

Prelude

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MASTERWORKS #3:

TCHAIKOVSKY'S FIRSTS • NOVEMBER 30-DECEMBER 2, 2018

Tchaikovsky was the first non-American composer whose music became identified with July Fourth celebrations. Can you name the piece?



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

The music of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, from boundlessly energetic to breathtakingly tragic, expresses an expansive range of musical styles and emotions. From his booming 1812 Overture, to delicate ballets such as *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*, Tchaikovsky's diverse repertoire earned him a reputation as one of the most popular – and most recognized – of all classical composers.

Tchaikovsky was born on May 7th, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia.ⁱ An orchestrinaⁱⁱ kept in the family home sparked young Tchaikovsky's interest in music.ⁱⁱⁱ Tchaikovsky composed his first song at just four years of age and soon began piano lessons.^{iv} However, despite his early and obvious musical talents, his parents tried to steer him in the direction of civil service.^v In his final years at boarding school, Tchaikovsky's father finally recognized his son's musical potential and engaged a professional pianist, Rudolph Kudingger, to teach him.^{vi} Later, Tchaikovsky was taught by Luigi Piccioli, an Italian singing instructor, who was among the first to recognize Tchaikovsky's innate musical talents.^{vii}

When the St. Petersburg Conservatory opened its doors, Tchaikovsky was among its first students.^{viii} Upon his graduation in December 1865, Tchaikovsky accepted a position to teach music theory at the Russian Musical Society, later renamed the Moscow Conservatory. Within

his first year of teaching, he produced his first symphony, *Symphony No. 1 in G Minor* (1866).^{ix} While Tchaikovsky went on to compose additional works, including the overture for *Romeo and Juliet*, a string quartet, several operas and another symphony, his early works failed to convince critics of his talent. Tchaikovsky shifted his attentions to larger orchestral works, which ultimately established his reputation as a composer.^x However, it was not until he composed the 1812 Overture that Tchaikovsky's international career really took off.

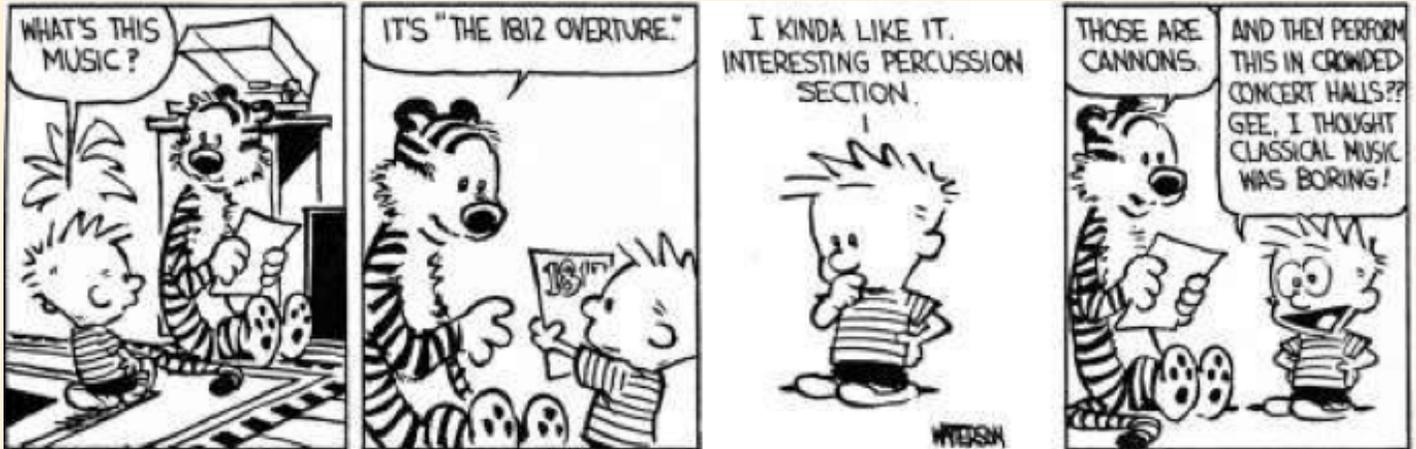


Tchaikovsky's Signature

At the suggestion of a friend, Nikolai Rubenstein, Tchaikovsky composed the 1812 Overture in 1880 with the idea that the piece might be performed at several important upcoming events in Russia.^{xi} Such events included the grand opening of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, the 25th anniversary of Alexander II's coronation, and the Moscow Arts and Industry Exhibition in 1882.^{xii} Tchaikovsky composed the piece over a period of six weeks, and, inspired by the shattering impact of the French invasion of his country in 1812, he sought to capture feelings of Russian nationalism.^{xiii} The overture specifically commemorates the Battle of Borodino, one of the bloodiest battles of the Napoleonic Wars, in which 70,000 troops perished as the French bombarded the Russians in a village west of Moscow.^{xiv}

continued on next page...





While the French gained the upper hand early in the battle, the French army eventually succumbed to the severe Russian winter. As food ran out, France's surrender became inevitable.^{xv}

Despite the overwhelming success of the *1812 Overture*, Tchaikovsky openly hated the piece.^{xvi} In his own words, he saw the work as "very loud and noisy and completely without artistic merit, obviously written without warmth or love."^{xvii}

Despite the composer's sentiments, of all Tchaikovsky's works, the *1812 Overture* might well be his most well-known, and in the mid-20th century, it began to be used commercially in the United States. Quaker Oats first used the music in a commercial for Puffed Rice cereal. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn1YIKiZk#action=share>

In 1971, Woody Allen used the music in his film "Bananas" as the soundtrack for a fantasy love scene.^{xviii} Then, on July 4, 1974, history was made when the Boston Pops began a tradition that has continued to this day.^{xix} Challenged by declining audience numbers at Boston Pops performances, conductor Arthur Fiedler decided to choreograph fireworks, cannons, and a steeple choir to accompany the orchestra's performance.^{xx} The performance was a roaring success. Soon after, orchestras all over the country followed suit, and the piece rocketed to fame.^{xxi}

The *1812 Overture* became part of the mainstream media. Beyond the original 1962 Quaker Oats commercial, the *1812 Overture* can be heard on the soundtracks of "The Muppet Show" and "The Simpsons."^{xxii} It is used in the opening and closing scenes

of the movie *V for Vendetta* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9gYhnUKehU>) and in a commercial for Subway restaurants. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsZFsZw5jtU>

Tchaikovsky's piece has stood the test of time, and its recurring role on America's July 4th playlist continues to inspire us year after year.



Tchaikovsky's Grave

Tchaikovsky never heard the piece as he had originally intended, but it was he who envisioned the work being performed with live cannon fire and ringing cathedral bells.^{xxiii} In 1880, however, it would have been next to impossible to coordinate the firing of cannons with precise cues in the score. It became more practical for orchestras to substitute timpani.

Join us!

Please join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra for **Tchaikovsky's Firsts, November 30 - December 2nd, 2018**. Our Masterworks presentation includes Tchaikovsky's **first** piano concerto and his **first** symphony. Tchaikovsky is credited with another (albeit different) type of first: he is the **first** non-American composer whose music is routinely played as part of a traditional July 4th celebration throughout the country.



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC WILL SOUND?

Try HSO'S Listening Guide, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Enjoy this vibrant and energetic video of the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Claudio Abbado, performing Tchaikovsky's *Polonaise* from the opera *Eugene Onegin*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwZF0JIRFqA>

We think you'll enjoy a 1975 performance by Martha Argerich playing the Piano Concerto No. 1 with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande under the direction of Charles Dutoit:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItSJ_woWnmk

Hear a beautiful recording of Symphony No. 1 by the Berlin Philharmonic, under the direction of Herbert von Karajan:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXaVZsOKdmc>

We would be remiss if we failed to include a performance of the *1812 Overture* by the Boston Pops, complete with Howitzer Canons!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2G2TBhSnwE>

The *1812 Overture* as a flash mob? Yes indeed! Check it out:

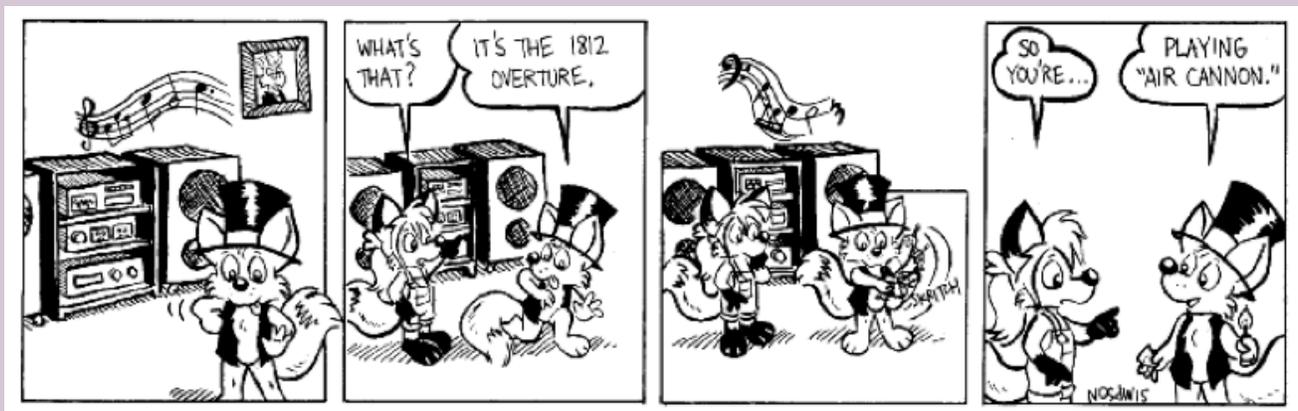
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NJRCCgK_AM



Tchaikovsky

And for the children of all ages:

Disney's *Fantasia 2000*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb7BagMMiMA>



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Casey's
Classics

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

Tchaikovsky's tuneful *Polonaise* from his opera *Eugene Onegin* is sumptuously performed by Herbert von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (DG). Karajan had a life-long affection for this composer's music and was able to elevate many works to the highest level of perfection by his astute and intuitive understanding of the music.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 is one of the staples of the concert hall, and no one has captured its bravura and beauty more than Martha Argerich. She has recorded this work several times, and the different versions are wonderfully satisfying, although my favorite continues to be her first with Charles Dutoit and the Royal Philharmonic (DG).

How delightful to hear Tchaikovsky's balletic and tuneful Symphony No. 1 in the concert hall, where it is not given enough opportunities to shine. Happily, there are many available recordings, but Mariss Jansons and the Oslo Philharmonic give a very special reading captured in state-of-the-art digital sound (CHANDOS).



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- ii. A mechanical musical instrument, designed to imitate the sounds of the orchestra.
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