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DuPage Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

Dmitri Shostakovich  
*Festival Overture*, Op. 96

This gifted composer and pianist, along with Prokofiev, symbolized the fate of the arts under Stalin's regime. Both wished to explore the new compositional ideas concerning tonality and rhythm that were exciting musicians and audiences in the first half of the 20th century. Stalin, however, ran the whole of the Soviet Union to meet his personal interests and tastes, and for all his "revolutionary" fervor in politics, his musical taste was strictly borscht. In 1948, after smaller skirmishes with the government over a period of years, Shostakovich and Prokofiev were hauled before the Union of Soviet composers, publicly denounced, and forced to apologize for their many sins against The People or risk having their music banned from Soviet concert halls.

In 1953, Stalin died, and for a time it appeared that a new light might be shining on Soviet life. Is it any wonder that the next year saw the appearance of this cheerful, invigorating *Festival Overture*, officially written for the 37th anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution? The work was part of a flurry of compositions that year (including the fabulous Tenth Symphony) that initiated the last productive period of the composer's life. The *Overture*, described by Steven Ledbetter as "a brilliant display of orchestral effect, melodic vivacity, and rhythmic life," begins with stately brass fanfares, continues with the lively central section in sonata form, and brings back the fanfare material in a rousing coda.

Shostakovich arranged the work for Russian military band in 1958, and it is frequently heard in a 1965 transcription for American concert band by Donald Hunsberger, of the Eastman School of Music, as *Festive Overture*.

Stephen Albert,  
*Flower on the Mountain*

Joel Stephen Albert was born in New York City but grew up in Great Neck, NY (a community on the North Shore of Long Island), where he played trumpet, horn, and piano in his school band. While still in high school, he studied composition privately with Elie Siegmeister. He attended the Eastman School, and his composition teachers there and later included Bernard Rogers, Darius Milhaud, Roy Harris, and George Rochberg. He won the American Prix de Rome in the mid-1960s and taught at Stanford University and Smith College in the 1970s. He was composer-in-residence with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and won the Pulitzer Prize (1985) for his symphony *RiverRun*. He died in Truro, MA, as a result of an automobile accident.

Albert was fascinated by works of James Joyce, specifically his notoriously challenging novel *Finnegans Wake* (published 1939) and the earlier *Ulysses* (1922), and he based several works on texts from these books: *To Wake the Dead* (1977), *RiverRun* (1984), *TreeStone* (1984), *Flower on the Mountain* (1985), and *Distant Hills Coming Nigh* (1991). *Flower on the Mountain* for soprano and chamber orchestra was inspired by Molly Bloom's final words in *Ulysses*—a "stream of consciousness" flow of thoughts, sometimes known as "Molly Bloom's Soliloquy," which the character articulates as she lies in bed next to her husband, closing with...

...I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

P.I. Tchaikovsky  
Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 74 ("Pathétique")

Tchaikovsky lived an unhappy life—there is no way to gloss over this. His difficulties in becoming established as a composer (both vocationally and financially) probably contributed to a lifetime of harsh self-criticism of his music. This self-criticism often received external validation, as with the devastating response of Rubinstein to his First Piano Concerto and the critical failure of his Fifth Symphony. Moreover, he sometimes made spectacularly inappropriate choices, as with his marriage: the bride was a Moscow Conservatory student many years his junior, and he was a homosexual. After a suicide attempt, he went on an extended tour in Europe, which was a response he frequently made to crises at home despite the fact that he hated touring and being away from home—he was almost neurotically shy and ill at ease in new surroundings.

His final symphony had its premiere in 1893 and enjoyed a slight success. Unfortunately, he became ill a few days after the premiere and died within a week of the premiere. The traditional account is that he drank a glass of unboiled water (by accident or on purpose is unknown) and contracted cholera. Yet in 1979, a Russian musicologist published a biography that stated Tchaikovsky intentionally took poison as the result of the verdict of a court of honor from the School of Jurisprudence (his alma mater) regarding his homosexual liaison with an aristocrat's son. Whether he committed suicide at all, let alone due to any external pressure, remains unresolved and a matter of some scholarly controversy.

This aftermath has led a number of listeners to assume that the subtitle *Pathétique* somehow reflects a self-judgment of his life and a suicidal frame of mind...and it may—brother Modest Tchaikovsky suggested as much sometime later. However, this French term for something that moves us deeply echoes the ancient Greek for "suffering" or "capable of suffering." That is, the symphony can easily be seen as one more 19th-century composer's effort to depict in music great emotional distress that is not in any sense an autobiographical suicide note. Between the two World Wars, a few words from the composer turned up that may be a hint as to what he had in mind, at least at one time:

The ultimate essence of the plan of the Symphony is LIFE. First part—all impulsive passion, confidence, thirst for activity. Must be short (Finale DEATH—result of collapse.) Second part love; third disappointments, fourth ends dying away (also short).

Tchaikovsky had been at the effort of composition for some time already by the time of a reference in a letter of February 22, 1893, and he later complained to Modest of the effort the orchestration was taking him, but that effort was completed by late August. In between these stages, we know that he was busy with other projects, including a trip to London. He declared to his publisher that "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."

The Symphony is in the standard four movements though the composer does not include the expected interior slow movement, perhaps because the last movement stands in for the slow movement. The first movement presents its principal theme in the low bassoon, a yearning sort of melody that rises three steps, then falls back one, rises another three and falls back again. The symphony genre had been a serious musical essay from its inception in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Tchaikovsky signals us that he has something important to express—this is to be no mere entertainment.

The second movement is a waltz though in five-four time, grouped in alternation as three beats and then two. Waltzes by this time had a certain perpetual motion quality to them, with the dancers propelled along rhythmically. Tchaikovsky's waltz, however, is constantly stopping and starting because it refuses to stay in three-beat units. Perhaps this is a statement of the loss of a *joie de vivre*, that one hears waltzes but is no longer capable of dancing to them. This perspective might explain why the third

movement, though clearly a march, is not a hymn of triumph so much as a statement of tenacity, even defiance.

And then, in the widest possible contrast with what has just been heard, we have the Finale. From the first few measures, this is music that tears at the heart, a collapse into pain and grief. The second theme is less rending but is as inconsolable—Tchaikovsky marks it to be played *con lenezza e devozione* ("with a quiet, gentle manner and great care"). The movement builds to a climax of ineffable despair, and this second theme returns, now in minor. After that, the music gradually dissipates into silence. This would be a time for an audience to withhold its applause just a bit to allow for contemplation of a moment of Tchaikovsky's effort to speak an inexpressible sorrow.

P.I. Tchaikovsky

*Lebedinoe ozero* [*Swan Lake*], Op. 20: Scène (Act II) and Valse (Act I)

Tchaikovsky's presence is so strong in the standard ballet repertoire that it is hard to imagine there was a time when *The Nutcracker*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake* did not exist. *Swan Lake*, a ballet in four acts, was his first foray into this genre. It was completed in 1876 and had its premiere the following year, putting it at about the time of his tone poem *Francesca da Rimini* and after the completion of his first three symphonies. The 1877 staging, however, was unsatisfactory, though the ballet enjoyed a modest success. The production that really gave the work "legs" (if the reader will pardon that pun) was that created in 1895; it was first presented in America in 1911.

Despite *Swan Lake* being his first ballet (and his first theatrical work of note), it is a work of great significance as it helped move ballet scores toward generally greater musical sophistication. As Roland John Wiley has so succinctly put it, "The unity of his integrated key scheme may lie beyond immediate perception, but his mastery of the *dansante*—of devising melodies that match physical movement perfectly—his vivid orchestration, his effective associative themes, and his continuity of thought in music with frequent breaks were unprecedented."

The ballet plot is based on Baron Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's story *Undine*, a tale that Tchaikovsky had already visited in his eponymous 1869 opera. In the ballet version, a young woman is turned into a swan by a sorcerer with the conditions that she may return to human form between midnight and dawn each day and that she may return to human form permanently only if a man marries her and never loves another. She is discovered by such a man, a prince, but he is fooled by the sorcerer. Rather than lose the Swan Queen forever, the prince joins her in death, and that sacrifice of love frees both from the power of the sorcerer. The waltz we hear ("Entrance of the Guests") is danced by attendees at the prince's 21st birthday gala during which he is told by his mother that he must wed soon, a requirement that largely sets into motion the tragic events of the story. Preceding that is the opening ("The Swans Swim on the Lake") of the second act, wherein the prince meets the Swan Queen.