TANGLEWOOD MUSIC CENTER ORCHESTRA ENCORE PERFORMANCES, Program II
Streaming from Monday, July 13, at 8pm through Sunday, July 19

TANGLEWOOD MUSIC CENTER ORCHESTRA
ANDRIS NELSONS conducting

TCHAIKOVSKY Serenade in C for Strings, Opus 48
Pezzo in forma di Sonatina: Andante non troppo—Allegro moderato
Valse: Moderato, tempo di valse
Elegia: Larghetto elegiac
Finale, Tema Russo: Andante—Allegro con spirito
(PERFORMED WITHOUT CONDUCTOR; TMC faculty member Edward Gazouleas, coach)
*(concert of August 5, 2019)*

BRAHMS Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Opus 68
Un poco sostenuto—Allegro
Andante sostenuto
Un poco allegretto e grazioso
Adagio—Più Andante—Allegro non troppo ma con brio—Più Allegro
ANDRIS NELSONS conducting
*(Leonard Bernstein Memorial Concert of July 31, 2016)*

Notes on the Program

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893) spent most of the year 1880 in the country, part of the time installed at Simaki, a small house on one of the estates of his patroness Nadezhda von Meck. He was supposed to write a piece of music for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Tsar Alexander II’s accession to the throne, inasmuch as the government hoped to generate a little enthusiasm for the ruler, who had recently been the object of some assassination attempts. The original plan was for a series of staged tableaux accompanied by music, each scene to be set by a different composer, chosen by lot. Tchaikovsky, to his chagrin, drew as his subject “Montenegrin villagers receiving news of Russia’s declaration of war on Turkey.” Not surprisingly, he felt unable to do anything with such a topic, and his creative inertia gave way to a variety of activities that helped him avoid composing: revising earlier works, proofreading scores, making fair copies of recently composed songs, and renewing his study of English in hopes of eventually being able to read his favorite English authors, Dickens, Thackeray, and Shakespeare.

Finally, while living at Kamenka, the home of his sister and her family, he began work on a composition for the Silver Jubilee Exposition, an overture dealing with Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812. At the same time, and purely for his own satisfaction, he wrote a Serenade for string orchestra, a late 19th-century equivalent of the Classical divertimento. The Serenade was completed on November 4; the 1812 Overture followed it two weeks later. Tchaikovsky summed up his own feelings about the autumn’s harvest of music in a blunt comparison: “The Overture will be very loud, noisy, but I wrote it without any warm feelings of love and so it will probably be of no artistic worth. The serenade, however, I wrote from inner compulsion—a piece from the heart, and so, I venture to say, it does not lack artistic worth.”

Both works have long been among the popular favorites of Tchaikovsky’s output—the 1812 Overture with its glorious bombardment, the Serenade for Strings with its freshness and charm, its brilliant string writing, its graceful waltz of a character Tchaikovsky made entirely his own, its richly expressive elegy, and its lively finale based on one of those Russian folk tunes that reiterates over and over a simple melodic gesture, allowing the composer to deploy his substantial skills as an arranger to ring the changes on the obstinate little fragment of tune as it gets ever livelier.

When JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897) finished his First Symphony in September 1876, he was forty-three years old (some of the sketches date back to the 1850s); Otto Dessoff conducted the first performance on November 4, 1876, at Karlsruhe. As late as 1873, the composer’s publisher Simrock feared that a Brahms symphony would never happen (“Aren’t you doing anything any more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in ’73 either?” he
wrote the composer on February 22), and Eduard Hanslick, in his review of the first Vienna performance, noted that “seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer’s first symphony with such tense anticipation.” Brahms already had several works for orchestra behind him: the Opus 11 and Opus 16 serenades, the D minor piano concerto (which emerged from an earlier attempt at a symphony), and that masterwork of orchestral know-how and control, the Variations on a Theme by Haydn. But a symphony was something different and had to await the sorting out of Brahms’s complicated emotional relationship with Robert and Clara Schumann (only after Robert’s death could Brahms finally begin to accept that his passion for the older Clara needed to remain unrequited), and, more important, of his strong feelings about following in Beethoven’s footsteps.

Beethoven’s influence is certainly to be felt in Brahms’s First Symphony: in its C minor-to-major progress; in the last-movement theme resembling the earlier composer’s Ode to Joy—a relationship Brahms himself acknowledged as something that “any ass could see; and, perhaps most strikingly, in the rhythmic thrust and tight, motivically-based construction of the work. But at the same time, there is really no mistaking the one composer for the other: Beethoven’s rhythmic drive is very much his own, whereas Brahms’s more typical expansiveness is still present throughout this symphony, and his musical language is unequivocally 19th-century–Romantic in manner.

The first Allegro’s two principal motives—the three eighth-notes followed by a longer value, and the hesitant, three-note chromatic ascent across the bar, heard at the start in the violins—are already suggested in the sostenuto introduction, which seems to begin in mid-struggle. The movement is prevalingly somber in character, with a tension and drive again suggestive of Beethoven. The second idea’s horn and wind colorations provide only passing relief: their dolce and espressivo markings will be spelled out at greater length in the symphony’s second movement.

The second and third movements provide space for lyricism, for a release from the tension of the first. The calmly expansive oboe theme of the E major Andante is threatened by the G-sharp minor of the movement’s middle section (whose sixteenth-note figurations anticipate the main idea of the third movement), but tranquility prevails when the tune returns in combined oboe, horn, and solo violin. The A-flat Allegretto is typical of Brahms in a grazioso mood—compare the Second Symphony’s third movement, or the finale of the Piano Concerto No. 2—and continues the respite from the main battle. And just as the middle movements of the symphony are at an emotional remove from the outer ones, so too are they musically distant, having passed from the opening C minor to third-related keys: E major for the second movement and A-flat major for the third. At the same time, the third movement serves as preparation for the finale: its ending seems unresolved, completed only when the C minor of the fourth movement, again a third away from the movement that precedes it, takes hold.

As in the first movement, the sweep of the finale depends upon a continuity between the main Allegro and its introduction. This C minor introduction gives way to an airy C major horn call (originally conceived as a birthday greeting to Clara Schumann in 1868) which becomes a crucial binding element in the course of the movement. A chorale in the trombones, which have been silent until this movement, brings a canonic buildup of the horn motto and then the Allegro with its two main ideas: the broad C major tune suggestive of Beethoven’s Ninth, and a powerful chain of falling intervals, which crystallize along the way into a chain of falling thirds, Brahms’s musical hallmark. The movement drives to a climax for full orchestra on the trombone chorale heard earlier and ends with a final affirmation of C major—Brahms has won his struggle.

From notes by STEVEN LEDBETTER (Tchaikovsky) and MARC MANDEL (Brahms)

Steven Ledbetter was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998.
Marc Mandel joined the staff of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1978 and managed the BSO’s program book from 1979 until his retirement as Director of Program Publications in 2020.

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Artists

ANDRIS NELSONS
The 2019-20 season marked Andris Nelsons’ fifth anniversary as the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Ray and Maria Stata Music Director. In addition to his concerts with the BSO at Symphony Hall and Tanglewood, Mr. Nelsons has led the Boston Symphony Orchestra on three European tours, as well as a tour to Japan and performances at New York’s Carnegie Hall. Named Musical America’s 2018 Artist of the Year, Andris Nelsons in February of that year became Gewandhauskapellmeister of the Gewandhausorchester (GHO) Leipzig, in which capacity he has brought
the BSO and GHO together for a unique multi-dimensional alliance. Mr. Nelsons’ recordings with the BSO, all
made live in concert at Symphony Hall, include an ongoing, award-winning, complete Shostakovich symphony
cycle for Deutsche Grammophon; the complete Brahms symphonies on BSO Classics; and a Naxos release featuring
the world premieres of BSO-commissioned works by the American composers Timo Andres, Eric Nathan, Sean
Shepherd, and George Tsontakis. Andris Nelsons began his career as a trumpeter in the Latvian National Opera
Orchestra before studying conducting. He was music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra from
2008 to 2015, principal conductor of the Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie in Herford, Germany, from 2006 to 2009,