

## Superheroes! – February 9 & 10, 2020

### From *Die Walküre* *Walkürenritt (Ride of the Valkyries)*

Richard Wagner  
1813-1883

The over 15 hours of Richard Wagner's four operas that together make up *Der Ring des Nibelungen* – *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* – comprise probably the most massive musical creation ever composed. It was also one of the most influential for musical development at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not least of all in the expansion of the orchestra and innovations in orchestration.

Wagner had numerous axes to grind with his massive tetralogy. He envisioned the mythological theme to represent the superiority of the German people – a theme that became the centerpiece of Hitler's Third Reich. He conceived a system of musical symbolism in which dozens of specific musical motives, or *Leitmotiven*, represented characters, objects and abstract concepts, which when combined provided simultaneous layers of meaning to the music and text. Wagner considered the complete integration of music, text and spectacle, or *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total art work), to be the pinnacle of his own genius, as well as the model for the perfection of artistic creativity of the future.

Perhaps the most famous of the orchestral pieces from *The Ring* is the Ride of the Valkyries from the second opera in the tetralogy, *Die Walküre*. Here, Wagner paints with music the rhythm of the galloping horses, the rush of the wind as they fly through the air and the calls of Wotan's maiden daughters as they swoop down to the battlefields to take fallen heroes up to Valhalla.

### Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35 3d Movement: *Allegro vivacissimo*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
1840–1893

“Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto raises for the first time the ghastly idea that there are pieces of music that one can hear stinking... [the finale] transports us into the brutish grim jollity of a Russian church festival. In our mind's eye we see nothing but common, ravaged faces, hear rough oaths and smell cheap liquor.” This politically incorrect assessment comes from the pen of the dean of nineteenth century music critics, Eduard Hanslick, reviewing the Concerto's Vienna premiere.

Why did the first performance take place in Vienna and not St. Petersburg? It is difficult to believe that this Concerto, probably the most popular in the literature, was declared to contain passages that were “almost impossible to play” by its first dedicatee, the famed violinist and violin teacher Leopold Auer, concertmaster of the Imperial Orchestra in St. Petersburg. Completed in 1878, it had to wait for three years for its premiere in Vienna where Hanslick was not alone in his opinion.

What Hanslick and the other critics disliked most is what makes the Concerto so appealing today: its athletic energy, unabashed romanticism and rousing Slavic finale. Without diminishing our own enjoyment of the Concerto, attempting to hear it with the ears of its first audience is a fascinating exercise in cultural relativity. First of all, consider the sheer difficulty of the piece. What defeated Russia's leading violin virtuoso is the stuff teenage prodigies cut their teeth on at Juilliard and Curtis, practicing the killer bits ad nauseam until they get it right or find some other career.

At the time of the Concerto's inception, Tchaikovsky was just emerging from under the black cloud of a disastrous marriage to an emotionally unstable woman who had threatened suicide if he refused to marry. The marriage was also undertaken to quash rumors about his homosexuality; it ended two weeks later with his attempted suicide, although they were never legally divorced. The vibrant energy of the Concerto, however, seems to have been inspired by the visit of Josif Kotek, a young violinist, pupil and protégé who managed to raise the composer's spirits. He helped him with the Concerto, giving advice on technical matters.

The unabashed use of Russian peasant dance rhythms in the third movement that so upset Vienna's critics was, even at the time, becoming a signature of much Russian orchestral music and a symbol of Russian nationalism. Another peculiar divergence from tradition that must have raised a few Viennese eyebrows is the spectacular cadenza at the *beginning* of the movement that follows immediately on the fiery orchestral introduction and leads right into the main theme. Now, if these had been German or Hungarian dances, Vienna's attitude might have been different.

**And something for the trivia buff:**

Williams' music to *Superman* (1978) was a last-minute affair, after the first choice, Jerry Goldsmith, bowed out. The march is the most familiar music from that blockbuster.

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