

From Russia With Love

Saturday, October 8, 2016 • 7:30 p.m.

First Free Methodist Church

Orchestra Seattle
Seattle Chamber Singers
Clinton Smith, conductor



NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844–1908)
Russian Easter Overture, Op. 36

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)
Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33

Introduction: *Moderato assai quasi Andante* — Theme: *Moderato semplice* — Var. I: *Tempo della Thema* —
Var. II: *Tempo della Thema* — Var. III: *Andante sostenuto* — Var. IV: *Andante grazioso* —
Var. V: *Allegro moderato* — Var. VI: *Andante* — Var. VII and Coda: *Allegro vivo*

Kai Chen, cello

—intermission—

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)
Alexander Nevsky, Op. 78

Russia Beneath the Yoke of the Mongols
Song About Alexander Nevsky
The Crusaders in Pskov
Arise, People of Russia
The Battle on the Ice
The Field of the Dead
Alexander's Entry into Pskov

Julia Benzinger, mezzo-soprano

Please silence cell phones and other electronics, and refrain from the use of cameras and recording devices during the performance.

Special thanks to First Free Methodist Church for all of their assistance in making OSSCS's 47th season possible, and for providing refreshments during intermission. Donations left at the refreshments tables help support FFMC and its programs.

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 Alexander Hawker
 Stephen Hegg
 Jason Hershey
 Manchung Ho
 Maria Hunt
 Fritz Klein**
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 Davis Reed
 Elizabeth Robertson
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 Nicole Tsong

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Julia Adams
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 Jon Epstein
 Katherine McWilliams
 Robert Shangrow
 Amy Werner-Allen
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Jo Hansen*
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Program Notes

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Russian Easter Overture, Op. 36

Rimsky-Kosakov was born March 18, 1844, in Tikhvin, Russia, and died near St. Petersburg on June 21, 1908. He began composing this overture on August 6, 1887, finishing it on April 1 the following year and conducting the premiere in St. Petersburg on December 15, 1888. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds (plus a third flute doubling piccolo), 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, tam-tam, triangle), harp and strings.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov trained for a naval career, but after a 30-month voyage with ports of call in America (during the Civil War), Brazil and Europe, he gravitated toward music. Eventually acknowledged as an unrivaled master of orchestration, he influenced two generations of Russian composers (including Stravinsky) as well as Ravel, Debussy and Respighi. Along with a penchant for “cleaning up” the rough edges in music of Borodin and Mussorgsky after their deaths, he composed 15 operas, three symphonies, choral works, chamber music and art songs. Today he is most often represented on the concert stage by a trio of orchestral works that he unveiled within the span of a year: *Capriccio Espagnol*, *Scheherazade* and the *Russian Easter Overture*.

In his 1909 autobiography, *My Musical Life*, Rimsky-Korsakov wrote about composing “an Easter overture on themes from the Obikhod,” a collection of Russian Orthodox liturgical chants first printed in 1772. “The rather lengthy slow introduction of the Easter Sunday overture, on the theme ‘Let God Arise!’ alternating with the ecclesiastical theme ‘An Angel Cried,’ appeared to me, in the beginning, as Isaiah’s prophecy of the resurrection of Christ. The gloomy colors of the *Andante lugubre* seemed to depict the holy sepulchre that had shone with ineffable light at the moment of the resurrection — in the transition to the *Allegro* of the overture.

“The beginning of the *Allegro*, ‘Let them also that hate Him flee before Him,’ leads to the holiday mood of the Orthodox church service on Christ’s matins. The solemn trumpet voice of the Archangel is then displaced by a tonal reproduction of the joyous, dance-like tolling of the bells, alternating with an evocation of the sexton’s rapid reading and the chant of the priest’s reading the glad tidings of the Evangel. The Obikhod theme, ‘Christ is risen,’ which is the subsidiary part of the overture, appears amid the trumpet blasts and bell-tolling, constituting a triumphant coda.

“In this overture were thus combined reminiscences of the ancient prophecy, of the gospel narrative, and also a general picture of the Easter service with its ‘pagan merry-making.’ The capering and leaping of King David before the Ark, do they not give expression to the same mood as the idol-worshippers’ dance? Surely, the Russian Orthodox Obikhod is dance music of the church. And do not the waving beards of the priests and sextons clad in white vestments and surplices, intoning ‘Beautiful Easter,’ transport the imagination to pagan times? And all those Easter

loaves and the glowing tapers! How far a cry from the philosophic teachings of Christ! The legendary and heathen side of the holiday, the transition from the gloomy and mysterious evening of Passion Saturday to the unbridled pagan-religious merrymaking on Easter Sunday morning is what I was eager to reproduce in my overture.”

To preface his overture, Rimsky-Korsakov commissioned a poet, Count Golenishchev-Kutuzov, “to write a program in verse — which he did for me. But I was not satisfied with his poem, and wrote in prose my own program, which same is appended to the published score. Of course, in that program I did not explain my views and my conception of the ‘Bright holiday,’ leaving it to tones to speak for me. Evidently these tones do, within certain limits, speak of my feelings, and thoughts, for my overture raises doubts in the minds of some hearers, despite the considerable clarity of the music. In any event, in order to appreciate my overture, even ever so slightly, it is necessary that the hearer should have attended Easter morning service at least once, and, at that, not in a domestic chapel, but in a cathedral thronged with people from every walk of life, with several priests conducting the cathedral service — something that many intellectual Russian hearers, let alone hearers of other confessions, quite lack nowadays. As for myself, I have gained my impressions in my childhood passed near the Tikhvin Monastery itself.”

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33

Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk, Russia, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He composed this theme and variations in December 1876. Nikolai Rubinstein conducted the premiere in Moscow on November 30, 1877, with Wilhelm Fitzenhagen as soloist. Fitzenhagen subsequently revised the work, which (in addition to solo cello) requires pairs of woodwinds and horns, plus strings.

Just how Tchaikovsky decided to compose a work for cello and orchestra remains unclear, but he wrote it quickly in December 1876, shortly after the “brilliant failure” of his opera *Vakula the Smith* in St. Petersburg — on top of news from Paris and Vienna about poorly received performances of his tone poem *Romeo and Juliet*. An ardent admirer of Mozart (“It is thanks to Mozart that I have devoted my life to music”), Tchaikovsky would later adapt Mozart melodies into an 1887 orchestral suite, but for his set of variations for cello and orchestra the Russian composer crafted an original theme, in the form of a gavotte inspired by the style of Mozart’s late-18th-century Rococo period.

In January 1877 Tchaikovsky showed the piano score of his variations to the young German cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, a colleague at the Moscow Conservatory, who participated in the premieres of all three of the composer’s string quartets. Fitzenhagen penciled many alterations into the cello part and Tchaikovsky subsequently orchestrated the work with these changes intact. It was Fitzenhagen who premiered the Rococo Variations at the end of November, eliciting a positive response from audience and critics.

Tchaikovsky himself did not hear the first performance (he was abroad at the time), after which Fitzenhagen took it upon himself to perform some major surgery on the structure of the piece. Apparently seeking to exploit the popularity of Tchaikovsky's third variation, a D-minor *Andante*, the cellist moved it near the end of the work, placing it as the penultimate variation. He also swapped the order of two others and omitted the original eighth variation entirely. "Loathsome Fitzenhagen! He is most insistent on making changes to your cello piece," wrote Tchaikovsky's publisher in February 1878 while preparing the piano reduction for publication, "and he says that you have given him full authority to do so. Heavens!" Perhaps due to the fallout of his ill-fated marriage, Tchaikovsky failed to object at the time.

A decade later, prior to the 1889 publication of the orchestral score for the *Rococo Variations*, he told a cellist friend, "Look what that idiot Fitzenhagen did to my piece, he altered everything!" Nevertheless, he declared: "The devil take it! Let it stand as it is!" Thus Fitzenhagen's version of Tchaikovsky's miniature masterpiece has graced concert halls around the world ever since, standing with the concertos of Schumann, Dvořak and Elgar as the most commonly performed — and best-loved — works for cello and orchestra in the repertoire. (In 1941 Soviet musicologists published a reconstruction of Tchaikovsky's original, which in recent years has received a handful of recordings.)

Following a brief orchestral introduction, the soloist states Tchaikovsky's graceful theme, supported by strings, leading to a short codetta for woodwinds that will recur as a bridge passage throughout the work. The first two variations retain the meter ($\frac{2}{4}$) and key (A major) of the theme, while the third variation — in C major and a slower triple meter — allows for a beautifully expressive solo line. The next two variations return to the opening key and meter, with a cadenza leading to the D-minor *Andante*, followed by a virtuoso final variation and brilliant coda.

Sergei Prokofiev

***Alexander Nevsky*, Op. 78**

Prokofiev was born in Sontsovka (Ukraine), of Russian parents, on April 23, 1891, and died in Moscow on March 5, 1953. He composed music for the film Alexander Nevsky in 1938, preparing this cantata the following year and conducting the premiere in Moscow on March 7, 1939. In addition to mezzo-soprano soloist and chorus, the cantata calls for: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

During February and early March of 1938, Sergei Prokofiev traveled across the United States on a concert tour. After his last engagement, as piano soloist with the Denver Symphony, he responded to an invitation to make an unscheduled trip to Hollywood, his second to the nation's movie capital. During his stay he visited several studios, taking a keen interest in their recording techniques.

Prokofiev had previously expressed his admiration for the 1937 release *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, so he

jumped at the chance to meet with Walt Disney. Looking for additional musical material for the forthcoming *Fantasia*, "le papa de Mickey Mouse" (as Prokofiev referred to him) inquired about acquiring film rights to the composer's 1936 composition *Peter and the Wolf* (which would eventually find its way into the 1946 Disney release *Make Mine Music*).

At Paramount Pictures — where he observed composer Dimitiri Tiomkin recording source music for Henry Hathaway's *Spawn of the North* — Prokofiev received an offer for 10 weeks of employment in exchange for "a nice big sum." The composer's schedule did not allow him to accept, but he promised to return the following year. Sadly, due to the onset of World War II and Prokofiev's failing health, he would never again set foot outside the Soviet Union.

The following month, back in the USSR, Russian director Sergei Eisenstein asked Prokofiev to score his newest film project: *Alexander Nevsky*, the story of a 13th-century prince who successfully leads an army of Russian peasants, defending against a German invasion. The choice of this historic battle as a cinematic subject was not a mere whim: Stalin intended the film to be used as anti-German propaganda. "The late 1930s and 1940s were the golden era for the Stalinist biopic," notes Kevin Bartig in *Composing for the Red Screen: Prokofiev and Soviet Film*, "a genre that cast members of the Russian historical pantheon in roles that sculpted contemporary Soviet identity." Both Eisenstein and Prokofiev had suffered recent failures (at least in the eyes of Soviet artistic bureaucrats) and needed to redeem themselves with authorities, so they agreed to participate despite the openly propagandist nature of the project.

In the United States, composers ordinarily did not score a picture until quite late in the filmmaking process (aside from the animated features Prokofiev admired), but Eisenstein had established a much different approach on his previous movies. For *Alexander Nevsky*, Prokofiev visited the sets and viewed daily rushes, in some cases composing cues before the film was edited, allowing the director to match his images to the music — and in at least one instance writing music for a scene before it had been shot.

Alexander Nevsky premiered on December 1, 1938, receiving acclaim from audiences as its release spread throughout the USSR. By mid-April 1939, a government official claimed over 23,000,000 people had seen the film. On August 23, Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, rendering all anti-German propaganda unwelcome, so the film was shelved until 1941 — at which time it helped fan the flames of anti-German sentiment, while coming to be regarded as one of the most important films of its era.

Nevsky's famous 30-minute battle sequence has influenced everything from Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944) to the original *Star Wars* films. (In particular, the white-caped, metal-helmeted Teutonic knights prefigure George Lucas' stormtroopers, while a particularly evil-looking monk is a dead ringer for the Emperor in *Return of the Jedi*.) Likewise, Prokofiev's music inspired generations of film composers (perhaps most strikingly James Horner's "Battle in the Mutara Nebula" cue from *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*).

Not long after *Alexander Nevsky's* premiere, Prokofiev reworked much of his score into a cantata, combining various cues to form longer movements but maintaining the chronology of the film. It has become one of the hallmark choral-orchestral works of the 20th century and one of Prokofiev's most popular compositions.

"Russia Beneath the Yoke of the Mongols" serves as an instrumental overture, musically depicting a desolate landscape strewn with remnants from past battles. Mongol warriors have attempted to menace Alexander and his compatriots, but the Russian prince fends them off, warning of more dangerous aggressors from the west: the Germans.

Russian peasants sing a "Song about Alexander Nevsky," praising his slaughter of an invading Swedish army two years prior.

"The Crusaders in Pskov" opens with that city falling to attacking German forces, who attempt to forcibly convert Russian peasants to the Roman form of Christianity, singing a Gregorian chant of Prokofiev's own invention. (The chant's text is grammatically inept: either Prokofiev was not well versed in Latin or, as Morag Kerr has theorized, Prokofiev strung together words arbitrarily chosen from Igor Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* — a dig at his older colleague.) German soldiers burn alive town officials and small children alike.

The townspeople of Novgorod sing "Arise, People of

Russia" as Alexander prepares his army for battle.

"The Battle on the Ice," the film's monumental set piece, forms the cantata's longest and most dramatic movement. Prokofiev combined several separate cues with newly composed material to depict the great confrontation. The movement opens quietly, the composer evoking the bitter cold on the frozen Lake Chudskoye. The German soldiers' battle chant emerges, as if from a distance. The Teutonic forces approach on horseback and engage the Russians. Slashing gestures underscore hand-to-hand swordplay. Eventually, Alexander faces the German commander in a one-on-one confrontation. When the ice begins to crack under the weight of the heavily armed forces, most of the German army slides into the freezing lake. Russian peasants stare in astonishment at the aftermath of the battle.

In "The Field of the Dead," soldiers lie expired and dying on the battlefield. Earlier in the film, a young woman had promised two warriors she would marry the one who proved himself bravest in combat. As she wanders about searching for her suitors, a mezzo-soprano sings her heart-breaking lament. The woman eventually finds the pair alive but wounded, one gravely so; she helps them stagger away. Back in Pskov, citizens kneel before a funeral procession.

Clanging bells and a joyous song greet "Alexander's Entry into Pskov." Townspeople dance to playful music and sing in celebration of the great victory. — Jeff Eldridge

Text and Translation

Песня об Александре Невском

А и было дело на Неве-реке,
на Неве-реке, на большой воде.
Там рубили мы злое воинство,
злое воинство, войско шведское.

Ух! Как бились мы, как рубились мы!
Ух! Рубили корабли по досточкам.
Нашу кровь-руду не жалели мы
за великую землю русскую. Гей!

Где прошёл топор, была улица,
где летело копьё переулочек.
Положили мы шведов, немчинов,
как ковыль-траву на сухой земле.

Не уступим мы землю русскую.
Кто придёт на Русь, будет насмерть бит.
Поднялася Русь супротив врага,
поднимись на бой, славный Новгород!

Крестоносцы во Пскове

Peregrinus, expectavi pedes meos in cimbaliis.

Вставайте, люди русские

Вставайте, люди русские,
на славный бой, на смертный бой.
Вставайте, люди вольные,
за нашу землю честную!

Song About Alexander Nevsky

It happened on the Neva River,
on the Neva, the great water.
There we slaughtered the evil army,
the evil army of the Swedes.

Oh, how we fought, how we slashed!
Oh, we chopped their boats into kindling!
We did not spare our golden blood
in defense of the great Russian land. Hey!

Where the axe passed, there was a street,
where the spear flew, an alley.
We mowed down our Swedish enemies
like feather-grass on dry soil.

We shall not yield up the Russian land.
Whoever invades Russia shall be killed.
Russia has arisen against the foe,
arise for battle, glorious Novgorod!

The Crusaders in Pskov

A foreigner, I expected my feet to be shod in cymbals.

Arise, People of Russia

Arise, people of Russia,
for the glorious battle, for the deadly battle.
Arise, free people,
to defend our honest land.