

Program Notes for VSO Concert – September 12-13, 2025
Tchaikovsky – Piano Concerto #1; R. Strauss – Also sprach Zarathustra)

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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.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23 – Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1875)

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings, and solo piano

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 is one of history's most popular—and unconventional—masterpieces. But it had a rocky start. He composed it in late 1874 during a period of creative intensity in Moscow. The work was initially dedicated to the celebrated pianist Nikolai Rubinstein in the hopes of a performance and endorsement. Instead, Rubinstein famously dismissed it as worthless, vulgar, and impossible to play, with clumsy, awkward passages. He even suggested that Tchaikovsky rewrite it completely.

Hurt but defiant, Tchaikovsky refused to alter a note and instead dedicated the Concerto to the German pianist Hans von Bülow, who triumphantly premiered it to wild applause in Boston in October 1875. Von Bülow loved it, declaring that the Concerto “displays such brilliance, and is such a remarkable achievement among your musical works, that you have without doubt enriched the world of music as never before... [T]his true gem shall earn you the gratitude of all pianists.” Despite the infamous incident, Rubinstein was an important early champion of Tchaikovsky's music and the two remained friends. A few years later Rubinstein did a complete about-face, becoming one of the work's most ardent champions and performing it himself many times. Tchaikovsky did, in fact, revise the entire Concerto several times.

The Concerto follows the traditional form of three movements, the first of which takes up more than half the duration of the piece.

The first movement—**Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso – Allegro con spirito**—opens with one of the most famous introductions in all of classical music: a flourish by the brass, and massive piano chords against sweeping orchestral themes. Surprisingly, that glorious and majestic opening theme never returns. It functions as a kind of grand prologue, setting a dramatic tone before the “true” movement begins. This was an almost shocking break from convention. Many 19th-century critics found this “wasteful,” but modern ears hear it as a magnificent curtain-raiser, adding to the Concerto's sense of epic breadth. The introduction ends in a subdued manner.

Then the main Allegro section begins, with three lyrical and passionate themes. The first, introduced by the piano, is forceful and rhythmic, full of syncopations. It is a Ukrainian folk theme that, it is said, Tchaikovsky heard performed by a blind beggar at a market near Kyiv. A short call and response between orchestra and piano serves as a transition. The second theme first appears in the clarinets and is often described as one of Tchaikovsky's loveliest melodies. The strings then introduce a third theme. But rather than present the latter two in sequence, Tchaikovsky alternates them. The exposition builds to a climax and a short piano cadenza before ending.

The development is tempestuous. The piano and orchestra engage in virtuosic dialogue, with cascading runs, thunderous octaves, and rhythmic drive. You will hear, in turn, a more intense third theme played by the orchestra, the second theme played by the piano, the horns interrupting with the third theme again, and then the initial Ukrainian folksong theme. After one more reprise of the second theme, the soloist has an extended bravura cadenza that again develops the second and third themes. The recapitulation returns the main ideas, but with powerful new orchestrations. A

triumphant climax brings the movement to a blazing and optimistic conclusion, with dazzling piano passages and bold chords by the orchestra. It is a thrilling resolution and makes the listener forget all about the absence of the grand opening theme.

The second movement is really three small movements in one. It is marked—**Andantino semplice – Prestissimo – Tempo I**. The first part begins with a tender and delicate melody played by solo flute over pizzicato strings, setting a pastoral mood. The piano answers, with a subtle change of one note. The first four notes by the orchestra are Ab–Eb–F–Ab, but the piano replaces the F with a higher Bb. It is a mystery why every restatement of the motif does this. British pianist Stephen Hough (who performed with the VSO in 2024-25) suggests that the opening F is a possible error in the published score, and that the flute *should* play a Bb. The piano takes up the theme delicately, providing the feel of chamber music rather than virtuosity. After a bridge section, the piano is joined by two cellos with the theme, then continued by an oboe. The section ends with the piano holding a pianissimo high F major chord.

The “finger-twisting” middle part is marked “prestissimo”, or “as fast as possible”. After a virtuosic piano introduction, the strings play a new melody. The piano provides playful staccatos, back-and-forth phrases with the orchestra, and rapid scales. This section ends with another virtuosic solo piano passage. The movement’s opening theme returns, now with richer piano ornamentation. The oboe continues the theme, setting up a quiet, dreamy coda—a striking contrast to the grand first movement and the fiery finale that follows.

The graceful opening main theme may have been borrowed from a French chanson (*Il faut s’amuser, danser et rire – One must have fun, dance and laugh*). Some say Tchaikovsky heard it performed by his onetime fiancée, the soprano Désirée Artôt. But his brother Modest claimed that he and his twin brother Anatoly, sang it with Piotr constantly during the early 1870s. Whatever the source, Tchaikovsky had an eclectic ear for melody, and drew frequently from Russian folk, French salon songs, and Italian opera.

The third movement—**Allegro con fuoco**—is indeed fast and fiery as marked. It is a rondo-like finale, driven by a pounding rhythm and full of virtuosic fireworks. The main theme, danced out with accents and syncopations, is based on a Ukrainian folk tune. The movement is written in 3/4 time; the stress on the second beat intrigues and captivates. This Slavic flavour gave the Concerto a distinctly Russian identity at a time when Tchaikovsky was forging a national voice. The contrasting second theme, more refined and lyrical, recalls the romance of the first movement; it is played first by the violins, then by the soloist. The piano alternates between brilliant solo passages and rapid exchanges with the orchestra. The folk-inspired main theme keeps returning, each time transformed—louder, faster, more virtuosic. Listen for the progressive evolution of the second theme through different keys; this is an ingenious and original technique from Tchaikovsky.

Tchaikovsky leaves nothing undone for the concerto’s coda. Fasten your seatbelts for a grand crescendo with dazzling octave passages. The piano hammers massive chords as the orchestra joins in, shifting triumphantly from B-flat minor to B-flat major. That is followed by the orchestra giving its all with the second theme. The Concerto races to an exhilarating conclusion that never fails to electrify audiences.

Russian music historian Francis Maes explains that the seemingly independent introduction links to the rest of the work by “Tchaikovsky’s gift of hiding motivic connections behind what appears to be a flash of melodic inspiration.... The themes of the three movements are subtly linked. Tchaikovsky presents his structural material in a spontaneous, lyrical manner, yet with a high degree of planning and calculation.” Perhaps the popularity of this Concerto is due, in part, to the listener subconsciously connecting all the dots. Despite its initial rejection, the Concerto quickly became one of the most beloved works in the piano repertoire. Van Cliburn, an American competing in Moscow at the height of the Cold War, won the First International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958. He received an eight-minute standing ovation for this performance. His subsequent recording was the first classical LP to go platinum. The combination of grandeur, lyricism, and virtuosity made the Concerto a natural showpiece for virtuoso pianists. It is also a testament to artistic conviction triumphing over criticism.

This biography first appeared in the 2024-2025 season:

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864 to 1949)

Richard Strauss was a prolific and revolutionary German composer of the late Romantic and early modern eras. He was born in Munich in 1864 to a musically inclined family. His father was a celebrated horn player and his mother came from a prosperous family of brewers. His middle-class upbringing included a high value on music and money; both were passions of Strauss throughout his life. He showed prodigious talent early, mastering the piano and violin by the age of six. He wrote his first composition at six and didn't stop composing until his death almost 80 years later.

Strauss was immersed in Munich's cultural and intellectual milieu, with access to the best musical education available. He studied composition and conducting at Munich's Royal School of Music. His early compositions were in classical form, influenced strongly by his father's musical tastes. But he was also introduced to the operas of Wagner, whose progressive style would have a profound effect later in Strauss's career. At 18 he entered university in Munich, where he studied philosophy and art history, but not music. He only stayed one year, leaving for Berlin to serve as assistant conductor to Hans von Bülow and the Meiningen Court Orchestra. When von Bülow unexpectedly resigned Strauss became the interim principal conductor.

At age 21, Strauss found his true style in writing vivid program music, what he referred to as "the poetic, the expressive in music." He would become the leading voice of the tone poem, modelling his compositional style on Wagner and Liszt.

His next position was as opera conductor at the Bavarian State Opera. But it wasn't a happy tenure there, since the opera house lacked the finances to stage ambitious works such as Wagner's operas. He found conducting work in Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig, where he met and befriended Gustav Mahler, and met his future wife, who would be a great source of inspiration to him. She was a soprano, which explains why all of Strauss's operas have important soprano roles.

In his mid-20s, Strauss wrote his first two tone poems, *Macbeth* and *Don Juan*, the latter receiving tremendous critical response. It, and a series of tone poems written over the following four-year period, blazed his name across the world. They include *Death and Transfiguration (Tod und Verklärung)*, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. These works shocked the conservative musical establishment and secured his position at the turn of the century as the *enfant terrible* of modern music. He would return to tone poems later, with his *Domestic Symphony* and *Alpine Symphony*.

Strauss became principal conductor of the Staatskapelle Berlin of the Berlin State Opera in 1898. He remained there for 15 years. He enjoyed celebrity status and was a frequent guest conductor in opera houses and with orchestras internationally. With his influence, he was able to promote contemporary German composers such as Mahler. But his compositional career was about to make a major shift. He conquered the operatic stage with his third opera, *Salome*, (based on Oscar Wilde's play of the same name) which premiered triumphantly in 1905.

He followed that with a string of critically successful operas, collaborating with librettist and poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal. These operas included *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*, all of which are still part of opera repertoire. The international triumph of *Der Rosenkavalier* was the

pinnacle of his career. *Salome* and *Elektra*, in particular, shocked audiences with their avant-garde subject matter and daring musical language. They solidified his reputation as a visionary composer unafraid to challenge conventions and provoke controversy. He collected unprecedented fees and royalties for all the scores, dispelling the myth that an artist is better off starving in a garret. He said, "Worry alone is enough to kill a sensitive man, and all thoroughly artistic natures are sensitive."

However, after 1911, Strauss's career took a downturn. Changing musical tastes and the rise of new movements in music left behind the one-time bad boy of music. Then Strauss was confronted with the rise of the Nazi regime in 1933. He was not a reactionary in political thinking and his cosmopolitan circles were not susceptible to Nazi ideology. However, his daughter-in-law was Jewish. He needed to decide whether to stay in Germany or leave as many other artists had done.

In 1933, because of his international stature (Strauss was even on the cover of *TIME* magazine in 1927) the Nazis appointed Strauss as head of the Reichsmusikkammer and principal conductor of the Bayreuth Festival. Accepting these positions likely saved the lives of his daughter-in-law and his Jewish grandchildren. He attempted to keep performing works by banned composers such as Mahler and Mendelssohn, who both had Jewish ethnicity. He used a Jewish librettist, Stefan Zweig, for his opera *Die schweigsame Frau* (*The Silent Woman*). That ultimately led to his firing. In 1935, Strauss wrote to Zweig saying, "Do you suppose Mozart was consciously 'Aryan' when he composed? I recognize only two types of people: those who have talent and those who have none." Thanks to Strauss's influence, his daughter-in-law was protected via house arrest during the war, but despite extensive efforts he was unable to save dozens of his in-laws from being murdered in concentration camps. In 1948, a year before his death, he was cleared of any wrongdoing by a denazification tribunal in Munich.

By the end of the war Strauss had become a victim of irony. He lived in near poverty because huge sums of money owed to him by England and the United States were impounded as war reparations. He was allowed to return to his home in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, West Germany, in the Bavarian Alps. Strauss had a late creative upsurge from 1942 to the end of his life. Major works, written in his late 70s and 80s, include his *Horn Concerto No. 2*, *Metamorphosen*, *Oboe Concerto*, and *Four Last Songs*.

In April 1945, when American soldiers arrived at Strauss's home, he met them with the declaration, "I am Richard Strauss, the composer of *Rosenkavalier* and *Salome*." An "Off Limits" sign was placed on the lawn to protect him. His *Oboe Concerto* was written in response to a request from a soldier who was also a well-known American oboist. By 1948 Strauss's health was deteriorating rapidly. He died shortly after a celebration of his 85th birthday at which he even conducted part of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Strauss himself declared with characteristic self-deprecation: "I may not be a first-rate composer, but I am a first-class second-rate composer." Glenn Gould contradicted that, describing Strauss as "the greatest musical figure who has lived in this century". Joseph Machlis wrote, "Strauss carried to its extreme limit the 19th-century appetite for story-and-picture music. His tone poems are a treasury of orchestral discoveries." Although his reputation fluctuated during his lifetime, his contributions to the world of music are an undeniable and lasting legacy.

Also sprach Zarathustra, Op. 30, – Richard Strauss (1896)

Orchestration: 3 flutes (3rd=piccolo), piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, E-flat clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, timpani, percussion (bass drum, chime, cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel), 2 harps, organ, and strings

What are the most identifiable opening passages in all of classical orchestral movement? Likely they are the “duh-duh-duh dum” of Beethoven’s Fifth and the C-G-C of Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the latter immortalized when filmmaker Stanley Kubrick used it in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. “The Dawn of Man” sequence was recently parodied in Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* movie. The Kubrick film made the fanfare instantly recognizable, even to those who have never attended a symphony concert. *Also sprach Zarathustra*’s popularity soared. Herbert Glass, writing for the LA Philharmonic, asks, “But, what happens after that colossal 21-bar opening, culminating in that stupendous brass-and-percussion bang and celebrated skull-numbing organ blast?” Ironically most listeners know only the opening, while the rest of the 30-minute masterpiece remains less familiar.

Composed in 1896, Richard Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* (“Thus Spoke Zarathustra”) is one of his most ambitious tone poems. It was inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical prose-poem of the same name (1883–85), in which the prophet Zarathustra descends from a mountain after years of contemplation to pass his wisdom on to humanity.

Strauss was fascinated by Nietzsche’s blend of poetry and philosophy, though he admitted that his symphonic poem was not a musical setting of Nietzsche’s book, but a personal response to its broad ideas—the eternal questions of science, faith, human striving, and the mystery of existence. In Strauss’s words: “I did not intend to write philosophical music or to portray Nietzsche’s great work musically. Rather, I wished to convey in music the development of the human race from its origin, through various phases of belief, up to Nietzsche’s idea of the Superman.”

Strauss gave the work nine titled sections, intended to flow without pause, creating a continuous symphonic journey. These selected chapters from Nietzsche’s novel highlight major moments of Zarathustra’s philosophical journey. Here are brief descriptions, along with the English translations of the titles.

Sunrise. A low rumble of organ, double basses and contrabassoon gives way to the rising C–G–C brass fanfare. Could there be a simpler three notes, in intervals of a fifth and an octave? But they pack a punch. They symbolize the sun rising over the Earth—the eternal cycle of nature, a metaphor for creation and cosmic power.

Of the Backworldsmen. Lush string harmonies and organ chords in this mystical slow section evoke religious devotion, suggesting humanity’s yearning for metaphysical answers, a counterpart to Nietzsche’s critique of traditional religion.

Of the Great Longing. This intense music is full of restless chromaticism, representing mankind’s deep longing for meaning.

Of Joys and Passions. Passionate surges and rich harmonies depict human emotional life, both ecstatic and turbulent.

The Song of the Grave. The strings provide a somber interlude, mournful and heavy, reflecting mortality and the inevitability of death.

Of Science and Learning. Strauss cleverly uses a fugue to represent rational order and scientific exploration. The fugue uses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale that grow in complexity; they symbolize intellectual striving which ultimately fails to resolve the mysteries of existence.

The Convalescent. The development continues with bold orchestral colours that suggest recovery and resilience after struggle.

The Dance-Song. This section marks the recapitulation. A radiant violin solo leads into a Viennese-style waltz, symbolizing life's affirmation. It is one of Strauss's most exuberant passages, full of vitality and dazzling orchestral colour.

The Night Wanderer's Song. The work ends with an enigmatic coda with conflicting tonalities, the natural order of C major (the universe) against B major (humanity). The two keys remain unresolved: high flutes, piccolos and violins play a B major chord, while the lower strings pluck a C. Because B and C are adjacent notes on the scale the two keys clash; B major uses five sharps, while C major has none. This tonal clash leaves us in ambiguity; humanity's search for meaning remains forever caught between aspiration and reality.

Strauss is said to have quipped that "In music one can say everything. People won't understand you." That certainly applies to this work, one of his best known yet most misunderstood works. It is indeed challenging; philosophical and sensual, cosmic and human, triumphant and unresolved. When one goes beyond the iconic opening, one is rewarded with a vast orchestral meditation on life's eternal questions. Strauss and Nietzsche could not answer them; neither can we.