

### ***Kamarinskaya* Fantasy for Orchestra on Two Russian Folksongs (1848)**

**Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857)**

*While Mikhail Glinka is not as celebrated as other Russian composers such as Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky, he is still considered “the father of Russian music.”*

Tonight’s concert spotlights three of Russia’s greatest composers. While Mikhail Glinka may be the less celebrated of this illustrious group, he is considered “the father of Russian music” and had major influence on composers such as Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky, who wrote: “All of the Russian symphonic school is contained in Glinka’s *Kamarinskaya*, just as all of an oak tree is in an acorn.” Many consider this work to be Glinka’s crowning achievement. Many say that before Glinka there was no Russian music.

Up until Glinka’s arrival, Russian composers imitated European styles of classical music, as these were the only works familiar to them. Russian music, including opera, was dominated by Italian composers who spent a great deal of time in St. Petersburg. The rich mine of indigenous music by Russia’s lower class went unnoticed. Glinka, who came on the scene as a wave of nationalism swept through Europe, was the first to infuse Russian folk music into his compositions, making him the founder of the 19th-century school of Russian Romanticism. *Kamarinskaya* was the first orchestral work based entirely on Russian folk song.

Glinka’s life began in 1804 in the Russian village of Novospassky, where he was born into a wealthy family that staunchly supported the Tsar (his father was a retired army captain). The boy was raised by his over-protective, emotionally unstable grandmother, who lived in the family home and kept the boy tucked inside her room. He rarely saw his parents. Glinka became a nervous, weak child in poor health, manipulated by his grandmother—up until she died when he was six years old. After her death, his parents realized the effects of his upbringing, but the damage was done. Then, in 1812, Napoleon’s armies invaded Russia, and while the family and their estate survived, traumatizing memories lingered.

Hearing his uncle’s orchestra playing music by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven proved to be a turning point for Glinka. The boy wrote that orchestral music left a “special and happy impression.” He asked to be taught music along with his general school lessons. Before long, he was taking piano, violin, and voice lessons from prominent musicians. It proved therapeutic.

At age 20, to please his father, Glinka joined the Ministry of Justice as the assistant secretary of the Department of Public Highways. Music, however, continued to beckon, and he composed many pieces during this period. Four years later, in 1828, Glinka left his job (citing health issues) and travelled to Italy, eager to soak up the culture. He moved on to Berlin in 1833 to begin his first formal study of composition—still in typical European styles. In 1844, Glinka headed to France and Spain, where he was enamored of the color and vitality of Spanish folklore.

At 43, Glinka returned home to find himself in demand to play piano at balls and parties. To escape, he set off again the next year for Paris. But without a passport,

he got no further than Warsaw, where he stayed for nine months. Here, he composed *Kamarinskaya*—a very short piece that cleverly intertwines two Russian folk tunes. He wrote in a letter: “At the time I discovered by chance a relationship between the wedding song ‘From behind the mountains, high mountains,’ which I had heard in the country, and the well-known dance tune, *Kamarinskaya*. And suddenly my fantasy ran high, and instead of a piano piece I wrote a piece called, “*Wedding Tune and Dance Tune for Orchestra*.”

Completed in 1848, *Kamarinskaya* revolves around two thematic constants: two very different melodies—the wedding dance and song—ingeniously woven together. The opening bars are a little jarring, even ominous, for a wedding scene, but they quickly flow into the slower, graceful *Over the Hills*. After this, the melody is heard three times with contrasting accompaniments of the very short (four bars long) instrumental dance tune heard in a brisk sequence of 13 variations.

After a repetition of the wedding tune, the music continues with 21 more repetitions of the dance tune. Melodically similar and harmonically identical, the tunes impressively interweave throughout the piece, varying the orchestral timbre, harmonization and counterpoint that surround them, while sustaining the fundamental character of the dance and complementing it with imaginative variations in the orchestral treatment.

*Kamarinskaya* successfully premiered in Moscow in 1850. At the peak of his popularity in 1852-1855, Glinka lived in Paris and Berlin, while his music was performed throughout Europe. At the end of 1856, Glinka’s music was featured in Berlin at a gala that was a great success. Everyone celebrated throughout the night. Exhausted, Glinka’s weak constitution caught a cold that led to his death on Feb. 15, 1857. Glinka’s legacy lived on through a society that was just forming in St. Petersburg in the late 1850s, known as The Russian Five, whose purpose was to create a uniquely Russian style of music, free of European influences.

**Piano Concerto No. 2, op. 18, C minor (1901)  
Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

*Sergei Rachmaninoff was one of the greatest pianists of his day and maybe the greatest ever. Rachmaninoff had hands of enormous reach and was tailor-made to perform this concerto.*

To play Sergei Rachmaninoff’s lush, sensational *Second Piano Concerto* takes gargantuan power, speed and dexterity, an almost inhuman hand span with great flexibility, and an ability to capture the subtle gradations in tempo and dynamics in this musical beast. No wonder it’s one of the world’s best-known and most popular piano concertos—it’s a jaw-dropping showpiece. The monumental work was first performed by the composer himself, one of the greatest pianists of his day—maybe the greatest ever. With spectacular technique and hands of enormous reach (possibly from Marfan syndrome), Rachmaninoff was physically tailor-made to perform powerful, sweeping Romantic works.

It was all about the piano for Rachmaninoff. Born in Russia, he trained as a pianist and composed for the instrument in Moscow and St. Petersburg. While there are three very famous piano concertos by him, the *Second* is the one that made

*After the failure of his First Symphony Rachmaninoff suffered from depression and temporarily stopped composing.*

his reputation. Ironically, the success actually followed failure. Rachmaninoff's *First Symphony*, written in 1895 and premiered in 1897 by a reportedly drunken Alexander Glazunov, actually bombed. It sunk Rachmaninoff into a dark place where he could no longer compose (he, in fact, suffered from depression for the rest of his life). Concertos he'd promised the following season never materialized. Three years slipped by. . .

In January 1900, feeling desperate, Rachmaninoff began seeing Dr. Nicolai Dahl, an internist and hypnotist. Daily doses of understanding and hypnosis, along with encouragement from friends to return to piano composition, helped him to climb out of his soundless hole. "I did nothing and found no pleasure in anything," recalled Rachmaninoff in his memoirs. "Half my days were spent lying on a couch and sighing over my ruined life. . . I heard the same hypnotic formula repeated day after day while I lay half asleep in my armchair in Dr. Dahl's study, 'You will begin to write your concerto...You will work with great facility...The concerto will be of excellent quality...' It was always the same, without interruption. Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me."

In April of that year, Rachmaninoff escaped to the Mediterranean for several months, where new music started bubbling to the surface, including sketches for his *Second Piano Concerto*. He finished the second and third movements in time to play them for a benefit concert in December. He completed the work that summer, and it premiered in November 1901. Voluptuous and monumental, the lyrical concerto was a heartbreaking piece of sensual, romantic yearning, as melancholy phrases intertwine with enchanting melodies. It was enthusiastically received, and has been a staple in the repertoire of the finest pianists ever since.

The first sumptuous movement, in C minor, begins with a foreboding, sweeping main theme as the piano plays a series of chords that climb to a grand fortissimo. As the tension builds to a breaking point, it is taken up by the violins before the entire orchestra roars together, arpeggios rippling gloriously. The movement continues with a rousing march by the piano, which fades into a solo horn announcing the second theme—one of Rachmaninoff's most familiar and beloved—followed by a lyrical coda. Until this point, the soloist's role is primarily one of accompaniment, but here the role changes. The fire shooting from the pianist's fingers at the beginning returns for a brief, intense conclusion.

The *Adagio* is in the distant key of E major. (Beethoven used the same key relationship between the first two movements of his *Third Piano Concerto*, written exactly 100 years earlier.) It is a storm of emotions with different themes, the piano and the orchestra thrashing about together, until the towering ending, a clatter in C minor. The beauty of this movement conjures a place of gossamer enchantment. The primary melody is heard in the clarinet, then the flute, with the piano accompanying. The piano then takes up the melody, one of serene, unabashed romanticism, and develops it, with woodwinds and strings accompanying. A brief interlude announces the soloist's cadenza and a final restatement of the theme.

For the final *Allegro scherzando*, the lower instruments offer a brief introduction to the soloist's flashy opening cadenza, which leads into the staccato pulsing rhythm of the first theme. The second theme returns quickly, a lyrical contrasting idea heard first in the violas and solo oboe. The two themes wrestle for the top spot as the mood of this movement shifts abruptly from agitation to rhapsodic elation. Rachmaninoff concludes with a show-stopping conclusion featuring the rhapsodic theme. At the very end, the speed suddenly careens out of control, and the movement hurtles toward a mind-blowing climax. It's a virtual explosion of virtuosity.

The success of this concerto launched Rachmaninoff to celebrity status in America, yet the true magnitude of his orchestral compositions did not reach its peak until years after his death.

*Tchaikovsky might not be “the Father of Russian music”, but is definitely the most popular Russian composer.*

*He is known for his 1812 Overture, Swan Lake, Romeo & Juliet, and The Nutcracker.*

### **Symphony No. 2, op. 17, C minor, *Little Russian* (1872) Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**

Pyotr Tchaikovsky is Russia's most popular composer. His music is revered for its marvelous orchestration, harmonies, and colorful melodies. But Tchaikovsky was another tormented soul.

Born on May 7, 1840, in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka, Russia, Tchaikovsky was the second-oldest of six surviving siblings. While he was attracted to music early on, his father, a mine inspector and metal works manager, had hoped he would grow up to work in the civil service. At 5 years old, Tchaikovsky began taking piano lessons. One night his mother (who would die of cholera when he was just 14) found him awake, pointing to his head, and crying, “Oh this music, this music! Take it away! It's here and it won't let me sleep!”

In 1859, at 19, Tchaikovsky fulfilled his parents' expectations by becoming a bureau clerk in the Ministry of Justice for four years, but mostly he just thought about music. At 21, Tchaikovsky entered the newly founded St. Petersburg Conservatory to become one of the first students to study composition. During the late 1860s-early '70s his compositions demonstrated a connection to a group of composers in St. Petersburg known as The Russian Five, which included Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who had joined forces to create distinctly Russian classical music—free of European musical influences.

Tchaikovsky worked so intensively on his *First Symphony* that in 1866 he suffered a nervous breakdown. In June 1872, after a difficult year chock-full of teaching, composing and writing music criticism, he sought sanctuary with his sister's family in Kamenka, Ukraine. There, he relaxed, listened to the peasants sing, and began his *Second Symphony*. During the fall, he continued to work so heatedly on this *Second* that he apologized to his brother for not writing, adding: “It seems to me to be my best work, at least as regards correctness of form.”

*A critic dubbed this work as the Little Russian because of the way Tchaikovsky wove folk tunes into his Symphony.*

Tchaikovsky joked that credit for the finale should have gone “to the real composer of the said work, Peter Gerasimovich,” the elderly butler in his sister’s home, who sang the folk-song *The Crane* while the composer worked. The folk tunes Tchaikovsky wove into his Symphony resulted in it being dubbed by a critic as the *Little Russian*, referring to the Ukrainian region of the same name, where the music originated. Actual credit went to Mikhail Glinka; Tchaikovsky believed that the heart of Russian symphonic music lay in Glinka’s *Kamarinskaya*.

In January, Tchaikovsky took the score to St. Petersburg, where he played the finale for Rimsky-Korsakov’s family, then wrote to his brother: “The whole company nearly tore me to pieces in rapture, and Mme. Korsakov, with tears in her eyes, asked if she might arrange it for piano duet.”

The official premiere, led by Nikolai Rubenstein, took place in Moscow on Feb. 7, 1873. Tchaikovsky wrote that it “enjoyed a great success, so great that Rubinstein wants to perform it again . . . by public demand.” Two “by-demand” performances took place in Moscow—both big hits with audiences and critics alike. The *Moscow Register* critic said: “Not in a long time have I come across a work with such a powerful thematic development of ideas and with contrasts that are so well motivated and artistically thought out.”

The only person unhappy with the work was Tchaikovsky: “To tell you the truth, I’m not completely satisfied with the first three movements, but *The Crane* [the Russian folk tune] hasn’t come out so badly.” Regardless, the score was published, but in 1879, Tchaikovsky made revisions, completely rewriting the opening movement, overhauling the scherzo, and making major cuts to the finale. It is the version commonly performed today.

*Little Russian* opens with a slow, lamenting introduction: a solo horn playing a Ukrainian variant of *Down by Mother Volga*, which is reintroduced in the development section and again at the movement’s conclusion. The *sonata-allegro* form begins with a quickening tempo and a vigorous, blustery main theme that contrasts with a gentle, lyrical second theme introduced by the clarinet. A major climax ends this section, leading back to the stormy main theme and the melody (sung by the oboe). The movement concludes with a quieter version of *Down* from the horn and bassoon.

The second movement was originally a wedding march that Tchaikovsky salvaged from his unpublished opera, *Undina*. He quotes the folk song *Spin, O My Spinner* (one of the 50 Russian folksongs he arranged for publication in 1868-1869) in the central section. More subdued in character than similar pieces by Mendelssohn and Wagner, it begins with the clarinet accompanied by the flutes. The third movement is a mercurial scherzo inspired by the music of Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov, with a sound reminiscent of folk songs.

The finale features a thrilling display of orchestral color and rhythmic energy, with a set of variations on *The Crane*. Tchaikovsky added a lyrical melody, first

heard in the violins and repeated by the flutes, to provide contrast. Both themes are repeated, as joyous festivity vies with tender romanticism. The finale gains momentum to become a swirling, exciting Cossack dance driven by captivating rhythms. The symphony finishes with a buoyant, colorful coda.

Despite the *Second's* success, Tchaikovsky veered away from The Russian Five, returning to the traditional, Germanic symphonic forms found in his later masterpieces. In 1877, his repressed homosexuality led him to marry a young music student, but the disastrous union collapsed within weeks and he (unsuccessfully) attempted suicide.

Tchaikovsky died in St. Petersburg on Nov. 6, 1893. While some thought he had committed suicide after enduring a sex scandal trial, the public explanation was "cholera."

### **Program Notes by Jayce Keane**

*Jayce Keane, who began her career as a journalist for The Rocky Mountain News, has been working in the orchestra industry and writing about music for the last 13 years. A longtime resident of California, she now lives in Colorado.*

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