

# NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

## Eroica

September 17, 2004 - Town Hall Seattle  
September 18, 2004 - Rialto Theater Tacoma

Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto  
Beethoven: Symphony No. 3 "Eroica"

Program Notes by Christophe Chagnard

In a grotesque display of blunt irony, both **Tchaikovsky's** First Piano and Violin Concertos were described by the highest musical authorities of the time (Nicolai Rubinstein and Leopold Auer respectively) as unplayable and not worthy of an audience! Not only did these erroneous initial judgments contribute much in shaking Tchaikovsky's creative confidence, they completely failed to grasp the vast new instrumental horizon these two masterpieces contributed. Although protracted, history's appreciation in the end revealed these concertos to be playable indeed (albeit very challenging). They became some of the most popular and wildly performed works in the genre.

Tchaikovsky's tenacity had also been challenged in his private life. In a desperate attempt at occulting his homosexuality, he married one of his pupils in July 1877. Nine months later, in the midst of a deep depression and suicidal thoughts, he escaped this impossible union and moved to Switzerland where he took the waters at Clarens, on Lake Geneva. There, away from public scrutiny, he enjoyed some of the happiest days of his life. This new state of salutary bliss was largely enhanced by the visit of a young violin student, Joseph Kotek, with whom Tchaikovsky had fallen in love two years earlier. Inspired by his new life, Tchaikovsky took on composing with feverish intensity, completing the Violin Concerto in less than three weeks. This burst of emotional creativity inspired Tchaikovsky to write one his most spontaneous and spirited compositions. The Violin Concerto's emotional range is wide, with a large scale, sonata form epic first movement, an introspective poetic song as second movement, concluding in a spirited folkdance in which the composer turns to his beloved homeland for inspiration. As noted earlier, the great virtuoso violinist and teacher Leopold Auer (to whom the concerto was initially dedicated) turned down the inaugural performance of the new concerto, describing its difficulties as unmanageable. It took no less than three years and the courage of Adolf Brodsky for the concerto to be finally shared with the public on December 4, 1881 in Vienna. Not only did this milestone of the violin repertoire prove playable, it ultimately inspired Auer and generations of the greatest virtuosos who found in this timeless masterpiece, a quintessential vehicle for their artistry.

These upcoming performances of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto are a first for both the Northwest Sinfonietta and myself. There are, of course, many violinists worldwide with the talent and inspiration to play such a masterpiece and we are particularly proud to bring to our shores, for his US Northwest debut, Russian violinist Ilya Gringolts whose striking rendering on his *Deutsche Grammophon* recording debut impressed me most.

Destiny missed another promising rendez-vous at the premiere of Beethoven's **Third Symphony** whose baffled audience reacted with a mix of ridicule and perplexity prompting one audience member to shout from the gallery: "I'd give another kreutzer if they would stop!!" Such audience response came as no surprise. Beethoven's new symphonic creation amounted to no less than a quantum leap in every conceivable aspect. No previous composer of stature or masterpiece of substance had prepared the occupants of the *Theater an der Wien* on April 7, 1805 for the musical hurricane which swept over them. Eroica was, in the words of Sir George Grove, "the first obviously revolutionary music."

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The idea of dedicating a symphony to a great heroic figure of the time is said to have come from General Bernadotte, at the time French Ambassador at Vienna. Beethoven's admiration for Napoleon's republicanism and challenging of the *ancien régime* planted the seed for one of the greatest musical creations of all time. There are often far-fetched tales surrounding the genesis of masterpieces. A quick look at the manuscript front page of Beethoven's Third Symphony, does, for once spare us the agony of speculation. Indeed, Beethoven initially dedicated his Opus 55 to Napoleon and later, upon receiving news of the French general's self-appointment as Emperor, crossed-out the dedication which such rage and vehemence that a hole was left in its place. Instead, the published version was to read: "Sinfonia eroica-per festeggiar il suovenire d'un gran uomo." ("Heroic Symphony to celebrate the memory of a great man.") With this final dedication, Beethoven expressed his nostalgia for Napoleon's initial vision before becoming the all too predictable prey of self-aggrandizement and tyrannical ambitions. The noble deed of heroism should also be taken in its most universal dimension, with the "great man" as the incarnation of the heroic impulses of manhood.

The circumstances in Beethoven's life in the year 1802 were tragic. Having reached the inescapable conclusion that his deafness was not only ineluctable, but isolating him further each passing month, Beethoven drafted his heartbreaking "Heiligenstadt Testament" in which he contemplates suicide as the ultimate appeasement to his suffering. It must have taken a formidable will to live and faith in the creative urgency of his musical genius, confined to experience his creations only within the intimate folds of his erupting mind. The "Eroica" Symphony is no less than an existential "coup d'état" through which he chose to "seize fate by the throat" as he once wrote to his doctor. By rejecting his social nadir and embracing the creative zenith to which he was destined, Beethoven becomes the hero himself, incarnating the notions of courage and uncompromising commitment he so admired in the young Napoleon.

What made this page of symphonic heroism so remarkable and so avant-garde?

Its size: No symphony ever written came even close to these 50 minutes of astonishing inventiveness. In the first movement alone where, traditionally the exposition exceeds the development in length, the proportions are dramatically inverted. Here the exposition counts 155 measures vs. 243 for the development. The coda, which should stand as a brief concluding gesture, is nearly the length of the exposition!

Its sound: Apart from the use of 3 horns instead of the traditional 2, there is nothing remarkable in Beethoven's choice of orchestration. The wind section is similar in scale to a Haydn or Mozart late symphony and the strings must have called for medium forces usually associated with private concerts. What is rather bewildering is the revolutionary treatment of such traditional forces. Never did an orchestra produce such a furry of sounds for such a sustained period of time. The orchestral palette is the most diverse and daring it had ever been.

Its structure: In addition to the enormous scale of the first sonata-form movement described above, Beethoven makes the unprecedented choice of a "Funeral March" for the second movement. (A tribute to heroic sacrifices in the name of freedom and an ominous foreshadowing of Napoleon's fall as he later described it.) Moreover, the usual sonata or variation forms usually associated with slow movements are here replaced with a rondo form in which the lengthy opening theme recurs between original episodes. With the third movement, Beethoven achieves what had been one of Haydn's unfulfilled ambitions: replacing the traditional Minuet with a form worthy of the ever-growing surrounding movements. This Scherzo was inspired by an old Austrian folk song and marks the first emancipation of the third movement as a full-fledged component of the expanding symphonic form.

Its harmonic boldness: Never since Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony did a composer so daringly shatter the harmonic rules and expectations of his time as Beethoven did in this symphony. There is, throughout the entire work, a constant tension between unrelated keys (such as the first movement's oboe 2nd theme in E minor

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and the early 2nd horn entrance in the tonic key against the violins at the recapitulation). Such a level of blunt dissonance must have sounded nothing short of defiant to an early 19th Century audience.

Its originality: I have already described the striking uniqueness of the second and third movements. There is scarcely a moment in the Finale that is not of overwhelming novelty and which was never to be duplicated. It is a massive free variation form based on an English contredanse of which Beethoven was particularly fond. (He had used it in the finale of his ballet *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*, in the *Variations for Piano-forte Op.35* and as the seventh of his *12 Contredanses for Orchestra*.) Through the complex workings of fugal episodes, inverted counterpoint, fugues, dramatic tempi fluctuations, and one of the most exhilarating codas ever written, Beethoven concludes his odyssey in the spirit of the great discoverers, leaving us to revel at the realization that it is indeed a bold new world which the master has laid before us. Romain Rolland equated this symphonic journey to "Columbus' caravel, the first to reach an unknown continent."