RICHARD WAGNER

Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* (1859)

**Instrumentation:** 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings

**Duration:** about 17 minutes

The theme of redemption through a woman’s love appears in Wagner’s operas as early as *The Flying Dutchman* (1843). In 1854 Wagner wrote to Liszt about the “true happiness of love; I intend to raise a monument to this most beautiful of dreams.” Wagner soon created that monument, finishing the libretto for *Tristan und Isolde* in 1857, and the complete musical score for the opera in 1859. Based on a 12th-century Celtic legend, Wagner’s setting has King Mark intending to marry Isolde, and sends his nephew Tristan to bring her to him. On the ship home, however, Tristan and Isolde fall in love. In Act 2, after rapturous love music, the king’s courtier wounds Tristan. He lingers into Act 3, just long enough to die in Isolde’s arms. In the opera’s final scene—Liebestod (‘Love-Death’)—she then dies through “an ecstatic combination of love and grief” (James Keller).

For fundraising concerts, Wagner (and others) conducted excerpts from his operas. In 1859, Hans von Bulow conducted the Prelude (Wagner’s term for overture) at a concert. In 1863, Wagner coupled the Prelude with the Liebestod (minus Isolde’s vocal part), an orchestral pairing performed countless times since. Wagner’s own term for the finale was Verklärung ‘Transfiguration.’ That word symbolizes Wagner’s approach to the opera—not a tragedy, but more of a religious drama. Both Tristan (in his delirium from the wound) and Isolde (in the Liebestod) undergo conversions in the final act. “Death is no longer oblivion, but triumph.” They are united forever in death, “the compelling higher reality of [love’s] spiritual universe” (Joseph Kerman).

Wagner’s mature style surfaced in the mid-1850s, based on a continuous and complex web of symbolic musical motives, called ‘leitmotifs.’ After financial delays, the 1865 premier of *Tristan* was the first public exposure to this style. “In depicting every shade of sexual love, Wagner developed a style richer and more chromatic than anyone had previously
attempted” (Norton / Grove Encyclopedia). In sheer orchestral beauty, the Prelude offers impassioned longing, while the Liebestod depicts a somewhat more peaceful redemption of eternal union. After another dramatic, dissonant peak, “everything dissolves into a long benediction… resolution onto consonance” (Paul Serotsky).

RICHARD STRAUSS
Horn Concerto No. 2 (1942)

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings

**Duration:** about 18 minutes

Richard Strauss forged a career unique in music history. He wrote his first piece at age six (1870) and his glorious final lieder in 1948 at age 84, a compositional career lasting just short of eight decades. Critics considered his tone poems from *Don Juan* (1888) through *Ein Heldenleben* (1898) the height of lush, late-Romantic style, and earned him “international recognition as a modernist” (New Grove). In a very different style, the 20th-century dissonance of both *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1910) crowned him “the leading German opera composer of his time.” They provided “a new, modernist voice for the stage” (New Grove). Cutting edge modernism in two different styles!

Yet after *Elektra*, Strauss abandoned the most progressive dissonant, atonal, and 12-tone serialist styles. Instead, he wrote rich, tonal music for the next 40 years. Composing today’s horn concerto in 1942, this earlier king of modernism—‘Richard III’ according to Hans von Bulow—had instead long been viewed as composing in a conservative, nostalgic style.

His father Franz Strauss was one of the great orchestral horn players of the 19th century. “Wagner consistently demanded his services” (Gunther Schuller). Richard wrote his first horn concerto (1883) for his father, but it proved beyond his capacity. When Strauss returned to the genre sixty years later, he dedicated this new concerto ‘to the memory of my father’ (who had died in 1905).

He wrote the second concerto in an even more challenging style. Its demanding virtuosity includes more extensive chromaticism and longer passages of 16th-notes for the soloist. After sixty years and many masterpieces, “the orchestral accompaniment shows altogether richer and more adventurous techniques than its predecessor” (Terry Barfoot). Unlike the first concerto, the sparkling first movement of this new one opens with a virtuosic primary theme for horn that already contains chromatic inflections of modulations to come. Strauss links the end of the first
movement to the following *Andante con moto*. This slow movement, in A B A form, features chamber-music intimacy with a tender opening oboe and bassoon duet. The lively *Rondo* finale features short motivic interplay between horn and orchestra, with a final triumphant solo statement joined by the orchestral horns as well.

However, it can’t be overlooked that Strauss wrote this 1942 concerto in Germany during the war. After Hitler came to power in 1933, Strauss accepted the position of *Reichsmusikkammer*, head of the state music bureau. He was forced to resign two years later, after the Nazis intercepted his supportive letter to Jewish librettist Stephen Zweig. Never a Nazi nor an anti-semit, Strauss nonetheless decided to stay in Germany when so many (Jewish and others) left. Strauss had a beloved Jewish daughter-in-law Alice and two Jewish grandchildren, and with requests—“his residual clout may well have saved their lives” (Rene Saller), keeping them out of the camps. Strauss also went to the Theresienstadt concentration camp to try and save other members of Alice’s family, but here he was rebuffed; she lost 26 relatives in the camps. Musicologist Leon Botstein cautions us that Strauss’s initial “thoughtless complicity with radical evil…cannot (and should not) be set aside easily.”

But Botstein also freely acknowledges the genius. In *The Enigmas of Richard Strauss: A Revisionist View* he writes of the “series of stunning works… [of] greatness and beauty…humor, insight, warmth, and subtlety.” Addressing a particular aspect of that genius, Gunther Schuller writes that “Strauss’s horn writing, except in some of his later works (parts of *Arabella, The Silent Woman*, and even his second Horn Concerto) is among the most idiomatic ever conceived.” Note the exceptions. The pianist Paul Wittgenstein lost his right arm in combat during World War I. He commissioned left-handed concertos by Strauss, Franz Schmidt, Britten, Prokofiev, and Ravel. “Strauss was the only one asked to write a second piano piece” (New Grove). Strauss died in 1949, two days before the 55th wedding anniversary to the love of his life, Paulina de Ahna. Genius and enigma, indeed. Today’s work has become the most performed and recorded horn concerto of the 20th century.

**PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

**Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36 (1877)**

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings

**Duration:** about 44 minutes

Symphonies did not emerge as a prominent genre in Russia until the 1860s. The passionate Russian nationalist composer Mily Balakirev
mentored the first fledgling symphonies of Rimsky Korsakov (1865) and Borodin (1867), after finishing the first movement of his own symphony in 1864. These three composers ultimately produced eight symphonies. Together with Cesar Cui and Modest Mussogsky, the other composers closely identified with Balakirov’s fiery nationalism, this group became known as the ‘Mighty Five’ or the ‘Mighty Handful.’

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky also completed his first symphony at this same time (1866). While not a member of the ‘Mighty Handful,’ Tchaikovsky’s ultimate mastery of Western models (taught by the conservatory) combined with his own Russian experience. Symphony scholar A. Peter Brown states a broad consensus, that of all these composers, Tchaikovsky’s six symphonies were “undoubtedly the most important, and [he was] the only universally recognized 19th-century composer of the Russian symphonic fraternity.”

By 1877, Tchaikovsky had already written two more symphonies, and established a celebrated international reputation with his tone poems and overtures, operas, his first ballet (*Swan Lake*), first piano concerto, and string quartets. Yet his next symphony—no. 4 in F Minor—nonetheless established “a crucial change in his symphonic style…the first movement of the Fourth was a breakthrough within his symphonic output” (Brown).

It begins with a powerful brass introduction—a fanfare that Tchaikovsky later calls ‘Fate.’ He intersperses it throughout this Sonata-form movement. After such a dramatic opening, he writes a soft and sinuously chromatic primary theme for the violins, and another soft, playful secondary theme introduced by solo clarinet. The extended interplay of the fanfare with the recurrences of these other themes results in an unprecedented structure of great length, dwarfing the following three movements.

Tchaikovsky’s new symphonic skills also emerge in cyclic unification, in beginning each of the following movements with thematic transformation of the same idea—a descending four-note motive. Yet you’d never guess that, given the incredible variety of mood and style. Tchaikovsky designates the lovely second-movement Andantino (in A B A form) as “in the manner of a Canzona:” a simple, lyrical song. The poignant theme, opening with oboe solo against pizzicato string accompaniment, recurs often and leads to a statelier and ultimately impassioned theme for full orchestra. He fashions the faster and contrasting “B” section in F Major almost entirely on the two-bar motive introduced in clarinets and bassoons—another manifestation of thematic integration.

The Scherzo and Trio is a sparkling delight set in F Major, with Tchaikovsky highlighting each of the major orchestral choirs in turn. He
sets the *Scherzo* entirely for pizzicato strings. The *Trio* opens with woodwinds alone, followed by the brass section for its conclusion. After the strings return for the *Scherzo*, the playful coda briefly revisits each orchestral choir.

The **Sonata-form** finale features a Russian folksong: ‘In the Field there stood a Birch Tree.’ After the introductory orchestral flourish serves as the primary theme, Tchaikovsky presents this folksong softly in the woodwinds as a new theme. Variants of it also constitute the later secondary theme as well, introduced by oboe and bassoon. After the development section and recap, Tchaikovsky brings back the dramatic F Minor ‘Fate’ theme in the coda. In this ‘breakthrough’ work, this becomes his first symphonic theme to appear in more than one movement, before the primary theme provides a triumphant close in F Major.

By 1877, two women had entered Tchaikovsky’s life. In April he received the first letter from Antonina Milyukova, admiring his music. He set the folksong in the finale of Symphony 4 with Antonina in mind. By June 8, Tchaikovsky had sketched the entire symphony. Though Tchaikovsky was gay, they married in July—and the marriage was a disaster, lasting only two months. He attempted suicide, entering a period of depression and comparatively fallow production for several years.

Tchaikovsky received his first letter from wealthy business woman Nadezhda von Meck the previous year. In 1877 she began sending him a huge annual stipend, on the condition that they never meet. She sent them for fourteen years—yet they never saw each other in person. Tchaikovsky dedicated this symphony to her anonymously “To a Friend.” In 1878 she asked if there was a narrative story guiding the symphony. So only after the fact, he wrote a programmatic description of the four movements, calling that opening fanfare ‘Fate.’ It was the only complete and detailed program Tchaikovsky wrote for any of his symphonies.

Despite Tchaikovsky’s frequent turn to Russian folksong, the nationalist ‘Mighty Five’ composers nonetheless viewed him as an antagonist—‘insufficiently Russian,’ too cosmopolitan. For the only ‘universally recognized 19th-century Russian symphony composer,’ the irony is astounding. In 1890 the novelist Anton Chekhov “gave Tchaikovsky second place as Russia’s most significant artist after Tolstoy” (Leon Botstein). Furthermore, the ballet was not considered a particularly Russian genre before Tchaikovsky. But Botstein writes that he “helped identify it with Russian culture, an association still current among today’s audienc-es” 140 years later.