

Alexander Borodin *In the Steppes of Central Asia*
(1883-1887)

This symphonic poem was originally commissioned in 1880 as part of the festivities to mark the the twenty-fifth anniversary of Czar Alexander II's ascension to the Russian throne. The project was never realized but Borodin's portion is still enjoyed today.

A note in the score from the composer says:

"In the silence of the monotonous steppes of Central Asia is heard the unfamiliar sound of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance we hear the approach of horses and camels and the bizarre and melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A caravan approaches, escorted by Russian soldiers, and continues safely on its way through the immense desert. It disappears slowly. The notes of the Russian and Asiatic melodies join in a common harmony, which dies away as the caravan disappears in the distance."

Borodin creates this "the silence of the monotonous steppes" by beginning then work with only the violins, and asking them to play very high notes using a technique using the natural overtones. The canvas of sound is suddenly wide, tall, distant, and bit transparent. Once this frame is set, the clarinet enters with a "peaceful Russian song." The English Horn evokes the more melancholic "Oriental sounds". To convey the movement of the traveling caravans across the desert, Borodin uses leaping pizzicato notes; the stepping and trudging of animals and people alike. Eventually the Russian and Oriental melodies meet and interweave in musical counterpoint. The work fades away as the travelers move on, into the distance.

Strauss, Richard *Romanze for cello and Orchestra*
(1864-1949)

This early work for cello was inspired by cellist Hans Wihan, a respected Czech musician, and also good friend of Richard's family. (Wihan's wife was a good friend of Richard's sister.) Perhaps this gave the young composer a chance to explore the intricacies of the cello and appreciate its possibilities. Richard composed a cello sonata for Wihan in 1881, the Romanze would follow in 1883. Dedicated to Strauss' cousin Ludwig Knözinger, Chief Public Prosecutor in Munich, the work shows a budding craft melody and dramatic development.

Peter Tchaikovsky *Symphony No. 5 in e, Op. 64*
(1840 - 1893)

This well-loved symphony of Tchaikovsky caused the composer much doubt and anxiety about its worth. As was typical , he struggled to balance musical structure, emotional elements and nationalistic (Russian) components.

Tchaikovsky wrote his fifth symphony in the summer of 1888. It is perhaps telling that he writes to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, "it seems to me I have not failed, and that it is good." The symphony's first performance took place in St. Petersburg with the composer conducting – another nerve-racking scenario for Tchaikovsky.

The listener will note a reoccurring “theme” which transforms itself throughout the work, while linking the separate movements with its common thread. The work opens with a slow introduction colored by low strings and woodwinds. The movement builds to an Allegro of contracting themes and closes with an odd fading away. The low register of the bassoon giving this a an eerie pathos.

The second movement is loved for its melody and unforgettable horn solo. The third movement lightens the mood with a graceful waltz, after which the fourth movement draws us into high drama and tension, as Tchaikovsky does so well. The work builds to its final climax, having transformed through a theme in minor into the triumphant major mode which marches to a rousing end.

-KD
