

OZEL PLAYS TCHAIKOVSKY | OCTOBER 22, 2022 PROGRAM NOTES

Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)

Premiered on April 7, 1977 by the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Eri Klas

Estonian composer Arvo Pärt was born on September 11, 1935. After completing his National Service obligation as an oboist and side-drummer in the army band, he joined the Tallinn Conservatory in 1957 where he composed several works for stage and film. Following a period in which he barely composed any music in an attempt to develop his own personal voice, Pärt reemerged in 1976 with a new compositional technique that he invented known as *tintinnabuli* or "little bells". Pärt describes the technique as follows: "I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements – with one voice, two voices. I build with primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells and that is why I call it tintinnabulation."

On December 5, 1976, Pärt heard of the passing of Benjamin Britten and was deeply affected by the news. He had just discovered the works of Britten and admired him so much that he wanted to meet him. At the time, Pärt was in the process of composing an elegiac orchestra piece and wanted to dedicate the piece to the memory of Britten.

Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten is a short canon in A minor scored for string orchestra and a singular tubular bell on the pitch A. The piece begins with three beats of silence followed by three chimes quietly struck by the tubular bell. The silence creates a spiritual framework around the piece reminding us that when we are not alive, we are silent. The three widely spaced intervals in the tubular bell represent the idea of the funeral bell and can be heard throughout the piece. After the bell has struck there is another brief moment of silence, and then the first violins begin setting the pattern in which the rest of the strings will follow at slower speeds. This idea is known as a prolation canon.

Half of the first violins begin playing the descending A minor scale, first playing one note from the very top of the scale, then returning to the beginning and playing two notes, and then three, then four, and so on. The other half of the first violins play notes from an A minor chord creating an increasing tension which is relieved by dropping the note. The second violins play exactly the same idea as the first violins but an octave lower and at half the speed. Then the violas join in at quarter speed and another octave lower, the cellos at one eighth, and finally the contrabasses at one sixteenth.

The pattern throughout the pieces continues to descend as though each voice is searching for an end. At measure 65 the first violins hit middle C, and when they do they stop playing the A minor scale and simply play C continuously until the end of the piece. Eleven measures later the second violins hit a low A and play that continuously. Similarly the other voices gradually find the note that they have been seeking and once reached, they play it continuously until the end. At measure 103, the contrabasses reach their note of low A

and the entire orchestra is playing an A minor chord. The chord continues for 5 measures then suddenly stops on the second beat of the last measure. At that same moment, the final bell tone is struck so quietly that the striking itself is not heard and only the fading overtones of the bell are audible.

Symphony No. 5 in D Major

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Premiered on June 24, 1943 by the London Philharmonic Orchestra

Ralph Vaughan Williams is one of the most well-known British composers. His works were strongly influenced by English folk songs and early Renaissance music of the Tudor period, which was different from the German style of the 19th century. He is celebrated for his nine symphonies, none of which are alike and contrast in various structures and moods. His first three symphonies incorporated more programmatic elements and were given titles rather than numbers. His fourth symphony caused quite a stir with its noticeable dissonance and harsh tonality compared to its predecessor, *A Pastoral Symphony*, which was more contemplative and quiet in nature.

After the premiere of the fourth symphony, Vaughan Williams experienced a brief period of writer's block. It wasn't until eight years later that *Symphony No. 5 in D Major* debuted. The symphony contains significant fragments of his unfinished opera, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which is based on the seventeenth-century religious novel of the same name by John Bunyan. At the time, Vaughan Williams understood that he was aging and he might not finish the opera that he had been working on for almost 30 years. Because of this, he wanted to incorporate ideas from the opera so that his work did not go to waste. The compositional style of this symphony was more similar to the earlier *Pastoral Symphony* with a quieter tone with very few passages rising above a forte.

Symphony No. 5 in D Major is scored for a smaller orchestra compared to his previous four symphonies, which include two flutes (one doubling piccolo), oboe, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. It follows the standard four-movement form.

The first movement, *Preludio*, opens with a pair of horns in D major over a C in the lower strings. This dark and obscure combination suggests a struggle as we continue with continuous changes between C and D, and between major and minor. The movement continues until we reach a new aspiring melody in the violins in E major and pizzicato in the double basses. The tempo accelerates to allegro at the development section with constant shifting and unpredictability until we complete the movement in a similar way as to the opening with the violas and cellos playing the C and D together to the end.

The beginning of the second movement, *Scherzo*, is composed in a way to give the illusion that the music is accelerating while the tempo remains the same. The entire movement alternates between a lush, playful melody on top of a quiet and shadowy anxiety in the moving accompaniment.

The broad and lyrical third movement, *Romanza*, opens with a gorgeous chord progression announcing the solo melody in the English horn. This melody is taken directly from Vaughan Williams' opera and is later repeated in the strings. Following a brief agitated passage in the strings with chromatic runs in the winds, the brass take over that same melody. The movement continues until it builds and finally winds down. The original melody can be heard in the horn at the end of the movement.

The beginning of the *Passacaglia* or finale is designed like a baroque passacaglia in which there are a series of variations over a repeated bass line. However, Vaughan Williams abandons that idea altogether later in the movement. The triumphant melody of the passacaglia finally showcases a certainty and resolution not heard in previous movements. The music continues until a fanfare motif ushers in the return of the themes from the first movement and we finally reach a sense of relief at the end of the piece.

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23 in B-flat Minor

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Premiered on October 25, 1875 in Boston with pianist Hans von Bülow

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky is one of the most prominent Russian composers of the nineteenth century. After graduating from law school and briefly serving as a civil servant, Tchaikovsky completely gave up on his career in government to focus on his music composition studies. Tchaikovsky enrolled in the St. Petersburg Conservatory where he would be influenced by two brothers: Anton and Nikolai Rubinstein. Anton was a skilled pianist and the Director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory at the time. His brother Nikolai, also a pianist, would later offer Tchaikovsky a teaching position at the Moscow Conservatory where he would teach for twelve years.

Shortly after the completion of his second symphony, Tchaikovsky would begin writing his first major success known as the *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Tchaikovsky originally dedicated the concerto to his mentor Nikolai Rubinstein. On Christmas Eve of 1874, he took the completed score to Rubinstein hoping that the pianist would premiere the work. While listening to the piece, Rubinstein sat in complete silence for several minutes. He later went on to criticize the piece stating that it was unplayable and unskillfully written. Tchaikovsky refused to make any changes and removed the dedication to Rubinstein. Instead, he rededicated the work to Hans von Bülow who premiered the piece in Boston in 1875.

Piano Concerto No. 1 is scored for solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Tchaikovsky later went on to revise the concerto three times until 1888.

The first movement opens with a majestic introduction dominated by the brass followed by the iconic crashing chords of the pianist on top of the flowing melody in the strings. After the theme is first introduced, the piano plays its own version of the melody which seamlessly transitions into a brief cadenza. The orchestra joins back in with a reprise of the introduction. We eventually arrive at the development section which builds

to an intense climax. The movement closes with an extended cadenza demonstrating the virtuosity of the pianist.

The second movement begins with a delicate melody in the flute that is later repeated by the solo piano and then two solo cellos. The movement then picks up to a faster, contrasting middle section. The slower first theme from the beginning of the movement then returns appearing first in the piano then the oboe before fading away.

The final movement opens with a lively melody taken from a Ukrainian folk song. This transitions into a soaring second theme heard in the violins and then the soloist. The two melodies alternate and overlap racing towards the coda and then finally the end.