

Tchaikovsky Grand Sonata Children's Album

Mikhail
Pletnev

alto



Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky

Grand Sonata in G major, Op. 37

1	I. Moderato e risoluto	13:26
2	II. Andante non troppo quasi moderato	9:18
3	III. Scherzo. Allegro giocoso	2:50
4	IV. Finale. Allegro vivace	6:22

Children's Album, Op. 39

5	I. Prière du matin	1:38	17	XIII. Le paysan prelude	1:19
6	II. Le matin en hiver	1:06	18	XIV. Chanson populaire	0:36
7	III. Maman	1:14	19	XV. Chanson Italienne	0:54
8	IV. Le petit cavalier	0:40	20	XVI. Mélodie antique Française	1:27
9	V. Marche des soldats de bois	0:50	21	XVII. Chanson Allemande	0:54
10	VI. La nouvelle poupée	0:37	22	XVIII. Chanson Napolitaine	1:08
11	VII. La poupée malade	2:59	23	XIX. Conte de la vieille bonne	0:54
12	VIII. Enterrement de la poupée	1:59	24	XX. La sorciere	0:46
13	IX. Valse	1:16	25	XXI. Douce reverie	2:36
14	X. Polka	0:45	26	XXII. Chant de l'alouette	0:56
15	XI. Mazurka	1:08	27	XXIII. A l'église	3:15
16	XII. Chanson Russe	0:39	28	XXIV. L'orgue de barbarie	1:00

Mikhail Pletnev, *piano*

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

The piano pieces on this disc were composed in 1878 in the aftermath of **Piotr Tchaikovsky's** disastrous marriage to Antonina Milyukova in July of the previous year. As a homosexual Tchaikovsky had unsurprisingly felt claustrophobic in her company; within three weeks of their wedding they were living apart and it was a further six weeks before Tchaikovsky could bear to see her once more. Friends and colleagues at the Moscow Conservatoire were unable to help; his family, with the exception of his sister Sasha and his twin brothers Anatoly and Modest were largely kept in the dark. In despair, Tchaikovsky attempted suicide by jumping into the frozen Moskva river, hoping to drown or catch pneumonia. However his constitution was hardier than he supposed, for he barely caught a chill.

Tchaikovsky then contacted Anatoly in St Petersburg, begging him to

fabricate an excuse to leave Moscow. His brother obliged and Tchaikovsky caught the first available train north. Anatoly was shocked by Piotr's appearance and hurriedly called for a psychiatrist when his brother broke down at the station. The psychiatrist recommended that Tchaikovsky should not return to his wife and the brothers left Russia soon afterwards on an extended visit to Europe (Anatoly, together with Nikolai Rubinstein, having indicated to Antonina that her husband would not be considering a reconciliation). Piotr and Anatoly arrived at Clarens on the shore of Lake Geneva in mid October 1877 where they gave various friends and relatives different versions of the events surrounding Tchaikovsky's marriage.

During that year Tchaikovsky had begun his almost daily correspondence with another female admirer, the wealthy widow Nadezhda van Meck. She commissioned a number of works from him and even gave him a monthly allowance, enabling him to live in some comfort whilst completing his Fourth Symphony and Yevgeny Onegin. From Switzerland, Tchaikovsky and Anatoly moved on via Paris to Italy where they were joined by Modest. Tchaikovsky was showing signs of being more settled but was unable to enjoy Rome (too noisy) and Florence. Venice, apart from the stench from canals, was more to his liking. His travels then took him to San Remo where he completed Onegin. In March, having visited Florence once more and also Pisa, he returned to Clarens where on 13 March he began work on his Piano Sonata.

Tchaikovsky was however unable to work at this piece for more than a few days. Kotek, a violinist friend currently studying with the great Joachim in Berlin, had just arrived with a substantial amount of new violin music including Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* and this was enough to divert Tchaikovsky from work. He wrote to Anatoly 'I neither know, nor can I understand why, despite such favourable circumstances, I am not disposed to work. Am I played out? I have to squeeze out of myself weak and worthless ideas, and ponder every bar. But I shall achieve my goal, and I hope that inspiration will dawn upon me'. Taking advantage of Kotek's presence, Tchaikovsky put aside the Piano Sonata and composed instead his Violin Concerto. The concerto was quickly completed, and dissatisfied with the slow movement, Tchaikovsky composed a new one in a day (the original one became *Meditation from Souvenir d'un lieu cher*) and on 11 April 1878 the orchestration of the concerto was finished.

Although Tchaikovsky had been happy enough whilst in the company of Koteck, he grew understandably apprehensive at the impending return to Russia. Koteck had had to return to Berlin; Modest, who had been hoping to adopt a deaf-mute boy, had to travel to Lyon in order to have the boy assessed; Tchaikovsky therefore unwillingly made plans for departure. Having been rejoined by Modest and the boy Kolya, the return trip was begun on 17 April. The three arrived at Kamenka on 23 April and were welcomed warmly by Sasha. In an attempt to put Piotr at his ease, Sasha gave him space and privacy in the form of a cottage on the estate, some distance from the main house. The pleasant aspect from the cottage window and the arrival of a piano enabled Tchaikovsky to return to the previously abandoned Piano Sonata. But first he had to plan his strategy re his ex-wife, and was overjoyed when Anatoly arrived from St Petersburg soon after his own arrival. Tchaikovsky finally finished sketching the 'Grand' Piano Sonata within three weeks, and completed the Twelve Pieces Op. 40, also begun at Clarens. The following day (13 May) he began work on the Twenty Four Pieces for Children Op.39. By 16 May all 24 pieces had been sketched. Having completed these short works, Tchaikovsky, between the end of June and August 1878 put the finishing touches to the Piano Sonata and this work received its first performance under Nikolay Rubinstein on 2 November 1879 in Moscow. Tchaikovsky was unable to attend the critically acclaimed premiere of the Sonata but heard Rubinstein play the piece one week later in private.

It is interesting to read of Tchaikovsky's own view of the Sonata for in his correspondence with Mme von Meck he referred to it as 'somewhat dry and complicated'. Certainly it is very different from the almost contemporaneous Violin Concerto which is one of his most melodic, free-flowing and expressive works, with some commentators finding it dull by comparison. Although clearly more at home composing for the voice or orchestra, Tchaikovsky certainly tests the abilities of the finest performers in the climaxes during the outer movements of this work (Richter, famously). If the primary subject of the opening movement is perhaps not as memorable, then this is more than offset by the contrasting second subject. Similarly the animated middle section offers an unexpectedly beguiling contrast to the deceptively simple opening subject of the second movement. The brief scherzo movement demands the highest manual dexterity whereas the final movement at times strips down the theme and its accompaniment to the barest essentials. It is noticeable that in this movement Tchaikovsky is less

inclined to overcrowd the score with detail.

If the Piano Sonata has been somewhat harshly criticised over the years, then the Twenty Four Pieces for Children remain well received. Although often set by examiners, these short works are charming, often humorous and rewarding to play. There is much that is surprisingly familiar about these pieces: those familiar with Glinka's Kamarinskaya (itself based upon folk-material) will recognise the theme in Chanson populaire and the Neapolitan Dance from Swan Lake is recalled in Chanson Napolitaine. A French song, used later in his opera The Maid of Orleans, is quoted in Mélodie antique française and two tunes heard that year in Italy provide the inspiration for Chanson italienne and L'orgue de barbarie. Tchaikovsky's love and understanding of the ways of children is there for all to see in the many wonderful sketches portrayed in these delightful works; from children's games and toys (both merry and sad ranging from the wooden soldiers to the illness and funeral of the doll) to the grown-ups in the childish world (the mother, the nurse with her frightening bedtime story or the estate worker struggling to master the accordion) - all are presented with a vividness that is delightfully unsophisticated.

NOTES ON THE ARTISTS

Mikhail Pletnev (born 1957) has achieved a reputation of being both a fine pianist and an equally brilliant conductor. He won the Gold Medal at the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in 1978, overcoming all competition with disarming ease. His subsequent keyboard recordings, many of which are of hugely complicated reductions of orchestral scores, have left critics and record-buyers breathless with delight. In 1990 he founded the Russian National Orchestra, the first privately sponsored Russian orchestra in recent times, and since 2003 he has been their Artistic Director, recording prolifically and touring with the orchestra on many occasions throughout Europe, America and Asia. His repertoire as conductor extends from Haydn to contemporary composers and his interpretations of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov have received particular acclaim. His compositions include works for symphony orchestra and chamber groups.

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