

Notes on the Program

By Arthur R. Smith

Andrei Bondarenko and Gary Matthewman open tonight's concert of French and Russian repertoire with the evocative set of "Chansons de Don Quichotte," by Jacques Ibert. These originated in Ibert's score for a 1933 G. W. Pabst film of the Cervantes novel, starring the great Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin as the knight-errant, who also gave their first performance as a set. The resulting mini-cycle has reflections from all stages of the hero's life, songs with a bard-like quality in their strummed accompaniment and conversational vocal lines. The opening song's languorous storytelling is balanced by the lamentation in the final song, and middle songs give us his love in full fever.

Two contrasting examples of Gabriel Fauré's art follow: the pastel harmonies of "Les Berceaux," a shimmer of stepwise motion in the accompaniment, and the explosion of color and energy of "Fleur jetée," where the discarded flowers of Armand Silvestre's poem are swept up in a wind of obsessive repeated notes in the piano while the singer decries the loss of love.

Another embodiment of literature's great tilter at windmills comes via Ravel's "Don Quichotte à Dulcinée." Ravel had been Pabst's first choice for the film score, but he was unable to complete the commission in time. The works that resulted—and were given their premiere by the renowned baritone Martial Singher—catch the Spanish spirit in the source material—Ravel was ever the master of local color. This Don Quixote is less the oracle of Ibert, more urbane, with shifting dance rhythms and flecks of dissonance in the music. Yet, as in the earlier set, the old knight has full measure of his ardor and dignity.

The remainder of tonight's program is devoted to Russian romances, a national song form, parallel to the German *lied* and French *chanson*. The *romance* refers to a stylistically distinct category but one that is loosely defined. The term applies to both the rustic songs of Mussorgsky and other

"Mighty Handful" composers as well as to the cultivated, restrained ardor that marks tonight's selections from Georgy Sviridov as well as Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky.

A student of Shostakovich, Georgy Sviridov (1915-1998), forged his own path towards a nationalistic musical style that taps folk sources, rich ostinato patterns, and modern musical devices used judiciously (think of the touch of dissonance in some of Copland's folk-inspired works). His legacy is primarily in song and choral works, and we hear excerpts from his cycles "St. Petersburg" of 1996 (also the subject of an earlier set) to poems by Aleksandr Blok and "Russia Cast Adrift" from 1977 to poems by Sergei Yesenin.

Rachmaninoff composed songs throughout his career, penning around 80 in total. The opening song in the set, "In the Silence of the Secret Night," from Op. 4 of 1893 is one of his earliest compositions (and a personal favorite of his which he arranged for violin and piano). The following romance, with its halting syncopations (a sad heartbeat perhaps?), brings a bleak recognition scene of vanished love. To end the set, we have a jovial drinking song—not a mode we perhaps think of with this composer, yet something he delivers with understated élan.

Tchaikovsky found an ever replenishing well of inspiration and source material in folk music, and this was leavened with an exceptional reverence for the formal balance of 18th century music (his worship of Mozart started early). The romances combine these influences, and express a sensibility of inward looking poetic melancholy, a sort of permanent autumn of the heart. (Although it's perhaps too easy a conjecture, it does seem that Tchaikovsky's vocal music—both opera and song alike—is particularly autobiographical. Protagonists in these songs, no less than Tatiana or Onegin in *Eugene Onegin* are perpetually looking back to a love that never was, or forward to what can never be. Is that the composer's own heartsickness?)

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The works date from throughout the composer's career—he was writing romances before conservatory training and his final opus from 1893, the year of his death, includes songs. Like Schumann, Tchaikovsky's romances have evocative piano parts, often with introductions and postludes. (In fact, some are better known today as “songs without words,” for piano. “None but the Lonely Heart” is a familiar example.) There is, like Schumann again, a deft sense of how to embody the shape of the poem and sound of the language in

melody and rhythm. This is notable, as is the trademark Tchaikovsky “pulse”—irregular phrase lengths, lines that seem to wind around restlessly, one moment speeding with ardor another lapsing into repose. (Recall Tatiana fomenting her love letter disaster in one of the greatest scenes of Russian opera.) A particularly magical instance of this comes in “Again, as before, I am alone,” a late work, in which repeated bass notes, almost baroque in feel, pulse evenly under piercing sobs in the piano treble, and the long breathed, heart-broken vocal line.