonists of the nineteenth century. Beethoven is the undisputed number one, with Tchaikovsky a strong choice for number two. The closing concert of the VSO Masterworks Diamond series, on June 6th and 7th will feature Beethoven's Ninth, arguably the greatest symphony ever written. Tonight, you'll hear his violin concerto, paired with Tchaikovsky's sixth and final symphony. Separately, each is a treat for the ears. Together, the treat more than doubles!

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770 to 1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven was part of the generation that experienced the full impact of the French Revolution, with a vision of freedom and the dignity of the individual. His music reflects this heroic age in an accent never to be forgotten. The man, himself, stepped outside the confines of his art to live heroically in the world. His masterpieces tell of his "wrestling with destiny" and have never been equaled. They culminate, of course, with his Ninth Symphony.

Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany, and baptized on December 17, 1770. His exact birthdate remains uncertain, despite some influential sources claiming it was on December 16. An abusive, alcoholic father made for an unhappy family situation. His musical education began at a young age, and his great talent was quickly recognized.

When Beethoven was seventeen, during a trip to Vienna, he performed for Mozart. Mozart is said to have commented to his friends, "Keep an eye on him—he will make a noise in the world some day." One genius recognized another. He studied with Joseph Haydn, but Beethoven's volcanic temperament and independent spirit were too much for the aging musician.

His pianistic abilities wowed the music-loving aristocracy, and he was welcomed by powerful patrons whose names you can find in the dedications of some of his works. Beethoven referred to them as the "princely rabble" and forced them to treat him as an equal and a friend. He said, "It is good to move among the aristocracy, but it is first necessary to make them respect you." He was a passionate rebel. Rather than attaching himself to the court of a prince, he worked under a sort of patronage system, getting paid for lessons and compositions. He had at least a half dozen publishers and was able to set his own terms and price.

The first decade of his career was marked by youthful exuberance, and perhaps a somewhat arrogant awareness of his strength. He said, "Power is the morality of men who stand out from the mass, and it is also mine!"

But vulnerability struck quickly. Beginning to lose his hearing at the age of 26 struck a tremendous blow to his pride. His affliction symbolized his apartness and difference from others. He began to understand that if life would withhold happiness, he would create music to achieve the victory fate threatened to take from him.

He overcame a personal sense of chaos and believed that humankind could, too. This became the epic theme of his music: moving from despair to conflict to serenity, then to triumph and joy. In

fostering this idea, he became the major prophet of the nineteenth century, the architect of a heroic vision of life.

Though Beethoven's deafness is well-known, other aspects of his life are not. He supported charities, including schools for the deaf and orphanages. He was a chess enthusiast, animal lover, avid reader of literature, philosophy, and history, nature lover, talented cook, and heavy drinker. Beethoven never married but had several relationships with women. He also enjoyed the company of close friends and colleagues. The enduring myth that Beethoven was a tortured and lonely genius completely ignores this rich and fulfilling personal life.

In the last years of Beethoven's career, he put forth an unyielding effort to get the elements of his art in line with his expressive ideals. His brilliant compositions attest to his success. The public, especially the younger generation, responded to the power of his music. Does that sound like the emergence of rock and roll, and now rap?

Outwardly, his life was uneventful. When he became totally deaf, he quarreled more with associates and friends. It is well-known that Beethoven dedicated his Symphony No. 3, also known as the "Eroica Symphony," to Napoleon Bonaparte, but later retracted it when Napoleon declared himself emperor. Beethoven died in 1827 at age 56, famous and revered then, and just as famous and revered today.

Beethoven's life and music have filled books. One massive and marvellous tome in my collection is *The Beethoven Companion*, edited by Thomas K. Scherman and Louis Biancolli. Beethoven's biography makes for just as fascinating reading as biographies of Churchill, Einstein, and possibly Steve Jobs and Elon Musk.

The last words here go to Wallace Brockway and Herbert Weinstock, from an old book called *Men of Music* (apologies for the sexist title). They begin their discussion with these words, "The history of music offers no experience comparable to that of an expanding universe afforded by the masterpieces of Ludwig van Beethoven."

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61 – Ludwig van Beethoven (1806)

Orchestration: *flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, and solo violin*

Ask listeners for a short list of the most beloved violin concertos of all time, and the list would likely include those by Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, and Mendelssohn. Thus, it may come as a great surprise to learn that Beethoven's singular, monumental work in the violin repertoire had a less than enthusiastic launch and early years.

His new, but unrehearsed, work was presented in an unusual program. The rather long first movement was featured in the opening half, the shorter second and third movements during the second half. In between was a peculiar sonata by Franz Clement played on one string of a violin held upside down! Beethoven knew of Clement and dedicated the new work to him. Clement was the soloist for the concerto's first performance, but the story is that he sight-read it from Beethoven's typically messy manuscript.

With such an inauspicious introduction it was, unsurprisingly, a failure. Called insignificant, it was exiled from the concert hall until about 50 years after Beethoven's death. The great violinist, Joseph Joachim, revived it and started it on a journey to a popularity that has never waned. (Not only did Joachim make Beethoven's concerto a signature piece, but he also inspired Brahms to compose one.) Perhaps the failure of the premiere was why Beethoven never composed another violin concerto.

In one try, Beethoven created music whose beauty comes from being perfectly suited for the violin, and from the sensitive balance between the timbres and volumes of the solo instrument and orchestra. He expanded the scope of the violin concerto, while managing to write a piece for a virtuoso without any trace of empty showiness.

The Concerto is almost deceptively quiet. Its melodies would be called undistinguished if they came from someone else's pen. There is a minimum of ornamentation, except in the cadenzas—somewhat ill-fitting—that virtuosos have written. Beethoven has woven unpromising melodies into an incomparably rich and varied tonal fabric that transforms them. The beauty lies deep; its secret is tone, not display. The work challenges the performer to discover what Beethoven has done and then share it with the listener.

The difference between Beethoven's Concerto and others of his time is best seen and heard in the first movement. With a duration of over twenty minutes, the extra time and space means the themes can be developed rather leisurely. They are elegant, calm and dignified, but always distinctively Beethovenian (yes, that's a real word).

The first movement—***Allegro ma non troppo***—opens one of the most unusual and bold ideas he ever wrote down: four drum taps. Hugh Macdonald suggests that they could be an echo of military music, a jazz musician counting in 1-2-3-4 to set the tempo, a suggestion of menace or thunder, a way to attract the audience's attention, or perhaps just a little tune. However characterized, they effectively set off shock waves at the premiere. Listen for that motif elsewhere in the movement.

A grand orchestral introduction features a majestic theme played by the woodwinds and strings. The woodwinds also introduce the rising scales in the second theme. The solo violin enters with a lyrical and expressive theme, seamlessly weaving in and out of the orchestral fabric, undergoing various transformations. As you listen, just marvel at how Beethoven created a sweeping epic sound with both grandeur and simple beauty. Each time I hear this piece I rediscover his brilliance.

The soft timpani taps that opened the concert now signal the recapitulation. The opening ideas return with great power while the soloist reprises the lyrical themes of the movement. This leads to the cadenza. Beethoven did not leave us any cadenzas, so every great soloist from Joachim onward composed his own set. The movement concludes with the solo violin quietly leading us home.

I guarantee that you will find yourself humming the brilliant second theme, on your way out and beyond!

The short second movement—***Larghetto***—is lyrical and introspective, perhaps the emotional centre of the concerto. Mark Rohr wrote, "It is one of those Beethoven slow movements that is a whole world unto itself, a world where time is suspended as if in a dream and the only thing that matters is the next note."

Technically, the movement is a double theme and variations, but unlike most such compositions, the music doesn't build in tempo or dynamics. It doesn't change key and sounds almost choral in nature. Instead, we are captivated by the changes of colour in orchestration and the delicate embellishments of the violin.

It begins with a simple 10-bar theme, played by the strings, horns, and woodwinds. The soloist introduces a second theme, even more serene than the opening one. The soloist plays variations on the orchestra's theme, with fragmented embellishments, and then on the soloist's theme. Just before the end of the movement, the horns offer a violent series of chords. But instead of leading to another variation, it is followed by a very brief cadenza leading directly into the last movement. Having no break between movements was a common device of that musical period.

It will only take you a few seconds to realize that the third movement—**Rondo. Allegro**—is indeed a rondo, with a very accessible and upbeat theme, with various contrasting sections interwoven. The melody, based on a short five-note figure, is known as the “hunting horn” theme, but is played initially by the solo violin, not the horns.

The movement is a spirited dialogue of themes and motives. Only Beethoven could create such rhythmic drive and dynamic contrast to create a sense of urgency and excitement. There seems to be an endless supply of lively invention. Calvin Dotsey points out that, “When the orchestra takes up the theme it prefigures the rustic merry-making of the peasant dance in the third movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony.”

After a final cadenza, the hunting theme returns one more time but in the wrong key. See if you can pick that out. Then the music cleverly returns to the home key in a coda that provides a thrilling and very satisfying conclusion. One writer described the coda playing with the theme akin to a kitten playing with a ball of wool.

Mark Rohr, quoted earlier, says of this movement, “[It] is a rollicking invitation to dance. It delivers a rustic, foot-stomping good time, with a brilliant coda and ingenious close: a delightful smile from Beethoven.” Beethoven wasn't always *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress). This masterpiece highlights Beethoven's genius as a composer and ensures its status as one of the greatest concertos ever written for the violin. One commentator long ago summarized it in four words, saying it has Olympian nature, nobility, and dignity.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840 to 1893)

Who are the best-known composers in the history of classical music? Bach, Mozart and Beethoven are at or near the top of the list, but Tchaikovsky must be considered for scope of musical forms and breadth of listening audiences. He is widely considered the most popular Russian composer in history. His ballets, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker* attract audiences of all ages. *Piano Concerto No.1 in B-flat Minor* is among the best-known of all piano concertos, and his *Violin Concerto* one of the greatest ever composed. Tchaikovsky's symphonies are staples of the orchestral repertoire.

Although Tchaikovsky showed an early passion for music, his parents wanted him to work in the civil service. Accordingly, he entered the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in Saint Petersburg at the age of 10. Nine years later, Tchaikovsky honoured his parents by taking a clerkship with the Ministry of Justice where he stayed for four years.

When he was 21, Tchaikovsky restarted music lessons and enrolled at the newly founded Saint Petersburg Conservatory. There, he became one of the school's first composition students. He then joined the Moscow Conservatory as a professor of harmony but resigned in 1878 to focus entirely on composing. His prolific body of work constitutes 169 pieces, including symphonies, operas, ballets, concertos, cantatas, and songs.

- *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* were both considered failures at their premieres. But they went on to become two of the most beloved and frequently performed ballets in the world.
- He was heavily influenced by Russian folk melodies, which can be heard in many of his compositions.
- A perfectionist when it came to his compositions, he often revised and rearranged his works multiple times before considering them ready for performance.
- Despite his incredible success as a composer, Tchaikovsky struggled with self-doubt, anxiety, and depression throughout his life. His homosexuality was a significant source of personal struggle, at a time when being openly gay was not accepted.
- Tchaikovsky had a unique relationship with his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, in that they communicated solely through letters and never met in person. Von Meck supported Tchaikovsky financially which allowed him the freedom to focus on his music.
- His works are known for their intense melodies and dramatic flair. Their themes of love, fate, and struggle resonate deeply with audiences all over the world.
- Tchaikovsky's life ended tragically in 1893, at the age of 53. The cause of his death remains a topic of speculation, with theories ranging from cholera to suicide. History has not provided an answer to this mystery.

Tchaikovsky's music continues to be cherished and performed worldwide, solidifying his legacy as one of the greatest composers of all time.

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, “Pathétique” – Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1893)

Orchestration: 3 flutes (3rd = piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, and tam-tam), and strings

Much has been written about Tchaikovsky’s life, yet much still remains unknown or unconfirmed, and will likely remain that way.

His Sixth Symphony involves some of these mysteries. The first is where the nickname “Pathétique” came from. Some sources say the composer titled it with a Russian word meaning “passionate” but without the connotation of “arousing pity”. It was translated into French as “pathétique”. Other sources attribute the name to a suggestion from Tchaikovsky’s brother, Modeste. It is unclear whether Tchaikovsky liked it, but his publisher did, and so it has remained the *Pathétique*.

The second mystery arises from a letter Tchaikovsky wrote to his nephew a few years after completing his Fifth Symphony. He described his idea for a new symphony that would have a “program” that would pose a riddle for everyone to solve. He said, “Let him guess it who can.” In fact, his initial title for the piece was The Program Symphony. Cryptic sketches discovered long after suggest that the first movement was “all passion, confidence, thirst for life; the second, love; the third, disappointment; the fourth, death.” It is not clear, however, whether this outline ever became a reality. But the letter did indicate that the new symphony would have an unusual form, as you will read below.

One more “mystery” is why commentators over the ages claim to have found and deciphered internal musical codes that explain Tchaikovsky’s death. They have kept the symphony not just popular but also the most controversial of all his works. Perhaps the unique combination of power and tragedy seems to demand explanation. The enigma is too compelling to go unresolved!

The first movement—**Adagio – Allegro non troppo**—is nearly twice as long as each of the other three. It brings us immediately into a bleak and intense world with a slow introduction led by a rather funereal sounding bassoon. Listen carefully: it is a forerunner of the faster, more forceful first theme which each part of the orchestra will eventually contribute to. A brief silence precedes the second theme, which may be even more familiar to listeners. It was used in a 1940s song popularized by Glenn Miller and a 1950s hit by the Platters, and others. American musicologist Edward Downes wrote that the theme appears “like a recollection of happiness in time of pain.”

Just before the Adagio section ends, the score instructs the solo bassoon to play the last four notes at a dynamic of *pppppp*. Well, *p* means *piano/softly*, *pp* means *pianissimo/very softly*. Six “*p*’s” must mean “softer than is humanly possible to play or to hear.” A bassoonist cannot really accomplish it, so a bass clarinet usually plays it instead. I could tell you to listen for it, but I doubt you’d hear it!

Neither theme prepares the listener for the tremendous and tempestuous development to come. Buckle up for a powerful blast as the orchestra erupts, and continues with vibrant, intensely emotional passages. Listen to how Tchaikovsky uses the orchestral resources in unexpected ways, particularly the brass and woodwinds. Throughout, you will hear a repetitive four-note figure in the brass, reminiscent of the introduction.

As if to balance the earlier six-*p* dynamic, Tchaikovsky instructs the trombones to play a rare and extreme quadruple forte (four-*f*)—much louder than loud! The second theme returns and with it the sense of pathos. The basses and brass play ever-diminishing, almost hymnlike passages, and the movement ends very quietly.

The second movement—***Allegro con grazia***—opens with a lovely melody presented by the cellos. It may remind you of Tchaikovsky’s ballet music, with this theme being a waltz. But it is 5/4 time not 3/4 which makes for a “limping” waltz or one with a beat missing. It was a rhythmic novelty in 1893, but in Tchaikovsky’s hands it sounds perfectly complete. In contrast to the ever-changing moods, tempos, and keys of the first movement, this one focuses on the simple beauty of its sound. A contrasting middle section comes with the musical instruction “faintly and with sweetness.” The main theme returns, followed by a wistful coda leading to a calm conclusion. Charles O’Connell wrote that the irregular meter was essential to the effect, “as if its gaiety were constantly under constraint; directed, not by careless joy, but by a determination to be joyful.”

The third movement—***Allegro molto vivace***—starts with a playful march-like scherzo. The very catchy main theme reappears many times, interrupted periodically with a secondary theme, but there is no development section. Instead, Tchaikovsky incorporates a whole host of melodic ideas: the continuous background of the strings as if marching at a distance, hints of the march heard in the brass as if approaching closer, and then the full march arriving with the clarinets and horns, rather like a military parade. The finale is played at full volume, with thundering brass and whistling woodwinds that ends in an overpowering coda.

This writer hears echoes of John Williams’ film scores for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Star Wars*. I challenge you not to conjure up images of the triumphant final scene in the first *Star Wars* movie while you listen to this movement. Tchaikovsky biographer John Warrack pours cold water on my delight with this exuberant music; he claims that the movement, “... for all the merriness of its manner, [is] essentially empty, with a coldness at its heart.” What a wet blanket!

There is a local connection, too. The third movement was featured during the closing ceremony of the 2010 Vancouver/ Whistler Winter Olympics during the handover to the next host, Sochi 2014.

Perhaps the listener wonders why Tchaikovsky didn’t make this movement the final one. Thomas May wrote that switching the order of the final two movements would have kept the optimistic, Beethovenian model of light over darkness (which you hear in all nine of his symphonies). The switch made for a radically new concept of the symphonic journey, and Tchaikovsky wrote that this new approach “excited his creative fancy.”

Right from the start, the fourth movement—***Adagio lamentoso***—exudes tragedy. Even the word “lamentoso” hints at what is to come, namely, a slow tempo and mood of despair throughout. The movement provides the opposite of joy and affirmation usually heard in a final symphonic movement. It certainly paved the way for new structures and possibilities for 20th century composers.

The opening theme which appears frequently through the movement is a fascinating auditory illusion. Played by the first and second violins, the melody is not really present in either part but

results from both parts (first and second violins) coming together to give the illusion of a scale. Listen very carefully and test your hearing. Can you resolve the illusion?

A calmer second theme involves the whole orchestra. The opening theme returns. Then a turbulent third theme with trombones, another restatement of the first theme. The music fades into a single, unique strike of a tam-tam which introduces a funereal chorale in the low brass. The second theme returns briefly, and the movement ends with muted strings moving down into the lower register, and bassoons, until slowly and finally fading away to nothing. This ending is the last mystery: namely, what happens when the funeral procession ends? It is appropriate that this is the only Tchaikovsky symphony to end in a minor key.

If themes in the final movement (and earlier one) sound familiar to you, perhaps it is because you are recalling old movies. Excerpts from the symphony can be heard in many films, including *The Outlaw (1943)*, *Now, Voyager (1942)*, *Anna Karenina (1997 version)*, as well as *The Ruling Class*, *Minority Report*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Soylent Green*, *Maurice*, *The Aviator*, and *The Death of Stalin*.

According to critic Richard Taruskin, post hoc “psycho-musical-analysis” (my term, not his) was rampant in the early days of the Symphony. Some said it was a suicide note and diagnosed depression. Others deemed it “homosexual tragedy.” The subtitle *Pathétique* likely contributed to these conclusions. But critic David Brown says that most of this is “patent nonsense.” Tchaikovsky couldn’t have known his death was near and he was anything but depressed while composing this symphony. His brother wrote, “I had not seen him so bright for a long time past.” In today’s world this would have been used as a marketing strategy!

The composer led the first performance nine days before his death. It was the last of Tchaikovsky's compositions premiered in his lifetime. (The single-movement 3rd Piano Concerto, Op. 75, completed a short time before his death, received a posthumous premiere.)

Philip Hale, writing for the Boston Symphony Orchestra long ago, wrote, “The somber eloquence of the *Pathétique*, its pages of recollected joy fled forever, its wild gaiety quenched by the thought of the inevitable end, its mighty lamentations — these are overwhelming and shake the soul.” Tchaikovsky’s sixth and final symphony remains the quintessential expression of tragedy in music, a fitting counterpart to Beethoven’s ninth and final symphony, the quintessential expression of joy in music.