MASTERPIECE

Shining New Light on an Old Standard

When it comes to Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, a well-trodden work turns out to be not what it has seemed.

PHOTO: YAO XIAO
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Few musical works are as immediately recognizable as Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. This Romantic blockbuster and audience favorite is laden with historical associations—from Van Cliburn's million-copy-selling recording in 1958 (the first-ever classical album with that distinction) to bandleader Freddy Martin's 1941 pop-hit take on one of its prominent themes, "Tonight We Love." Yet, the composer never approved the version we know best, which was published in 1894, a year after his death. Apparently, the great warhorse we have come to admire is not what he had in mind.

There were actually three different editions of the piece, and Myrios Classics recently released the first recording of the composer's little-known 1879 revision, which he performed at the opening of Carnegie Hall in 1891 and at his very last public concert in 1893, shortly before his death. It is most likely the version he preferred. The new recording features pianist Kirill Gerstein, conductor James Gaffigan and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin. A companion score, in a new critical edition, will be published later this year by the Tchaikovsky Museum and Archive in Klin, Russia.

Why so many versions? And how can we tell which is the most authentically Tchaikovsky? There is a convoluted story here, but this new recording just might affect how musicians and listeners view a well-trodden work that turns out to be not quite what it has seemed.

A little history is in order. Tchaikovsky struggled over this music from the start. At the end of 1874, when he first showed it to his friend Nikolai Rubinstein (founder of the Moscow Conservatory),

the reaction was swift and horrible. The composer related the incident in a letter to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck: “As I am not a pianist, I needed a virtuoso’s opinion as to what was technically impractical, difficult, unplayable, and so on,” he explained. But Rubinstein was unmerciful. “It appeared that my concerto is worthless, impossible to play, the themes have been used before, are clumsy and awkward beyond possibility of correction; as a composition it is poor, I stole this from here and that from there, there are only two or three pages that can be salvaged….

“An outsider, dropping into the room,” continued Tchaikovsky, “would have thought me a madman, without talent, ignorant, a worthless writer who had come to annoy a famous musician with his rubbish.” Mr. Gerstein believes that this account, written four years after the event, is probably exaggerated.

Tchaikovsky’s reaction was to dig in his heels, refuse to change a single thing, and give the piece to pianist Hans von Bülow, who debuted it in Boston. Reportedly, the composer scratched Rubinstein’s name from the dedication and replaced it with von Bülow’s. Ironically, Rubinstein eventually became a champion of the work, and performed it many times.

But for Tchaikovsky, personal doubts persisted. The composer made some improvements to the piano part for the 1879 version. Then, other hands intervened. After the publication of the second edition, pianist Alexander Siloti took the crashing piano chords at the beginning of the piece and transposed them an octave higher—the way we still hear it performed. He claimed that he played it that way for the composer, and that Tchaikovsky didn’t object, but current experts find Siloti’s account dubious. Others tinkered with the score, changing dynamics, accents, even cutting material. Some of the great piano pedagogues of the Russian school, like

Alexander Goldenweiser and Konstantin Igumnov, attempted to separate the composer's intentions from the work of later editors, with varying degrees of success.

For the new publication, Polina Vaydman, senior researcher at the Tchaikovsky Museum and Archive, led an editorial team that incorporated Tchaikovsky's handwritten performance markings.

Why the third, posthumous edition of this work became the standard is hard to say. Sergei Taneyev, whose performance of the concerto was described by Tchaikovsky as "glorious," called in 1912 for a "return to the author's text, to forget what overzealous editors put in the composition on their own, and to perform it according to the author's intentions." Taneyev called this work "the first truly Russian piano concerto."

But in the 19th century, performers felt entitled to make changes to suit their whims, and Tchaikovsky was regarded by many as less than masterly when setting about to write for the piano. By his own admission, he was no piano virtuoso.

And what do we find with this return to Tchaikovsky's own score? In the new recording, a work that had been cast in a superficial, flashy mold has now been tempered, made more lyrical and introspective. Those crashing chords have been restored to their original arpeggiated state (played one note at a time, harplike), for a more genteel effect. The strings at the opening are softer and don't have to fight against the piano—allowing for an air of nobility, free of the usual bluster that Mr. Gerstein describes as like falling "Soviet bombs." As a result, the melody in the strings assumes a new prominence.

The harmonies are thinned, the dynamics tapered. Cuts have been restored—significantly adding almost 30 seconds to the third movement—making the structure feel more coherent. The work,

says Mr. Gerstein, now comes off as more “Schumannesque,” more balanced, and with additional harmonically adventurous material.

The orchestra on this CD is top-notch. Mr. Gerstein’s playing is exquisitely nuanced and breathlessly virtuosic. The revised work, though free of the usual bombast, is nevertheless filled with fire—the music is often palpably ardent. The piano phrasing ranges from impassioned to declamatory, carefully matching the musical content. Much of the piece makes new sense, as in the fleet middle section of the slow second movement, where a French melody is usually played so quickly that it turns into what Mr. Gerstein calls “bad Mickey Mouse music.” Here, it has been slowed slightly, and becomes more elegant—and more French-sounding.

Shining new light on an old standard has, in this case, proved to be well worth the effort.

—Mr. Isacoff’s latest book is “A Natural History of the Piano.”