

The Tchaikovsky “Pathetique” is full of contradictions — florid yet muscular, triumphal yet heart-wrenching, tender yet bombastic. The part-writing is excellent and the melodies are so hummable!

DAVID KILBRIDE, NCS ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL SECOND VIOLIN

Leonore Overture No. 3, Op. 72b

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

BORN December 16, 1770, in Bonn; died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1806; first performance March 29, 1806, in Vienna, Ignaz von Setfried conducting

OVERVIEW

The decade (1804-1814) that Beethoven devoted to his only opera, *Fidelio*, was an unprecedented amount of time to spend perfecting such a work during the early 19th century. Given the same ten years, Rossini dispensed 31 (!) operas between 1810 and 1820, and Donizetti cranked out 35 (!!) specimens of the genre from 1827 to 1837. Even Mozart launched seven operas during his decade in Vienna. For Beethoven, however, *Fidelio* was more than just a mere theatrical diversion — it was his philosophy set to music. This story of the triumph of justice over tyranny, of love over inhumanity was a document of his faith. To present such grandiose beliefs in a work that would not fully serve them was unthinkable, and so Beethoven hammered and rewrote and changed until he was satisfied. In his book *The Interior Beethoven*, Irving Kolodin wrote, “As tended to be the life-long case with Beethoven, the overriding consideration remained: achievement of the objective. How long it might take or how much effort might be required was not merely incidental — such consideration was all but non-existent.”

The most visible remnants of Beethoven’s extensive revisions are the four

overtures he composed, the only instance in the history of music in which a composer generated so many curtain-raisers for a single opera. The first version of the opera, written between January 1804 and early autumn 1805, was initially titled *Leonore* after the heroine, who courageously rescues her husband from his wrongful incarceration. For that production, Beethoven wrote the Overture in C major now known as the *Leonore* No. 1, utilizing themes from the opera. The composer's friend and early biographer Anton Schindler recorded that Beethoven rejected that first attempt after hearing it privately performed at Prince Lichnowsky's palace before the premiere. (Another theory, supported by recent detailed examination of the paper on which the sketches for the piece were made, holds that this work was written in 1806-1807 for a projected performance of the opera in Prague which never took place, thus making *Leonore* No. 1 the third of the *Fidelio* overtures.) He composed a second Overture in C Major, *Leonore* No. 2, and that piece was used at the first performance, on November 20, 1805. (The management of Vienna's Theatre an der Wien, site of the premiere, insisted on changing the opera's name from *Leonore* to *Fidelio* to avoid confusion with Ferdinand Paër's *Leonore*.) The opera foundered. Not only was the audience, largely populated by French officers of Napoleon's army, which had invaded Vienna exactly one week earlier, unsympathetic, but also there were problems in *Fidelio*'s dramatic structure. Beethoven was encouraged by his aristocratic supporters to rework the opera and present it again. That second version, for which the magnificent *Leonore* Overture No. 3 was written, was presented in Vienna on March 29, 1806, but met with only slightly more acclaim than its predecessor.

In 1814, some members of the Court Theater approached Beethoven, by then Europe's most famous composer, about reviving *Fidelio*. The idealistic subject of the opera had never been far from his thoughts, and he agreed to the project. The libretto was revised yet again, and Beethoven rewrote all the numbers in the opera and changed their order to enhance the work's dramatic impact. The new *Fidelio* Overture, the fourth

he composed for his opera, was among the revisions. Beethoven realized that the earlier overtures, especially the *Leonore* No. 3, simply overwhelmed what followed (“As a curtain raiser, it almost made the raising of the curtain superfluous,” judged Irving Kolodin), and, from a technical viewpoint, were in the wrong tonality to match the revised beginning of the opera. The compact *Fidelio* Overture, in E major, is now always heard to open the opera. The *Leonore* No. 3 often appears between the two scenes of Act II, a practice instituted by Otto Nicolai when he produced *Fidelio* in Vienna in the early 1840s. Both are regular entries on concert programs.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The *Leonore* No. 3 is one of the most magnificent overtures in the orchestral literature. It distills the essential dramatic progression of the opera into purely musical terms: the triumph of good over evil, the movement from darkness to light, from subjugation to freedom, is integral to this music. It is a musical/philosophical road Beethoven also travelled in his Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, and in this sweeping overture it is compressed into a tonal document of staggering power. The structure of the overture follows the basic sonata-allegro design, but adapted by Beethoven to fit the dramatic requirements of his subject. It begins with a broad, slow introduction, by turns lugubrious and threatening, during which the clarinets and bassoons intone the opening phrases of the aria Florestan sings in his dungeon prison. In a faster tempo, the violins present the arch-shaped main theme, which grows to a riveting climax before the entry of the complementary theme, a lyrical strain introduced quietly by flute and violins. The development section is filled with sudden dynamic changes and expressive harmonic excursions that mirror the perilous struggles of the play. Then, in an unforgettable *coup de théâtre*, a distant trumpet call signals deliverance for Florestan and his faithful Leonore. The recapitulation of the themes glows in triumph. A jubilant coda, begun with whirling scales in the strings, brings this superb work to a stirring close.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings

Piano Concerto in One Movement

FLORENCE B. PRICE

BORN April 9, 1887, in Little Rock, Arkansas; died June 3, 1953, in Chicago

PREMIERE Composed 1933-1934, reconstructed 2011 by Trevor Weston (b. 1967); first performance: June 24, 1934, in Chicago, with the composer as soloist

OVERVIEW

Florence B. Price was a musical pioneer — one of the first African-American students to graduate from the New England Conservatory of Music, the first African-American woman to have a symphonic work performed by a major American orchestra, the first winner of the composition contest sponsored by the progressive Wanamaker Foundation. Florence Beatrice Smith was born in 1887 into the prosperous and cultured family of a dentist in Little Rock, Arkansas, and received her first piano lessons from her mother, a schoolteacher and singer; Florence first played in public when she was four. She later also took up organ and violin, and at age fourteen was admitted to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, where she studied with George Chadwick and Frederick Converse, two of their generation's leading composers; wrote her first string trio and a symphony (now lost); and graduated in 1907 with honors for both an artist diploma in organ and a teaching certificate. She returned to Arkansas, where she taught at Arkadelphia Academy and Shorter College before being appointed music department chair at Clark University in Atlanta in 1910. She returned to Little Rock two years later to marry attorney Thomas J. Price, and left classroom teaching to devote herself to raising two daughters, giving private instruction in violin, organ, and piano, and composing.

In 1927, following racial unrest in Arkansas that included a lynching, the Price family moved to Chicago. Florence studied composition, orchestration, organ, languages, and liberal arts at various schools with several of the city's leading musicians and teachers, and published four pieces for piano soon after settling there. She was also a frequent guest at the home of physician Dr. Monroe Alpheus Majors and organist and music teacher Estelle C. Bonds, and became both friend and teacher to their gifted daughter, Margaret. In 1932, Price and Bonds (then just nineteen) won respectively first and second prize in the Wanamaker Foundation Composition Competition, Price for her *Symphony in E Minor and Piano Sonata* and Bonds for her song *Sea Ghost*. The performance of Price's *Symphony* on June 15, 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Frederick Stock, was the first by a major American orchestra of a symphonic work by an African-American woman; the CSO repeated the performance at the Chicago World's Fair later that year. She continued to compose prolifically — three more symphonies and two more piano concertos, a violin concerto, chamber, piano and organ pieces, songs, spiritual arrangements, jingles for radio commercials — and received numerous performances; her arrangement of the spiritual *My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord* was chosen by Marian Anderson to close her historic concert at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on April 9, 1939. Florence Price died in Chicago on June 3, 1953.

Price was encouraged by Frederick Stock, conductor of the remarkably successful premiere of her *Symphony in E Minor*, to write a Piano Concerto and appear as soloist in its first performance. She began the work in October 1933, finished the score the following spring, and gave its premiere on June 24, 1934, at a concert celebrating the 67th commencement of the Chicago Musical College, where Price was then a graduate student, with the school's orchestra. She scored another success with the Concerto — which, according to a reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune*, “aside from its technical perfections, disclosed thematic substance rich in syncopated and spiritual colors” — and

two months later she played the piece in a two-piano arrangement at the annual convention of the National Association of Negro Musicians in Pittsburgh; it was heard again on October 12, 1934, when her protégé Margaret Bonds was soloist in a performance with the Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago at the city's Century of Progress Exhibition. There were apparently no further performances of the Concerto in its original orchestral form during the composer's lifetime. The full orchestral score was lost, but the music survived in manuscripts of the solo part with an orchestral reduction, arrangements for two and three pianos, and a partial set of parts for the instruments. Those materials came into the archives of the Center for Black Music Research at Chicago's Columbia College, which commissioned composer and Drew University professor Trevor Weston to reconstruct the Concerto's performance materials from them. Pianist Karen Walwyn and conductor Leslie Dunner gave the first performance of Price's reconstructed Piano Concerto with the Center's New Black Music Repertory Ensemble on February 17, 2011, and recorded it for Albany Records a month later.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Price's Piano Concerto is in a single movement divided into three distinct sections — *Moderato*, *Adagio*, *Allegretto* — that approximate the scale and form of the traditional genre. The serious mood of the opening *Moderato* is established by the wind instruments, which introduce the modally-inflected motive that provides much of the thematic material for the first section. A piano cadenza leads to the entry of the full orchestra and further development of the modal motive. The *Moderato*'s emotional and thematic content are given formal balance by an episode based on a march-like melody in a brighter key, but the stern music soon resumes and leads to a full cadence and a brief pause. After a few transitional phrases in the strings, the poignant, lyrical *Adagio* begins with a "call" from the oboe followed by a "response" from the piano, recalling a common structure in African-American folk music. The finale is based on the *juba*, an antebellum folk dance that involves foot-tapping, hand-clapping, and thigh-slapping, all

in precise rhythm. (Such “body sounds” were a musical necessity, since slaves were forbidden by their owners from having drums for fear they might be used to send coded signals.) Price said that the rhythmic element in African-American music is of “preeminent importance. In the dance, it is a compelling, onward-sweeping force that tolerates no interruption,” a quality joyously manifested in the closing section of her Piano Concerto.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, percussion, strings

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, “Pathétique”

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

BORN May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia; died November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg)

PREMIERE Composed 1893, first performance October 28, 1893, in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

Tchaikovsky died in 1893, at the age of only 53. His death was long attributed to the accidental drinking of a glass of unboiled water during a cholera outbreak, but that theory has been questioned in recent years with the alternate explanation that he was forced to take his own life because of a homosexual liaison with the underage son of a noble family. Though the manner of Tchaikovsky’s death is incidental to the place of his Sixth Symphony in music history, the fact of it is not.

Tchaikovsky conducted his B-minor symphony for the first time only a week before his death. It was given a cool reception by musicians and public, and his frustration was multiplied when discussion of the work was avoided by the guests at a dinner party following the concert. Three days later, however, his mood seemed

brighter and he told a friend that he was not yet ready to be snatched off by death, “that snubbed-nose horror. I feel that I shall live a long time.” He was wrong. The evidence of the manner of his death is not conclusive, but what is certain is the overwhelming grief and sense of loss felt by music lovers in Russia and abroad as the news of his passing spread. Memorial concerts were planned. One of the first was in St. Petersburg on November 18th, only twelve days after he died. Eduard Napravnik conducted the Sixth Symphony on that occasion, and it was a resounding success. The “Pathétique” was wafted by the winds of sorrow across the musical world, and became — and remains — one of the most popular symphonies ever written, the quintessential expression of tragedy in music.

In examining the Sixth Symphony, whether as performer or listener, care must be taken not to allow pathos to descend into bathos. It is virtually certain that Tchaikovsky was not anticipating his own death in this work. For most of 1893, his health and spirits were good, he was enjoying an international success unprecedented for a Russian composer, and work on the new Symphony was going well. He wrote to his nephew Vladimir Davidov in February that he was composing “with such ardor that in less than four days I have completed the first movement, while the remainder is clearly outlined in my head.” Tchaikovsky was pleased with the finished work. “I give you my word of honor that never in my life have I been so contented, so proud, so happy, in the knowledge that I have written a good piece,” he told his publisher, Jurgenson, as soon as he had finished the score in August. The somber message of the music, therefore, seems not to have been a reflection of the moods and events of Tchaikovsky’s last months.

The music of the “Pathétique” is a distillation of the strong residual strain of melancholy in Tchaikovsky’s personality, rather than a mirror of his daily feelings and thoughts. Though he admitted there was a program for the Symphony, he refused to reveal it. “Let him guess it who can,” he told Vladimir Davidov. A cryptic note discovered years later among his sketches suggests that the first movement was “all impulsive

passion; the second, love; the third, disappointments; the fourth, death — the result of collapse.” It is not clear, however, whether this précis applied to the finished version of the work, or was merely a preliminary, perhaps never-realized, plan. That Tchaikovsky at one point considered the title “Tragic” for the score gives sufficient indication of its prevailing emotional content.

The title “Pathétique” was suggested to Tchaikovsky by his elder brother, Modeste. In his biography of Peter, Modeste recalled that they were sitting around a tea table one evening after the premiere, and the composer was unable to settle on an appropriate designation for the work before sending it to the publisher. The sobriquet “Pathétique” popped into Modeste’s mind, and Tchaikovsky pounced on it immediately: “Splendid, Modi, bravo. ‘Pathétique’ it shall be.” This title has always been applied to the Symphony, though the original Russian word carries a meaning closer to “passionate” or “emotional” than to the English “pathetic.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Symphony opens with a slow introduction dominated by the sepulchral intonation of the bassoon, whose melody, in a faster tempo, becomes the impetuous first theme of the exposition. Additional instruments are drawn into the symphonic argument until the brasses arrive to crown the movement’s first climax. The tension subsides into silence before the yearning second theme appears, “like a recollection of happiness in time of pain,” according to American musicologist Edward Downes. The tempestuous development section, intricate, brilliant and the most masterful thematic manipulation in Tchaikovsky’s output, is launched by a mighty blast from the full orchestra. The recapitulation is more condensed, vibrantly scored, and intense in emotion than the exposition. The major tonality achieved with the second theme is maintained until the hymnal end of the movement.

Tchaikovsky referred to the second movement as a scherzo, though its 5/4 meter gives it more the feeling of a waltz with a limp. This music’s rhythmic novelty must have

been remarkable in 1893, and the distinguished Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick even suggested that it should be changed to 6/8 to avoid annoyance to performers and listeners. Charles O'Connell, however, saw the irregular meter as essential to the movement's effect, "as if its gaiety were constantly under constraint; directed, not by careless joy, but by a determination to be joyful."

The third movement is a boisterous march whose brilliant surface may conceal a deeper meaning. Tchaikovsky's biographer John Warrack wrote, "On the face of it, this is a sprightly march; yet it is barren, constructed out of bleak intervals, and for all the merriness of its manner, essentially empty, with a coldness at its heart."

The tragedy of the finale is apparent immediately at the outset in its somber contrast to the whirling explosion of sound that ends the third movement. A profound emptiness pervades the finale, which maintains its slow tempo and mood of despair throughout. Banished completely are the joy and affirmation of the traditional symphonic finale, here replaced by a new emotional and structural concept that opened important expressive possibilities for 20th-century composers. Olin Downes dubbed this movement "a dirge," and, just as there is no certainty about what happens to the soul when the funeral procession ends, so Tchaikovsky here leaves the question of existence forever hanging, unanswered, embodied in the mysterious, dying close of the Symphony.

Wrote former Boston Symphony Orchestra program annotator Philip Hale, "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."

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings