In the early winter of 1877, 37-year old Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was found neck-deep in the icy water of the River Neva, trying to commit suicide by freezing himself to death. Just months earlier, Tchaikovsky had married Antonina Milyukova but, in truth, the marriage was doomed before it began.

Letters to his younger brother Modest in late 1876 and early 1877 revealed Tchaikovsky’s ambivalent feelings on the subject of his sexuality and marriage. The letters referenced three recent homosexual encounters and a growing passionate love for Iosif Kotek, his student from the Moscow Conservatory. Writing of his deep love for Kotek, Tchaikovsky described his emotional pull to Iosif as an “unimaginable force”:

“My only need is for him to know that I love him endlessly... It is impossible for me to hide my feelings for him, although I tried hard to do so at first. Yesterday I made a total confession of love, begging him not to be angry...”

By the Spring of 1877, Tchaikovsky’s intense infatuation with Kotek had cooled, but they remained devotedly close friends. At the same time, he suddenly received a series of letters from Antonina Milyukova, a former conservatory student, confessing her great love for him. Faced with social pressures to repress his homosexuality, Tchaikovsky agreed to the marriage. Within weeks it was apparent that he had made a grave mistake. Emotionally devastated by the impulsive marriage, Tchaikovsky made an unsuccessful suicide attempt in the icy river and fled Moscow.

In early 1878, Tchaikovsky was with Kotek in Switzerland, recovering from his emotional breakdown. At Kotek’s urging, Tchaikovsky began composing the Violin Concerto, and quickly became so carried away that he abandoned work on his Grand Sonata, which was already in progress. Kotek assisted Tchaikovsky, playing portions to iron out details while offering his own ideas on the composition. Tchaikovsky’s brother, Modest, also suggested changes.

Working feverishly, the concerto was written in only 11 days. The score was completed in April of 1878 and, while Kotek played a large role in creating the piece, Tchaikovsky declined to dedicate the work to him, concerned that it would only fuel rumors about his relationship with Iosif. Instead, Tchaikovsky instructed his publisher Jürgenson to dedicate the composition to violinist Leopold Auer, hoping the dedication would encourage Auer to premiere the work.
The first performance of the piece, scheduled in March of 1879 at the Russian Musical Society in Saint Petersburg, had to be cancelled. Auer refused to play the piece, declaring it “too difficult.” The concerto quickly gained a reputation as unplayable and no one could be found to perform it.

The first musician to play the concerto in front of an audience was violinist and conductor Leopold Damrosch, whose 1879 concert in New York was performed with piano accompaniment only, and thus could not be considered a premiere. The official premiere did not occur until three years after the work was composed; on December 4, 1881, Russian violinist Adolf Brodsky performed the piece with the Vienna Philharmonic. Although pressured to make cuts and changes, Brodsky insisted on playing the piece as written.

Tchaikovsky did not learn of the premiere until it was over; he happened to read a devastating review of the performance in a Vienna newspaper by music critic Eduard Hanslick:

“The violin is no longer played, but torn apart, pounded black and blue... Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto brings us face to face for the first time with the revolting thought: may there... exist musical compositions that we can hear stink?”

Upset by the review, Tchaikovsky re-read it so often that he memorized it! But grateful to Brodsky for having undertaken to perform the piece, he rededicated the concerto to Adolf Brodsky, a dedication that appears on scores published today.

Despite his initial refusal to perform the concerto, Auer's interest peaked after the premiere. But he was still unable to overcome the difficulties he encountered when he first tried it; in January of 1893, Auer performed the concerto in St. Petersburg, using his own cuts, alterations and revisions, all without permission from the composer.

Tchaikovsky authorized only one version of the concerto and most editions are published as Tchaikovsky intended. The virtuoso skills of today's musicians are impressive: the original “unplayable” concerto is the version that is routinely performed by artists.

We eagerly invite you to the HSO's performance of Russian Masters, March 10 – 13, 2016, to hear guest artist Simone Porter perform Tchaikovsky's only Violin Concerto, known for its challenging pyrotechnics. Despite its dramatic origins, it remains one of the best-loved pieces in the violin repertoire.
Masterworks #6:
Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto in D Major: An emotional drama that gave birth to a masterpiece.

Curious about what you will be hearing on the concert program, or want to hear more? Coleman Casey, HSO’s dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Happily, both Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony and his Symphony No. 5 appear together on a classic and still the greatest recording of this combination by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. (DG)

It’s hard to find a poor recording of Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto, as every great violinist and orchestra have recorded it, but a personal favorite is with Vadim Repin and Valery Gergiev conducting the Kirov Orchestra (PHILIPS), an all-Russian production in excellent sound.

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Leslie Kearney, Tchaikovsky and His World
Letter to Modest Tchaikovsky, 31 January 1887
Alexander Poznany, Tchaikovsky. The quest for the inner man (1991); Project: Tchaikovsky Research (website)
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David Nelson, “Tchaikovsky, Violin Concerto”, In Mozart’s Footsteps
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