Festive Overture, op.96  
by Dmitri Shostakovich  (1906 – 1975)

Duration: Approximately 7 minutes
First Performance: November 6, 1954 in Moscow
Last ESO Performance: October, 1994; Robert Hanson, conductor

To most concertgoers the name Shostakovich first brings to mind that composer’s monumental symphonies, works fraught with heavy political as well as aesthetic significance, referring frequently to the upheavals and tragedies of recent Russian experience and conveying an enormous emotional impact. Alongside the searing emotions of grief and tragedy there is occasional humor, although it is almost invariably of the sardonic variety: Shostakovich was one of the supreme masters of 20th century musical irony.

There were other sides to the composer’s musical persona, however. He was quite capable of writing light music (his jazz suites are entertaining examples), and, as a composer who thought of himself as the servant of a socialist state, there was also the inevitable need from to time to produce “official” music, i.e. music for various sorts of official occasions as well as music that was frankly intended as state propaganda.

One of the most successful of these pièces d’occasion and one of the few that seems to have found a place in the standard repertoire is the delightfully ebullient Festive Overture. The work dates from 1954, near the beginning of the “thaw” that followed the death of Stalin in March of 1953. It can safely be said that Shostakovich wasted no tears on the occasion of Stalin’s death, for he had lived in mortal terror for some twenty years under the dictator’s iron rule, never knowing when he might be summarily executed or sent to Siberia for producing work that offended the party’s principles of so-called socialist realism.

The circumstances that produced the overture are a classic example of art-on-demand. For a concert celebrating the 37th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, officials of the Bolshoi Theater found themselves without an opening work. A panic-stricken call was made just a few days before the concert to Shostakovich, who had accepted a position as musical consultant to the theater. Demonstrating a level of facility at the level of a Mozart, Shostakovich dashed off the work in three days, giving the parts, still wet with ink, to couriers who delivered them to copyists at the theater. The successful premiere took place on 6 November 1954 and the overture has been a popular favorite ever since, receiving frequent performances at official events such as the opening of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow and the 2009 Nobel Prize ceremony.

A rousingly bombastic opening brass fanfare serves as introduction to the main body of the work, which takes off at breakneck speed. The model for this whirlwind rhythmic energy was a classic of Russian music, the ever popular Overture to the opera Ruslan and Lyudmila by Mikhail Glinka, the revered “father of Russian music” (1804 -1857).

Shostakovich employs two themes, one fast-paced and the other more lyrical, which are stated separately and then eventually combined in counterpoint. The opening fanfare makes a final brief reappearance before a fiery coda closes off the work. Musicologist
Lev Lebedinsky, a close friend of the composer, aptly described the overture as a “brilliant effervescent work, with its vivacious energy spilling over like uncorked champagne.” Like any good *aperitif*, this overture satisfies while it whets the appetite for something yet to come.

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Concerto in D major for Violin & Orchestra, op.35, TH 59
by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

*Duration: Approximately 33 minutes*
*First Performance: December 4, 1881 in Vienna*
*Last ESO Performance: October, 2006; Isabella Lippi, violin; Robert Hanson, conductor*

For every masterpiece that quickly enters the musical canon to rave reviews and standing ovations it is easy to find one that was originally savaged by critics and booed off the stage by audiences. Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto, today one of the most beloved works in the violin repertoire, serves as a good example. The first performance in 1881 produced such masterpieces of musical invective as the remark by one critic that the new work was “an accumulation of discords, confused climaxes and dressed up trivialities.” Even more memorable was the famous diatribe by Eduard Hanslick, that demigod of Viennese critics, who said that the concerto was music “that stinks in the ear.”

Exactly what it was that caused His Nibs, Herr Hanslick, olfactory as well as auditory distress is not now easy to discern, but the concerto had already had its difficulties before the critics got at it. Tchaikovsky composed most of the work in Switzerland in 1878 on the rebound from his disastrous two and a half month marriage to a former student. Assisting him with violinistic details was a young composition student and violinist named Yosif Kotek, with whom he was probably romantically involved. Tchaikovsky’s first disappointment with the concerto came when he showed the work to Madame von Meck, the wealthy and cultivated lady who had just become his patron and who would be a great help to his career for years to come. Although her devotion to Tchaikovsky’s music usually bordered on the fanatical, she was not impressed by the concerto. Even greater disappointment was yet to come as Tchaikovsky showed the concerto to the virtuoso Leopold Auer, the concertmaster of the Imperial Orchestra of St. Petersburg. It had been the composer’s hope all along to dedicate the work to Auer and have him play the premiere. When he declined, giving sharp criticisms of many aspects of the piece, Tchaikovsky was deeply wounded.

As it happened, the task of bringing the concerto to the public fell to a young violinist named Adolph Brodsky, who, without the composer’s knowledge, gave the premiere in Vienna with the Vienna Philharmonic in December of 1881. By all accounts, the performance was underprepared by conductor and orchestra, which no doubt had much to do with the disastrous critical reaction. Despite its unpromising beginnings, however, the concerto gradually began to catch on, helped, incidentally, by such violinists as America’s own “Queen of the violin,” Maud Powell. Born in Peru, Illinois, and educated in Aurora and Chicago, Ms. Powell brought a number of violin masterpieces to the New
World, including the Tchaikovsky Concerto, whose American premiere she played in January of 1889 with the New York Symphony.

Today, of course, the concerto is heard in the practice rooms of conservatories throughout the world. Its beautiful melodies and spectacular virtuoso treatment of the instrument maintain it as one of the three or four most popular concertos in the violin repertoire and it stands as one of the supreme examples both of the unrivaled expressive powers of the violin as well as its technical capabilities.

Like that other wildly popular Tchaikovsky concerto, the Piano Concerto in Bb Minor, the Violin Concerto begins with a lovely theme that is never heard again. No need to worry, however, as there is plenty of subsequent melodic material. Particularly noteworthy in the first movement is the difficult cadenza, which, unlike the practice of earlier eras, is carefully written out rather than improvised. In addition to the expected virtuoso fireworks, it gives us an interesting new look at melodies already heard.

More evidence of Tchaikovsky’s unexcelled melodic gift is clearly heard in the tenderly beautiful second movement, which features a good deal of the Slavic melancholy that was so much a part of his output. A brief connecting passage brings us without a pause into the fiery finale, a movement that demonstrates yet another aspect of the violin’s versatility. Here the folk tradition of violin playing is evoked, with the use of the trepak, a traditional Ukrainian folk dance, as the main theme as well as a broad, Gypsy-like second theme. As expected, the movement ends in a pyrotechnical blaze of violinistic glory.

Finally, it should be noted that Leopold Auer eventually saw the error of his ways, and, as he put it, “received absolution” from the composer. Not only did Auer himself eventually perform the concerto, but he made it the virtual theme song of the great Russian school of violin playing by teaching it to his students, which included such fabled fiddlers as Heifetz, Elman, Milstein, Zimbalist, and Shumsky.

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**Symphonic Dances, op.45**
by Sergei Rachmaninoff  (1873 – 1943)

*Duration: Approximately 35 minutes*
*First Performance: January 7, 1941 in Philadelphia*
*Last ESO Performance: November, 1992; Robert Hanson, conductor*

Like many other members of the Russian upper classes, Sergei Rachmaninoff left Russia after the 1917 Revolution, never to return. He was then a world figure in his mid-forties and had already written most of the works on which his reputation rests today, including the Second Symphony and the Second and Third Piano Concertos. He would live the last quarter of a century of his life as a homesick émigré, mostly in Switzerland and the United States, and would complete only six more works.
The reasons for this reticence as a composer are not hard to understand. To begin with, having left possessions behind in Russia, he realized that he could support his family much more easily as a performer than as a composer. As one of the great pianists of his time as well as a fine conductor, his career as a touring artist was spectacularly successful but inevitably limited time for composition.

At least as important, however, to his future as a composer was his special place in the musical life of the times. Rachmaninoff’s public persona often projected an air of melancholy, prompting his fellow Russian émigré Igor Stravinsky to call him “Six and a half feet of Russian misery.” (He was a tall, rather gaunt figure.) Like many members of the aristocratic, so-called “White Russian” diaspora, he would retain a life-long deep nostalgia for the brilliantly rich high culture of Imperial Russia, the culture that produced the colorful, lushly Romantic, and deeply emotional music of composers such as Tchaikovsky, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov. Rachmaninoff would remain a stylistic archconservative, causing him to be viewed as the last great representative of this great Russian tradition of late Romanticism. Given the enormous gap between his musical sympathies and the radically new trends that were sweeping through sophisticated musical circles outside Russia, it is not surprising that his output declined in quantity. He disliked even the music of Debussy, let alone the more extreme experiments of composers like Stravinsky and Schoenberg.

Rachmaninoff did enjoy a late flowering, however, in the last decade of his life. In this so-called Indian Summer period, he absorbed to a certain degree some of the new techniques of the time, while still preserving his familiar late Romantic idiom. The result was works such as his Third Symphony and the very popular Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. The Symphonic Dances, written in 1940, were his final completed work and the only one written entirely in the United States. Although it can be seen as his most “advanced” work, it is still very much Romantic music with a mild dose of twentieth century dissonance and rhythmic irregularity.

Symphonic Dances were first written under the working title Fantastic Dances in a version for two pianos. (Rachmaninoff enjoyed playing this version with his neighbor and fellow Russian émigré Vladimir Horowitz.) As the title suggests, the work was originally conceived as ballet music, and Rachmaninoff went so far as to approach the distinguished choreographer Michel Fokine, who had choreographed several of Stravinsky’s ballets as well as a work by Rachmaninoff himself, about the possibility of making a ballet out of the score. Unfortunately, Fokine died before the project could begin and the first performance rights were offered as a symphonic work to the Philadelphia Orchestra, the composer’s favorite orchestra and the one with which he had the closest connection throughout his life in the United States. The successful premiere took place in Philadelphia in January of 1941.

In his original conception, Rachmaninoff had entitled the three movements according to three symbolic stages of life, but he later dropped the titles. The first movement, originally entitled “Noon”, is strongly rhythmical with hints of the sardonic style of the modernist Prokofiev. The lyrical middle section offers contrast in mood as well as color, featuring the striking novelty of an extended saxophone solo. After a return of the opening material comes a brief coda in which Rachmaninoff lets us into a very private part of his emotional life. Here he quotes a theme from his First Symphony, written some 45 years earlier, whose public failure had deeply traumatized the young composer,
bringing him to a nervous breakdown. This beautiful theme, incidentally, was based on ideas from Russian church music, a tradition that was always close to the composer’s heart.

The second movement, which is very much in the tradition of the *valse triste* (“sad waltz”), was originally named “Twilight”. Skillful orchestration and imaginative harmonies lend a magically sinister tone to the movement.

The final movement, originally called “Midnight”, begins with a brief slow introduction but soon breaks into an *Allegro vivace* which features strongly syncopated dance rhythms. The contrasting slower middle section presents some of Rachmaninoff’s famous lush melodic writing and leads directly back into the *Allegro vivace* tempo. Here Rachmaninoff introduces one of his signature themes, the famous lugubrious *Dies Irae (Day of Wrath)* from the medieval Requiem Mass which had been used for macabre effect by Romantic composers such as Liszt and Berlioz, and which appears in a number of Rachmaninoff’s own works. Although it has occasionally been suggested that the composer had an obsession with death, here he seems determined not to allow gloom to triumph. At a key point near the end of the work he wrote the word *Alliluya* in the score. Although long considered a mystery, it is now clear that the marking signifies that Rachmaninoff has borrowed music from his *All Night Vigil*, a liturgical choral work from 1915 which is widely considered to be one of the most beautiful examples of Russian Orthodox church music. Considering that it is highly probable that Rachmaninoff knew that this would be his final work, and that at the very end of the work he wrote “I thank thee, Lord”, it is certainly not fanciful to think that this was a symbol of life triumphing over death. The composer died two years after the premiere of *Symphonic Dances*, just one month after becoming a citizen of the United States.

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