

Opening Night – Strings in Motion

An American Composer's Perspective on Lifshitz, Vivaldi, Piazzolla & Tchaikovsky

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For tonight's opening night concert, Maestro Héctor Guzmán has chosen an international musical feast, starting with a world premiere by Mexican composer Marcos Lifshitz and continuing with two concertos for the unusual instrumentation of string quartet and orchestra. The quartet concertos are arrangements of works by Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi and Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla. The evening ends with Russian composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky's blazing Symphony No. Four in F Minor.

I.

Mexican composer Marcos Lifshitz (born 1951) is the newly appointed Composer in Residence with the Plano Symphony Orchestra. He began his musical studies as a classical guitarist at the National Conservatory of Music in Mexico, where he was a founding member of the Philharmonic Concert Society and Intermedia Cultural. He has served as Composer in Residence with the Acapulco Philharmonic, and he has composed many chamber and orchestral works, including concertos and symphonic poems. Also active in the field of commercial music, he has written over 50 popular songs, numerous scores for television and film and hundreds of jingles and arrangements.

About tonight's *Plano Overture*, Maestro Guzmán offers the following commentary, "The PSO is continuing its unique commitment to new music and composers. Lifshitz's brief and festive work expresses the character and vitality of the city of Plano in musical terms. It opens with a dramatic fanfare followed by three contrasting episodes. The first section points to the optimism and vitality of the city. The second section moves to a more pensive atmosphere, perhaps as a remembrance of the challenging times every city faces in its history. The work concludes with a joyful finale that looks ahead to a bright and hopeful future. Lifshitz's orchestration, for full symphony orchestra, features soothing passages for the woodwinds and strings with powerful brass and percussion."

II

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) was one of the finest Italian composers of the Baroque era. In his time, he was internationally known as a composer of operas, but today, he is best remembered for the many string concertos he wrote as Director of Music at the Church of Santa Maria della Pietà in Venice. Attached to the church was an orphanage for

foundling girls, and Vivaldi's duties included musical instruction for the resident students. Vivaldi built an excellent orchestra which attracted audiences from all over Europe. Part of the allure was a large screen which was put up in front of the performers to shield them from public view. The church fathers believed that the sight of so many lovely young girls in the physical act of making music would be too provocative for the audience. In 1740, under mysterious circumstances, Vivaldi suddenly left Venice and his girls. He made his way to Vienna, but his career never regained its former glory, and he died in poverty the following year. The young Franz Joseph Haydn sang as a choirboy at his funeral.

Even though Vivaldi's *Le Quattro Stagioni* (The Four Seasons) is his "hit tune," Vivaldi's earlier Opus 3, (*L'estro armónico* or Harmonious Inspiration) helped establish his international reputation. He originally scored the eleventh concerto of the series, the Concerto grosso in D minor RV 565, for a combination of solos for two solo violins and a solo cello interacting with the larger ensemble of string orchestra and harpsichord continuo. Tonight's performance is of an arrangement in which the solo parts are redistributed among the members of a string quartet. Vivaldi cast his work in the customary three movements: fast (with a slow interlude), slow (a lilting *siciliano* in 6/8 meter) and fast. The young (26-year-old) Bach obtained access to these concertos, and he was so impressed that he copied them by hand and made organ arrangements of six of them, including this one. Of special interest are a few spots where Bach was tempted to add some richer, German-style contrapuntal filigree to Vivaldi's simpler voice leading.

III.

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) was born in Buenos Aires but grew up in New York City. His first composition teacher was his fellow Argentine Alberto Ginastera. His first pieces were inspired by his teacher and other symphonic composers of his day such as Ravel, Bartók and Stravinsky. In 1954, he travelled to Paris to study with the great pedagogue of the 20th century, Nadia Boulanger. Piazzolla told her that he wanted to write elegant, "respectable" European symphonies. "But why?" asked Boulanger, "Anyone can write symphonies, but only *you* can write *your* music, and *your* music is the tango." Inspired by her encouragement, Piazzolla returned to Argentina and formed his own *Quinteto Nuevo Tango* featuring a violin, electric guitar, piano and double bass, which he led from the bandoneón. His career quickly developed, mostly with film music, and, in *María de Buenos Aires*, his range even extended to the genre of opera.

It is important to remember that the tango was not created for the concert stage. The dance originated as a variation of the Cuban *habanera*, and it was first performed in the brothels of Argentina. The tempo, in 4/4 meter, is deliberate and driving. The dancers wrap themselves around each other and prowl forward together, as the music suggests

a pelvic lunge at the end of each bar (one, two, three, four AND one). The tango, thus, became infamous as a symbol of sensuality. The fifth-century St. Augustine had confessed that, since he enjoyed the sensuous beauty of the sound of Gregorian chant more than the divine message of the texts, then music itself must be a sin. In 1912, Pope Pius X pronounced the tango a sin, to be confessed in the sacrament of penance. In 1914, the state of Massachusetts declared the dance to be a misdemeanor, punishable by fine or imprisonment. By contrast, a hundred years later, the Argentine Pope Francis I blessed the thousands of tango dancers who had filled St. Peter's Square to honor him on his birthday.

One of Piazzolla's best-known works is his *Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas* (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires). Unlike Vivaldi, Piazzolla wrote his four seasons as four separate pieces which he and his quintet performed separately more often than as a set. Also, his order -- (Otoño (Autumn), Invierno (Winter), Primavera (Spring) and Verano (Summer) -- is different from Vivaldi's: La primavera (Spring), L'estate (Summer), L'autunno (Autumn) and L'inverno (Winter). The Vivaldi and Piazzolla are often performed together to create a vivid contrast between the seasons in the Northern vs. the Southern Hemispheres. As with tonight's Vivaldi, we hear Piazzolla's work in a special arrangement for string quartet and orchestra.

IV.

Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky (1804-1893) was the leading Russian composer of his time, and, along with Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), he was one of Russia's two greatest composers of any time. In Russian, his name is pronounced "Chee-KOV-ski." Tchaikovsky brought his music to the United States when he was commissioned to compose and conduct a Festival Coronation March for the opening of Carnegie Hall in 1891. The concert also included the famous *1812 Overture*. Stravinsky wrote that, as a child, he was thrilled to have caught a glimpse of Tchaikovsky at a concert. Stravinsky also said he was "impatient with music that does not sing or dance." Tchaikovsky's music always does both. Few composers have achieved equal success with both symphonies and operas. Tchaikovsky's chamber works, overtures and particularly his ballets, such as *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, are known and loved throughout the musical world.

Looking back from the present to Tchaikovsky and his 19th-century Russian contemporaries, we find two types of composers: nationalists ("vodka composers") and internationalists ("champagne composers"). The vodka composers, the famous "Russian Five" --- Mily Balakirev, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin --- primarily strove to celebrate the Russian tradition, often incorporating folk themes and basing their works on Russian history and legends. In their lifetimes, their music was played primarily in their homeland. On the other hand, champagne composers, such as Tchaikovsky and, later, Sergei Rachmaninoff, followed European, predominantly German, symphonic models. While their music

took occasional sips of vodka, it also had an international flavor. Their careers extended far beyond Russia to Europe and the United States, and their music continues to be more widely performed than that of their more nationalistic contemporaries.

Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony in F Minor, Op. 36, is pure champagne, in the European, mostly Brahmsian, tradition, with just a touch of vodka in the form of a Russian folk tune, "In the Field Stood a Birch Tree," in the last movement. The 36-year-old Tchaikovsky had reached his full powers as a composer, and he dedicated the symphony to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, who was later to be the patron of Claude Debussy. In a letter to Mme. von Meck, Tchaikovsky provided his personal insights into the four movements of his work, paraphrased as follows:

"The introduction is the *seed* of the whole symphony: *Fate*, that fateful force that can never be overcome – merely endured. The bleak and hopeless feelings grow stronger and intense. Then, out of nowhere, a sweet and gentle day-dream appears. Some blissful, radiant human image hurries by and beckons us away. Everything gloomy and joyless is forgotten. But no, these were only daydreams, and *Fate* awakens us. Life is, thus, an unbroken alternation of harsh reality with fleeting dreams and visions of happiness.

"The second movement expresses another aspect of sadness: that melancholy feeling which comes in the evening when, weary from one's toil, one sits alone with a book – but it falls from the hand. There is a whole host of memories: happy moments when the young blood boiled, and life was satisfying; there are also painful memories, irreconcilable losses. All this is now somewhere far distant. It is both sad, yet somehow sweet to be immersed in the past.

"In the third movement, there are whimsical arabesques, vague images which can sweep past the imagination after drinking a little wine. The spirit is neither cheerful, nor sad. Amid these memories there suddenly comes a picture of drunken peasants and a street song. Then, somewhere in the distance, a military procession passes. These are images which sweep through the head as one falls asleep. They have nothing in common with reality; they are strange, wild, and incoherent.

"The fourth movement. If within yourself you find no reasons for joy, look at others. Go out among the people. See how they can enjoy themselves, surrendering themselves wholeheartedly to joyful feelings. Picture the festive merriment of ordinary people. Hardly have you managed to forget yourself and to be carried away by the spectacle of the joys of others, than irrepressible *fate* appears again and reminds you of yourself. But others do not care about you, and they have not noticed that you are solitary and sad. O, how they are enjoying themselves! How happy they are that all their feelings are simple and straightforward. Reproach yourself, and do not say that everything in this world is sad. Joy is a simple, but powerful force. Rejoice in the rejoicing of others. To live is still possible."

Tchaikovsky was pleased with his work, saying, "It seems to me that this is my best work...What lies in store for this symphony? Will it survive long after its author has disappeared from the face of the earth, or straight away plunge into the depths of oblivion? I only know that at this moment I... am blind to any shortcomings in my new offspring. Yet I am sure that, as regards texture and form, it represents a step forward in my development..." Tchaikovsky was, of course, correct, and his Fourth Symphony remains one of most often-performed and best-loved works in the symphonic literature.

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