

Jakub Hruška, conductor
Karen Gomyo, violin

Friday, March 29, 2019 at 8:00pm
Saturday, March 30, 2019 at 8:00pm
Sunday, March 31, 2019 at 3:00pm

BARTÓK
(1881-1945)

The Miraculous Mandarin Suite, op. 19 (1918-1924)

TCHAIKOVSKY
(1840-1893)

Violin Concerto in D major, op. 35 (1878)
Allegro moderato
Canzonetta: Andante -
Finale: Allegro vivacissimo
Karen Gomyo, violin

INTERMISSION

SHOSTAKOVICH
(1906-1975)

Symphony No. 9 in E-flat major, op. 70 (1926-1927)
Allegro
Moderato
Presto –
Largo –
Allegretto

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The 2018/2019 Classical Series is presented by **World Wide Technology** and **The Steward Family Foundation**.

These concerts are presented by the **Thomas A. Kooyumjian Family Foundation**.

Karen Gomyo is the **Bruce Anderson Memorial Guest Artist**.

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Pre-concert conversations are sponsored by **Washington University Physicians**.

PROGRAM NOTES

BY THOMAS MAY

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky: the personification of heart-on-sleeve, passionate Romanticism. Béla Bartók: a pioneer of folk music research, who drew on this music's raw rhythms and colors to invigorate a unique modern style. Dmitri Shostakovich: among the most compelling of all symphonic composers.

The three works on this program seem ready-made for the orchestral canon, created by artists who have stood the test of time. What could possibly be controversial?

In fact, as it turns out, each piece triggered a disappointing reaction — in the case of Bartók, an honest-to-goodness scandal — and might have been tossed aside by their respective composers. It's unlikely that anything in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto or Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony will strike today's listeners as upsetting. The music by Bartók that opens our program, on the other hand, is connected to a scenario that still does have the capacity to shock, or at least to make us uncomfortable.



BÉLA BARTÓK

Born March 25, 1881, Sânnicolau Mare, Romania

Died September 26, 1945,
New York City, New York

The Miraculous Mandarin Suite, op. 19

The Miraculous Mandarin began as a stage work: to be precise, as a ballet pantomime from a scenario by a fellow Hungarian, the author and journalist Menyhért Lengyel. Lengyel later emigrated to Hollywood and successfully wrote screenplays, and you can detect a cinematic quality in the narrative style of this wordless stage work. It prompted Bartók to make some spectacularly bold choices in how to depict the sordid atmosphere of *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

Bartók had previously shown that he commanded a dazzling theatrical imagination with his chilling one-act opera *Bluebeard's Castle* and another ballet, *The Wooden Prince*. Forget the claim that “modern” composers tended to incite audience anger and resentment off the bat. While Bartók did experience a pattern of alienation as a misunderstood composer, *The Wooden Prince* was a success when it premiered in 1917 and gave him his first real public breakthrough.

However, with *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Bartók was courting trouble — particularly given the troubled political situation of Europe still recovering from the First World War. He had composed the music at the end of the War but only finished orchestrating it in 1924 (and went on to revise it still further).

The premiere was secured for Cologne, but the audience and church authorities were horrified by the gruesome story. After just one performance there,

the Mayor of Cologne succeeded in getting it banned. In this case, the scandal this caused did not have a “Barbra Streisand effect” — that is, make it even more talked about by trying to suppress the matter — and the ballet itself wasn’t even staged in Budapest until after the composer’s death in 1945.

Because of the long delay before that ill-fated premiere, Bartók extracted the work-in-progress to create the independent concert suite that we hear in this concert. In keeping with the story’s air of Expressionist fantasy, the music is remarkably adventurous, filled with eerie sonorities that make a graphic impact even without staging.

We get the rude chaos of traffic in the brass, while clarinet solos signal each of the young woman’s seductive “decoy” dances. Surreal sliding trombones depict the penniless old man, oboe and English horn the timid student. As for the Mandarin, Bartók uses a pentatonic (all black key) theme. There’s also a sleazy rewrite of a waltz for the dance directed at him.

Notice the “special effects” like flutter-tonguing, strange tunings, and notes “in-between” the normal division of the piano’s black and white keys. Galvanizing rhythms that recall the Stravinsky of *The Rite of Spring* are also a major part of Bartók’s vocabulary here. The concert suite cuts short before the ballet’s ending, with a furious chase across the orchestra that expresses the Mandarin’s suddenly aroused desire.

The Miraculous Mandarin’s story

It’s a Freudian allegory of lurid desire, perhaps — or of the alienation of urban life. *The Miraculous Mandarin* takes place in a seedy neighborhood, where three tramps are playing a dangerous game of bait by using a young woman to lure unsuspecting victims to their run-down apartment. Once attracted, they beat and rob whoever is seduced by the woman’s seductive dancing in a window.

First up is a shabby old fellow, then a shy young student, both with little money and soon tossed out. But the third possible catch is a wealthy Chinese man: the automaton-like Mandarin. (Despite the ballet’s avant-garde credentials, the story’s author Lengyel exploited ugly stereotypes of Asians.)

A spectral creature whose stare is fixed, the Mandarin chases the girl about the room, so the tramps quickly intervene to rob him and then attempt to murder the Mandarin: by suffocation, stabbing, and hanging — but he remains freakishly resistant to the effects of their violence.

Finally, as the young woman embraces him, the Mandarin begins to bleed and dies. Bartók used the term “pantomime” for this narrative, since dance per se is used only sparingly in its telling. Most of the story is conveyed through mime.

First Performance November 27, 1926, Cologne, Germany

First SLSO Performance December 1, 1962, Christoph von Dohnányi conducting

Most Recent SLSO Performance November 4, 2009, Carnegie Hall, David Robertson conducting

Scoring 3 flutes (2nd and 3rd doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (2nd doubling E-flat clarinet, 3rd doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, suspended cymbal, cymbals, snare drum, tenor drum, triangle, tam tam, xylophone), harp, piano, celesta, organ, and strings

Performance Time approximately 20 minutes



PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia

Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia

Violin Concerto in D major, op. 35

If any composer could compose the music of desire, it was Tchaikovsky. His greatest symphonies suggest a boldly subjective confession of emotions — a trait that has been identified with a particular brand of Romanticism, and a far cry from the ironic detachment that would come several decades later with the first “Moderns,” such as Tchaikovsky’s fellow Russian Igor Stravinsky (who also adored his predecessor).

And yet: composers with this level of gift tend to like to challenge themselves, to avoid repeating the same patterns again and again.

Pure escapism?

The Violin Concerto takes a step back from the soul-searching attitude of pieces Tchaikovsky worked on at the same time. His Fourth Symphony, written in the same year (1878), is a score of immense emotional turbulence. In the Violin Concerto, you get the sense of Tchaikovsky putting on a mask, finding relief in the image of the gracious violin virtuoso.

It all seems to contradict the familiar, scandal-heavy narrative (still much misunderstood, in fact) of the composer’s ill-fated attempt to offset gossip about his sexuality. The previous year, he had agreed to marry a lovesick former student, but instantly regretted what he had done — sending his life into chaos, the effects of which spilled over into the Fourth Symphony. Tchaikovsky fled to Western Europe in a temporary exile and took time off in the spring of 1878 to compose his Violin Concerto. That work proceeded at a rapid pace, requiring less than a month. Was it pure escapism?

The deliciously, leisurely lyrical result seems at times to suggest as much. Tchaikovsky had long since proved himself one of the masters of melody, and some of the darker undercurrents we find in other works of this composer enter the picture at moments. But in general, the cliché of the hyper-emotive Tchaikovsky here goes on holiday, as it does in some of his other Mediterranean-tinged works.

There were other factors. One was simply Tchaikovsky’s happy discovery of a Spanish-flavored piece by the Frenchman Édouard Lalo: his quasi-violin concerto known as the *Symphonie espagnole*. Tchaikovsky admired Lalo’s focus on “musical beauty” instead of the routines of “established traditions,” as he put it.

“Stinks to the ear”

How could the music of this concerto not inspire love at first hearing? Yet his violinist friend (and possible lover) Iosif Kotek, a primary inspiration (see “A Real-Life Muse,” page 30), refused to play it, leading Tchaikovsky to break with him. For

complicated reasons — more Tchaikovskian bad luck — the premiere ended up happening in Vienna in 1881, in the composer's absence.

On hand to review it was Eduard Hanslick, perhaps the most eminent critic of that era, who made or broke reputations. Hanslick reported a sense of disgust that the Concerto aroused in him, evoking images of “vulgar and savage faces” and “crude curses.” He summed it all up as follows: “It gives us, for the first time, the hideous notion that there can be music which stinks to the ear.”

Fortunately, the Viennese response turned out to be the exception to the rule. How much of this criticism was motivated by anti-Russian bias? The episode should remind us that musical creation and performance — and the way all of this is heard by audiences as well as gatekeeper figures like critics — never takes place in an apolitical/ahistorical vacuum but is as subject to passionate, shifting opinions as current political debates.

The concerto's music

Though his own instrument was piano, Tchaikovsky writes for the soloist in a way that maximally explores different aspects of the violin's personality. What makes this so enduringly engaging is that it's by no means all about technical challenges — though there are plenty of those, of course. Tchaikovsky turns the violin into a richly complex character, above all an individualist, in the long opening movement.

Commentators have pointed to a more obviously Russian character in the other two movements. The middle is a song-like movement called *Canzonetta* (composed in a single day!), which took the place of an earlier effort that the composer decided did not properly fit into the Concerto. It's a simple song that turns the soloist into a virtual vocalist with its aura of gentle melancholy.

Tchaikovsky links the *Canzonetta* without pause to the finale, which bursts on the scene, breaking the soulful spell. We get still another personality here: the fun-loving, earthy fiddler playing with abandon. Hanslick was revolted by the smell of “cheap booze.” But most audiences since that time have been more than happy to be guests at this village party.

First Performance December 4, 1881, Vienna, Austria, Hans Richter conducting with Adolph Brodsky as soloist

First SLSO Performance December 1, 1906

Most Recent SLSO Performance March 1, 2015, Hans Graf conducting with Augustin Hadelich as soloist

Scoring solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings

Performance Time approximately 33 minutes



DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born November 25, 1906,

St. Petersburg, Russia

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia

Symphony No. 9 in E-flat major, op. 70

Shostakovich shares with Bartók the distinction of being one of the great “might-have-been” operatic/theater composers of the 20th century. Frustration with the politics and practical irritations of the stage turned Bartók in the direction of purely instrumental music. For Shostakovich, the power of the state itself intervened (see “Soviet Condemnation,” page 31).

In 1936 the composer faced public condemnation for his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Shostakovich was able to redeem himself in the eyes of Stalin’s culture police with his Fifth Symphony and, during the worst of the German invasion in the Second World War, was lauded as a war hero for the morale-boosting, rousing patriotic Seventh Symphony of 1942 (the Leningrad). The bespectacled composer even graced the cover of *TIME* magazine that summer, wearing a fireman’s helmet and posed against a smoldering city backdrop.

Great expectations

While still able to bask in the aftermath of the Seventh’s success, Shostakovich announced a forthcoming Ninth Symphony that was intended to celebrate the now-secure victory against Hitler. He wrote that the work would “honor with reverence the memory of the brave heroes who have died and glorify the heroes of our army for eternity.”

His comments fueled expectations of a large-scale choral work. Ever since the Beethoven Ninth, mere mention of working on a “Ninth” Symphony would bring immediately to mind that colossal precedent, fusing the orchestral symphony with a gigantic choral finale.

In fact, the Ninth Symphony that he unveiled a few months after the war’s end — on November 3, 1945, on a live broadcast program that included Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony — turned out to be a perplexing, enigmatic affair. It’s among the shortest of Shostakovich’s fifteen symphonies. The Seventh, by contrast, is his longest. The Ninth has five brief movements and uses comparatively spare orchestration. Some of its textures even seem to emanate a comic tone.

What had become of the grand choral celebration? Perhaps Shostakovich got cold feet. The work he produced had nothing in common with what had been announced. He now described the character of the new work as dominated by “a transparent, clear, and bright mood.” The audience for the Leningrad premiere seemed to be pleased overall and even asked for three of the movements to be scored. But the official take was that the Ninth showed a “grotesque” attitude — the very adjective that crops up in complaints about Bartók’s *Miraculous Mandarin*, by the way.

One prominent Soviet critic of the time worried that it was all too escapist: “Is it the right time for a great artist to go on vacation, to take a break from contemporary problems?” From Shostakovich’s perspective, his unexpected choice of tone freed up his imagination from the weightiness of the Beethoven associations and from the burdens of continuing to pose as a musical war hero.

The symphony’s music

The music brims with invention and delightful gestures; its ideas come through with chamber music-like clarity. For the only time in all of the Shostakovich symphonies, the first movement even includes a classical exposition repeat — *very* old-fashioned, even for uptight Soviet tastemakers — but he resplices his themes with the ingenuity of a 20th-century Haydn.

Not quite a slow movement, the second movement approaches Tchaikovsky in its melodic richness. A miniature scherzo at the center crams bursts of energy and a dazzling episode for solo trumpet into its brief span, leading without pause into the fourth and fifth movements: a Largo featuring low brass and eloquent bassoon, then a shockingly (to those who wanted it) unheroic finale.

First Performance November 3, 1945, Leningrad, Russia, Yevgeny Mravinsky conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

First SLSO Performance December 23, 1948, Harry Farbman conducting

Most Recent SLSO Performance October 16, 2010, David Robertson conducting

Scoring 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tambourine, triangle), and strings

Performance Time approximately 27 minutes



Iosif Kotek with Tchaikovsky in 1877.

A Real-Life Muse

When he was still getting on his feet as a composer, Tchaikovsky taught at the newly established Moscow Conservatory, where he taught Antonina Miliukova, the young woman whose desire to be in a relationship led to their ill-advised marriage. But his favorite student was Iosif Kotek, a highly gifted violinist and composer, and they may well have become lovers. (The composer liked to call him by the nickname “tomcat,” in Russian a play on his last name.)

Tchaikovsky grew particularly close to Kotek during the stressful period after his wedding, and he invited the young violinist to stay with him while he was recovering at his patroness’ getaway in Switzerland. We can thank Kotek for turning his friend on to such then-new music as Lalo’s *Symphonie espagnole*, thus triggering the idea of writing a violin concerto. But both artists felt the need to conceal possible public clues as to their relationship. Kotek declined to perform the Violin Concerto, which led to a break, though Tchaikovsky came back to comfort Kotek when he was near the end of his life — he died at the age of 29 in early 1885.



A production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* at the Teatro Comunale di Bologna in December 2014.

Soviet Condemnation

On January 28, 1936, the official Communist newspaper *Pravda* carried an opinion piece condemning Shostakovich's new opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which was by then so successful it ran in multiple productions. Shostakovich was accused of catering to “decadent” bourgeois tastes, demeaning the calling of the true Soviet composer.

Because of this public disgrace, the stakes could not have been higher when Shostakovich revealed his next major public work, the Fifth Symphony. (He decided to withhold for the time being the much more experimental Fourth Symphony.) From that point on, every major premiere — especially of a symphony, the musical equivalent of a major public mural — was fraught with stress and worry. Would it run afoul of the official arbiters? How could a composer like Shostakovich remain true to his artistic conscience and not give in to mediocre hack-composing simply to keep in the Party's good graces?



JAKUB HRŮŠA

Born in the Czech Republic, Jakub Hrůša is Chief Conductor of the Bamberg Symphony, Principal Guest Conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Czech Philharmonic.

Hrůša is a frequent guest with many of the world's greatest orchestras, and in addition to his titled positions enjoys close relationships with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, Orchestre philharmonique de Radio France, The Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra. The 2018/2019 season will see him make debuts with the Berlin Philharmonic, Bavarian Radio Symphony, Orchestre de Paris, and NHK Symphony.

His relationships with leading vocal and instrumental soloists have included collaborations in recent seasons with Behzod Abduraimov, Piotr Anderszewski, Leif Ove Andsnes, Lisa Batiashvili, Jonathan Biss, Yefim Bronfman, Rudolf Buchbinder, Isabelle Faust, Bernarda Fink, Julia Fischer, Vilde Frang, Sol Gabetta, Christian Gerhaher, Kirill Gerstein, Karen Gomyo, Augustin Hadelich, Hilary Hahn, Alina Ibragimova, Janine Jansen, Karita Mattila, Leonidas Kavakos, Sergey Khachatryan, Lang Lang, Igor Levit, Jan Lisiecki, Albrecht Mayer, Johannes Moser, Viktoria Mullova, Anne Sofie Mutter, Kristine Opolais, Stephanie d'Oustrac, Olga Peretyatko, Jean-Guihen Queyras, Josef Špaček, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Daniil Trifonov, Simon Trpčeski, Mitsuko Uchida, Klaus Florian Vogt, Yuja Wang, Frank Peter Zimmermann and Nikolaj Znaider



KAREN GOMYO

Bruce Anderson Memorial Guest Artist

Born in Tokyo and beginning her musical career in Montréal and New York, violinist Karen Gomyo has recently made Berlin her home. A musician of the highest caliber, the *Chicago Tribune* praised her as “... a first-rate artist of real musical command, vitality, brilliance and intensity”.

Highlights of Gomyo’s 2018/2019 season include debuts with the Philharmonia Orchestra with Jakub Hrůša, the Royal Northern Sinfonia with Karina Canellakis, the BBC Symphony with Ben Gernon at the opening concert of the Dubai Proms, as well as returns to the WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln, Minnesota Orchestra and the San Francisco, Houston, Oregon, Minnesota, Vancouver, and Dallas symphony orchestras.

In Europe, Gomyo has most recently performed with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Bamberg Symphony, Danish National Symphony, Orchestre Symphonique de Radio France, Residentie Orkest, Stuttgart Radio Symphony, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Polish National Radio Orchestra in Katowice and WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln. Further ahead, Gomyo will make her debut with the Deutsche Radio Philharmonie Saarbrücken and Orchestre de la Suisse Romande.

Strongly committed to contemporary works, Gomyo gave the North American premiere of Matthias Pintscher’s Concerto No. 2 *Mar’eh* with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington under the baton of the composer, as well as Peteris Vasks’ *Vox Amoris* with the Lapland Chamber Orchestra conducted by John Storgårds. In May 2018, she performed the world premiere of Samuel Adams’ new Chamber Concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Esa-Pekka Salonen to great critical acclaim.

In recital and chamber music, Gomyo has performed in festivals throughout North America and Europe, including recently at the Seattle Chamber Festival, Australian Festival of Chamber Music, with Jeremy Denk at this Milton Court/Barbican residency and at her annual chamber music project with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. Future plans include a new piano trio collaboration with Olli Mustonen and Julian Steckel.

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slo.org/recordings



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