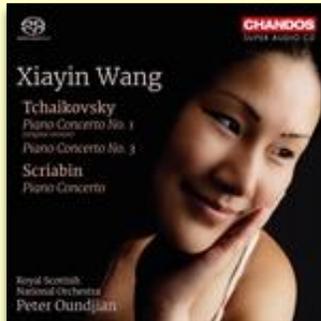


Phil's Classical Reviews

Atlanta Audio Club

Music from the Russia We Love

December, 2018



Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 1
+ Scriabin: Piano Concerto - Xiayin Wang; Peter Oundjian, Royal Scottish National Orchestra (Chandos SACD)

China-born pianist Xiayin Wang completed her studies at the Shanghai Conservatory before moving to new York in 1997, where she received Bachelor's, Master's, and Professional Studies degrees from the Manhattan School of Music. She has concertized widely throughout the Americas, Europe, and her native China. Everywhere, she is much in demand for her sweeping virtuosity that makes the most difficult passages of music seem deceptively easy.

She reveals these qualities in the present program, beginning with the ever-popular Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Opus 23 by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. This is a little different from the concerto we are used to hearing, as Wang uses the original version that Tchaikovsky wrote before he revised the work discretely after suggestions made (none too tactfully, as it turns out) by Nicholas Rubinstein. The main difference occurs in that famous overpowering introduction to the opening movement, which dies away after the first three minutes and is never heard from again. The original version uses arpeggiated piano chords instead of the thicker chords we are familiar with from the revision. Other differences between the two versions are mostly discernible to music scholars (so let



Tchaikovsky: Symphonies No. 2, "Little Russian" & 3, "Polish" Vladimir Jurowski, London Philharmonic (LPO)

Moscow native Vladimir Jurowski last year celebrated his tenth anniversary as principal conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. He shows us why he is held in such high esteem, at the LPO and elsewhere, in live 2016 recordings made at the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall, London. His timing is right on the money in accounts of Tchaikovsky's Second and Third Symphonies, and he handles the numerous repetitions in both scores in such a way that they build in interest and excitement the way the composer desired, rather than merely proving tedious.

The repetitions in both scores derive from the fact that Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was a typical Russian of his day in his penchant for continuously stirring up existing themes and throwing in new ones for variety, rather than developing his themes in the way the German composers did. The problem is that a Russian symphony of that era can end up seeming like a series of colorful tableaux rather than a well-developed and consistently unified whole. Something of this drawback exists in both the Second and Third Symphonies, in which Tchaikovsky was still learning his craft as a composer, alongside a wealth of melody that would have lasted most composers a whole lifetime.



Stravinsky: Firebird and Rite of Spring – Mariss Jansons, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (BR-Klassik)

Mariss Jansons, who has been chief director of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (*Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks*) since 2003, leads the world-class ensemble in thrilling and gorgeous-sounding performances of Igor Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* (Rite of Spring to you!) and the 1945 suite to *L'oiseau de feu* (The Firebird). Jansons' precise cueing and his firm grasp of Stravinsky's pervasive and often very tricky rhythms serve the music well. With the opulent sound he receives from the orchestra, and in particular, the flutes, reeds, harps, and brass, this pairing of Stravinsky ballets is one you will want to make room for in your listening library.

We all know about the *succès de scandale*, bordering on a riot, that Rite of Spring provoked on the occasion of its Paris premiere May 29, 1913. More than a hundred years later, many of the things Stravinsky did in this score can still startle the unwary listener. There is the absolute dominance of rhythm over melody (which is virtually non-existent) as the driving force in the music. Irregularly-placed accents and frequent chages of metre have historically made it a very difficult work to choreograph.

Stravinsky first conceived of Rite of Spring after experiencing a vision of

<p>them have their fun!)</p> <p>Wang's performance with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Canadian conductor Peter Oundjian is distinguished by its clean lines and a clarity of purpose that is always present whether the piano is interacting with the full orchestra in the most tempestuous passages in the opening movement, or with individual instruments, as it does in the <i>Andantino semplice</i>, where its discourses with flute, oboe, and cello add to the relaxed, open-air flavor of the movement. The finale, with its dancelike character, jittery rhythms and robust octaves in the piano part, tosses around a lively dance theme and a lyrical melody, both thought to have been of folk origin, in the process of building to a thrilling conclusion.</p> <p>Piano Concerto No. 3 in E-flat major, Opus 75, is a somewhat thornier proposition, as Tchaikovsky completed only the opening movement. He confided drafts of the subsequent movements to Sergei Taneyev shortly before his demise. The latter scored them and had them published as Tchaikovsky's <i>Andante</i> and <i>Finale</i>, Opus 79.</p> <p>The result has never been widely accepted as a viable completion, and the Third Concerto is usually performed, as it is here, in just the single movement. It has a big opening theme and a challenging cadenza. While neither is quite up to the level of those in the First Concerto, there is an undeniable excitement generated by the edgy alternation of two lyrical themes with a rousing folk dance, the <i>Hopak</i>. With no fewer than twenty tempo/expressive markings in its 15-minute duration, it calls for a lot of virtuosity from the performer, to say nothing of frequent re-positionings. In the end, both artist and listeners may be left limp with exhaustion.</p> <p>The program concludes with a splendid performance of Alexander Scriabin's Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor, Opus 20. This very attractive work of pleasing classical proportions has been surprisingly slow in gaining popularity, possibly</p>	<p>That is certainly the case in Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 17, known as the "Little Russian" from the fact that Tchaikovsky lifted three actual melodies from the Ukraine (then called "Little Russia"), to insert in this work. The fact that he also included two folk-like melodies of his own that are indistinguishable from the authentic folk melodies to the uninitiated is a measure of how well he absorbed the folk ethos.</p> <p>From the very opening when a full orchestral chord gives way to a quiet horn solo intoning a soulful theme, we are in the presence of a great master of ballet and opera transferring his magic to the medium of the symphony. The music builds to a powerfully dramatic climax, and then the movement ends on a dying melody in the bassoon, a typical Tchaikovsky touch. Instead of the usual slow movement, we are given a sweetly innocent march, at its heart a clarinet solo accompanied by a pair of flutes.</p> <p>Next we have a nimble scherzo with a quicksilver trio recalling the world of the ballet. The finale, a rousing set of variations on a Ukrainian folk song "The Cranes" is handled in the present instance with the greatest rhythmic exuberance, daring and propulsiveness, giving full play to its dazzling display of orchestral color.</p> <p>Interestingly, Symphony No. 3 in D major, Op. 29 is known as "the Polish" solely for the reason that the finale, marked <i>Tempo di polacca</i>, is largely based on the rhythm of the Polish dance, but otherwise the nickname has nothing to do with it. It is unusual in having five movements recalling the formal design of Shumann's "Rhenish" Symphony. For that reason, as well as the inclusion of a lilting waltz marked <i>Alla tedesca</i> (in the German style) as an extra movement, it might with justice be termed Tchaikovsky's "German" symphony.</p> <p>The other thing we notice about this symphony is that the feelings we get from the movements do not always correspond to their markings. The opening movement, marked <i>Tempo di marcia funebre</i>, gives way to</p>	<p>a pagan ceremony in prehistoric Russia, "old wise men sitting in a circle, watching the death dance of a young maiden who was going to be sacrificed to appease the god of spring." Having said that, I must add that Stravinsky's music is not point-for-point descriptive in terms of the musical depiction of action, but it isn't abstract, either. Rather, there are vague, pervasive moods of violence, anxiety, and fear, similar to the composer's memories of the sudden onset of Spring in Russia, which "seemed to have been born in a single hour." Other commentators have recalled the sudden breaking of the ice in the Moscow River, making sharp sounds like gunshots.</p> <p>With all its non-pictorial elements and startling dynamic changes, sharply edged accents and ostinato sequences, this score requires the attention to nuance and detail that Jansons is capable of giving it. As Stravinsky recalled later, "I tried to portray . . . holy terror at the midday sun, a kind of scream of Pan." Jansons captures this element very well, as he also does the uneasy tensions underneath "Mysterious Circles of the Young Maidens" and the fear and panic that underlie "The Glorification of the Chosen One." The big percussive beats that herald the transition between these two numbers are absolutely stunning in the present recording.</p> <p>The Firebird was premiered by the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1909. The version we have here is the 1945 suite for a medium-sized orchestra which is distinguished for its well-defined movement and colour. It was based on material from Russian folklore, and has the typical theme of an innocent, unsuspecting hero, Prince Ivan Tsarevitch, triumphing over the principle of evil, repressed by the vile sorcerer Kaschchei. Against so powerful an enemy, Ivan needs help. He finds it in the person of a fabulous creature, the Firebird, part woman and part bird, who gives him one of her golden feathers as a token of faith.</p> <p>The demanding role of the Firebird is always danced by the prima ballerina. Interestingly, it is she with</p>
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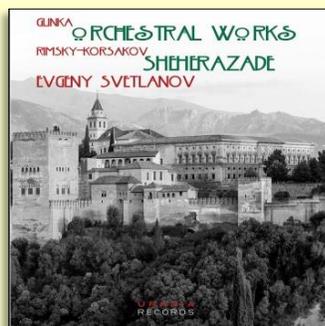
because of the composer's later reputation for explorations of weird tonalities in the interest of ever-more expressive harmonies.

Have no fear: this early work won't bite you! The present performance by Wang, Oundjian and the RSNO stresses the clarity of its outer movements and its sweeping *scherzando* phrasing for the soloist in the opening movement. The captivating innocence of the melody in the slow movement, which glitters with the brilliance of a diamond, leaves a lasting impression. The well-defined clarity of Multichannel SACD mastering serves this particular performance very well.

cheery spirits and an exhilarating momentum soon after its solemn introduction, and the central movement, *Andante elegiaco*, is likewise more gently balletic than it is funereal.

The fourth movement is the true Scherzo, characterized by washes of brilliant orchestral color. The finale, in which the composer unwisely inserted a fugue in the center of the proceedings in an attempt to give it some academic stature, benefits from Jurowski's superb pacing in the present performance, so that it does not overstay its welcome.

whom Prince Ivan dances the *pas de deux* (ballet's equivalent of a love duet), and not the most beautiful of the princesses that Ivan frees from their captivity by Kaschchei. All the principals are well characterized by the music: folklike diatonic tones for Ivan, music of wonderful iridescent beauty for the Firebird, dissonant chromaticism and aggressively disjunctive rhythms for Kaschchei and his demonic horde. Under Jansons' baton, the Bavarian RSO is well equipped to render all this incredibly opulent beauty, and more, making the present album a ideal companion for their earlier account of *Petrushka* (see *Phil's Classical Reviews*, February 2016).



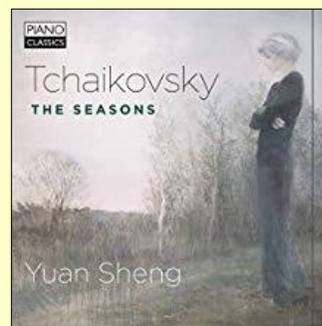
Glinka: Symphonic Works + Rimsky-Korsakov: Shéhérazade – Evgeny Svetlanov (Urania)

I remember Evgeny Svetlanov from late in the LP era when I heard him frequently on recordings Angel Records had licensed from the Russian state label Melodiya. At that time, it was touted as a slight thawing in cold war Russian-American relations. Svetlanov was then at the podium of the USSR Symphony Orchestra, which had been specially created for him.

These performances of symphonic masterworks by Mikhail Glinka and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov reveal Svetlanov's finest qualities as a conductor, his love of bold orchestral color, movement, and contrast, and his flawless sense of timing, qualities that will always win over audiences anywhere in the world.

This 2-CD slimline package divides the program of Glinka favorites and Rimsky-Korsakov's Sheherazade into separate CD's, a decision that provides the listener with a break to allow the distinctive styles of two great composers to make their desired impact in an optimal way.

Glinka (1804-1857) is still revered by Russians as their first great composer. We have six orchestral works by this composer on CD1, revealing the ways in which he engages us and keeps our interest in the unfolding of



Tchaikovsky: The Seasons
Yuan Sheng, piano (Piano Classics)

Yuan Sheng studied piano in his native China and at the Manhattan School of Music, where he completed his BM and MM and was a student of Solomon Mikowsky. He also studied independently with Rosalyn Tureck. He is currently professor of piano at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music. This is his fifth CD for Piano Classics, following three well-received Bach albums and a 3-CD set of the complete Preludes, Nocturnes, Ballades and Impromptus of Chopin.

Sheng invests just as much of himself in long- (and comparatively) underrated piano pieces of Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky as he did the major keyboard works of Bach and Chopin. Here, he shows us the breadth of his musical sympathies and his rare ability to characterize seemingly humble pieces and make them vivid musical experiences for the listener.

Tchaikovsky composed his album entitled The Seasons for monthly installments of a musical journal that was geared toward the capabilities of home pianists. Each installment was evocative of the natural beauty or descriptive of the typical activities associated with each month of the year. The nature pieces include a highly evocative song of the Lark (March) and a gracefully swaying Snowdrop (April) in which the humble flower of

his music. Jota Aragonesa and Summer Night in Madrid, products of his visit to Spain and his fascination with its folk culture, reveal his free use of variations to define form in music that is sensually beautiful to begin with. The variety of instrumental combinations he uses to evoke the associations he wishes, particularly his use of harp and pizzicato strings, suggest the Spanish guitar, is amazing in these works.

On home ground in Russia, Glinka's Kamarinskaya (Wedding Dance) takes a theme that is only a couple of bars long and spins it into a fine orchestral fantasia by adding an original countersubject and by constantly varying his orchestration, harmonic and rhythmic settings, so that fresh new surprises continually pop out at us. His three Oriental Dances excite our imagination with music of Muslim lands, the best-known of which is the Lezghinka, a folk dance of the Caucasus in which a male solo dancer leaps and dances with increasingly frenzied movements as he courts his bride.

Sheherazade shines forth in all its accustomed splendor, warmth, and brilliance on CD2. Once again, in Rimsky-Korsakov's luxurious palette of luminous instrumental colors washed over primary hues, we have music that really appealed to Svetlanov's best instincts as a conductor. Rimsky's orchestrations resemble highly-colored mosaics that are underscored by pure, unmixed orchestral groups, a fact that Svetlanov is not slow in discovering.

In this work, we are thrilled by the gorgeous obbligati by horn, flute, bassoon, and harp, plus fanfares from trombones and the sounds of muted trumpets, and of course the solo violin that weaves an imaginative fabric as the "voice" of the narrator of the Arabian Nights, Sheherazade herself, throughout the course of the four tales of enchantment and high adventure. As is often the case, the soloist who performs the concerto-class violin part (here, Heinrich Friedheim) is given special credit.

Svetlanov is well attuned to patterns of rhythm and movement in a work that varies in affect from the languid beauty of *The Young Prince and the Young Princess* to the high drama of the final tableau in which the brass cry out, woodwinds sweep up and down, and the music builds to a fearsome climax topped by a bitonal percussive crash depicting Sinbad's ship striking a massive rock and sinking. At the very end, as the storm subsides, we hear the violin in its highest harmonics hauntingly playing Scheherazade's theme for the last time.

the title has the poise of a ballerina. Starlit Night (May) captures the enchantment of the "White Nights" phenomenon that is characteristic of the northern latitudes in a city such as St. Petersburg. Autumn Song (October) is a melancholy reverie that says as much about the spirit and mind of an observer as it does the sweet sadness we experience in the autumn colors signifying the waning of the year.

Barcarolle (June) is inspired by the songs of Venetian gondoliers, with a strikingly passionate section added to contrast the gently swaying lilt of the music. Carnival (February), Harvest Song (August) and Hunter's Song (September) are vigorous, exciting depictions of human activity which break with the usual requirements of the other pieces that are typically pitched to the technical capabilities of a competent amateur pianist. Such pieces fit comfortably under the hands and do not require the advanced technique of a professional, a fact that has helped ensure their enduring popularity.

As Sheng demonstrates in his accounts of all these pieces, a deft feeling for characterization, involving a judicious assignment of relative emphasis to each passage and nuance of the music, is the key to interpreting these pieces, not sheer virtuosity. One of my own favorites is Troika (November), depicting a thrilling sleigh ride that gathers momentum as it moves from a highly attractive theme to a *grazioso* middle section, then to a series of dotted sixteenth notes that leads to the repetition of the theme. Christmas (December) is an infectious waltz, reminding us that Tchaikovsky was at work at this time on his three-act ballet Swan Lake.

There follow four characteristic pieces that reveal once again how much of himself Tchaikovsky could express in a small space. They include an enchanting Nocturne and a rollicking Humoresque, a wide-ranging Romance, Opus 5 that reveals the composer as a master of the deeply-affecting mood and lyricism he was to employ as one of the masters of the Russian art song, and an *Aveu passioné* (Passionate Confession) that lives up to its name.

Dumka, Opus 59 is a more spacious work (at 10:09) in the style of a profound meditation or lament with a contrasted middle section. As Sheng presents it to us, it is a work of inspired greatness and a good choice to end the program.



Russian Piano Concertos
Joshua Pierce, piano
MSR Classics

Note: This review has been re-printed from *Phil's Classical Reviews* for January, 2016

What a find this is! Joshua Pierce recorded five of the six Russian piano concertos in this 2-CD set in Eastern Europe between 1988 and 1991, and they appeared without much fanfare on such obscure labels as Carlton Classics and Phoenix USA. Their reissue in superb remasterings on MSR gives them a fair chance to be heard by a wider audience. This is a treasure trove of the best of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Khachaturian. What more do you want: egg in your vodka?

From the opening of the ever-popular Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor by Tchaikovsky, we feel we are in for an exalted musical experience as both Pierce and conductor Paul Freeman, at the podium of the RTV Symphony Orchestra of Slovenia, are right on the money with its smartly-paced excitement. They handle this supremely lyrical work as if it were second nature, but without taking it for granted. Pierce's solid pianism includes a beautiful tone that stays amazingly limpid throughout the work's **wide** dynamic range.

This performance unflinchingly holds our interest, so the work doesn't suffer, as it often does, from a slackening of intensity when the opening Allegro gives way to the lovely Andantino. The finale is as overwhelmingly triumphant as you've ever heard it. Really, this account is a revelation.

The same goes for Tchaikovsky's too-seldom heard Concerto No. 3 in E-flat major. The composer did not live to complete the work in three movements as planned, and it is often heard, as here, in its only finished movement, an *Alllegro brillante* exhibiting big block chords, octaves and scale runs in the piano part. An exuberant main theme is contrasted by a lovely slow melody. Frequent tempo changes keep both Pierce and Freeman on their toes.

Rimsky-Korsakov's Piano Concerto in C-sharp minor is surprisingly under-valued today, at least outside of Russia. With the able assistance of Kirk Trevor and the Slovak National Symphony, Pierce makes us wonder all the more at its neglect, for it is as lovely in its folk-like lyricism as it is economic in form. Good humor and musicality prevail in a work in which Pierce clearly relishes its vivacity and bravura passages. A very satisfying gem in just 13 minutes.

CD2, in which Joshua Pierce is partnered by Freeman at the podium of the Berlin Radio Symphony on Tracks 1-3 and the RTV Symphony-Slovenia on 4-10, continues the excitement in ways that reveal the 20th century concertos of Prokofiev, Khachaturian and Shostakovich to be more a continuation than a break with the Russian romantic tradition. From its opening Allegro, we feel the visceral intensity of Khachaturian's Concerto in D-flat major (1936) in a three note signature that will be the genesis of every theme we hear in this movement. In the Andante, this performance eschews the musical saw which the composer originally intended, instead using conventional instruments played *un-conventionally* to convey its exotic, dreamlike beauty (Kudos for the tender melody played by the bass clarinet). Pierce takes the driving, bouncy rhythms in a compelling and utterly brilliant finale with deceptive ease.

In a mood of self-deprecation, Dmitri Shostakovich may have hurt the popularity of his Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major when he described it as having "no redeeming artistic merit." It is really a very attractive work, more cheerful than we usually expect of this composer. The outer movements are bouncy (I envisioned the Moscow Circus) and they require the pianist to frequently play octaves and unisons in fast passages. The slow movement is subdued, warm, and tinged with melancholy. Pierce takes this moment for all it is worth.

Finally, we have Sergei Prokofiev's Concerto No. 1 in D-flat major (1912), which served as an unmistakable calling card for the recent conservatory graduate. The opening theme emerges out of a whirling cyclone of notes, which is heard again at the work's conclusion, a scherzo that turns out to be the finale. The tempi in these outer movements are of two kinds: fast and faster. The slow movement is dark, gloriously so, with an abysmal climax. Pierce and Freeman make it a thing of sinister beauty.

We've noted Joshua Pierce's dynamic artistry in numerous places in the course of this review. His high-profile intensity in the fast, trenchant, and stunningly rhythmical passages speaks for itself, and he is just as keenly

attuned to the warm, deeply felt moments in the slow movements of all these works. Now, let's talk for a moment about the conductor who strides step-for-step with him in most of these performances. Paul Freeman, like Pierce, was a figure who has been under-recognized by the critical and musical establishment in the U.S. His death last July 21st received scant attention from the media. Being an African-American, he must have realized early-on that he had little chance of landing an appointment as music director with a major orchestra, and so he went international on a grand scale. In a career of more than forty years, he guest-conducted more than 100 orchestras around the globe and made some 200 recordings. Long before *Perestroika*, he was a welcome presence and a good-will ambassador when conducting orchestras in Russia and the Soviet Bloc. He will be missed.

ⁱ By the way, nobody ever bothers to tell you the significance of *Rundfunks*. The German verb *rundfunken*, from which it is derived, means "to broadcast," and has the same agricultural analogy in its origin as the English equivalent. It's what a farmer did in early spring, walking over a freshly plowed field and scattering seed evenly in a wide-sweeping pattern. In other words, "broadcasting."