

**PROGRAM NOTES - February 26, 2012**  
**by Jon Rabben**

**Johann Strauss, Jr. - Russischer Marsch (Russian March), Op 426**

Johann Strauss, Jr., (1825, St. Ulrich, Austria - 1899, Vienna) was a very prolific Austrian composer, primarily of light music, particularly dance music and operettas. During his lifetime he was known as "The Waltz King" for his focus on that musical form. He composed over 500 compositions, including 479 works with opus numbers. Strauss was musically precocious in childhood, during which his father, composer Johann Strauss, Sr., did not want him to become a musician, but rather a banker, resorting to severe measures to deter the budding musician. It was only after the elder Strauss deserted his family for a mistress that the younger Strauss was able to concentrate fully on music.

Strauss's most famous works include *The Blue Danube*, *Kaiser Walzer*, *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, *Tritsch-Tratsch Polka*, and *Pizzicato Polka*. He is also well known for his operettas *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat) and *Der Zigeunerbaron* (The Gypsy Baron). Among his many works, albeit lesser known, is one of our musical offerings today, the *Russischer Marsch* (Russian March), Op 426.

The *Russischer Marsch*, one of Johann Strauss's "characteristic marches," belongs to a group of new compositions with which the Viennese maestro charmed audiences attending his series of charity concerts in St. Petersburg in 1886. This trip to Russia was to be his final visit there, and came after a lapse of seventeen years since his previous visit. The appearance of the Viennese maestro in St. Petersburg in 1886 occasioned an outbreak of 'Strauss fever,' with shops offering pictures, busts and statuettes of the conductor/composer. It was at his third concert, on April 29, 1886, that Strauss unveiled his *Marche des Gardes à Cheval* (March of the Horse Guards), written as a tribute to the Tsar's bodyguard in whose riding school the concerts took place. Music critics, however, opined that the title did not really suit the character of the piece.

Critics saw the work as more descriptive of Russian foot soldiers trudging wearily through the snow, even to the extent of the diminuendo at the end of the piece depicting the column of soldiers disappearing into the distance. Thus, the march was rechristened the *Russischer Marsch* for audiences in Vienna, where Strauss conducted its first performance on November 7, 1886.

**Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky - Capriccio Italien, Op. 45**

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840, Votkinsk, Russia - 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia) was one of the leading Russian composers of the Romantic era. His education was geared toward a career as a civil servant despite obvious musical precocity. Tchaikovsky served as a titular counselor for three years, during which he studied music, and then resigned his civil service post to study music full-time at the new St. Petersburg Conservatory. He soon became a professor at the Moscow Conservatory.

His musical output consists of some 80 opus numbers that include symphonies, operas, ballets and other instrumental music, chamber music and songs, many of which are enduring popular works in today's concert repertoire. Among these is the delightful *Capriccio Italien*, Op. 45, a fantasy for orchestra, composed in 1880 and premiered in Moscow the same year.

Tchaikovsky got his inspiration for *Capriccio Italien* largely from melodies he heard during his 1880 trip to Rome. In a letter to his patron, Nadezhda von Meck, he wrote:

I have already completed the sketches for an Italian fantasia on folk tunes for which I believe a good fortune may be predicted. It will be effective, thanks to the delightful tunes which I have succeeded in assembling partly from anthologies, partly from my own ears in the streets.

Five tunes make up the thematic material, only two of which have been identified. The opening fanfare has been identified as a trumpet call heard daily from the barracks next to his hotel in Rome. The final tarantella is the tune known in Italy as *Cicuzza*. The *Capriccio* is contrasted with Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4 in A major, best known as the *Italian Symphony*. Whereas Mendelssohn's work is in the traditionally conceived symphonic form, Tchaikovsky departed from such form in his delicate interweaving of bright, warm, and contrasting themes. The resulting *Capriccio Italien* has earned a permanent place in the orchestral repertoire.

### **Alexander Porfirievich Borodin - In the Steppes of Central Asia**

Alexander Borodin (1833, St. Petersburg, Russia - 1887, St. Petersburg, Russia) was a prominent Russian composer of the Romantic period. He was also one member of the leading group of composers, known as The Five, who were dedicated to a distinctly Russian kind of music. Borodin was a chemist by profession, in which he earned great respect, published papers on complex topics, and was co-credited with the discovery of certain chemical reactions.

Unlike many well-known composers, Borodin was a musician by avocation, in which he made an early start with piano lessons in childhood and his initial foray into composition at the age of ten, the *Helene Polka*, for piano. He was also a cellist, and his chamber music is dominated by compositions for strings. Borodin was not nearly as prolific as many other composers whose works are performed today, but several of his compositions are widely performed in today's concert repertoire. Borodin is best known for his opera *Prince Igor*, *Symphony No. 2 in B minor* (performed by the Carson City Symphony Orchestra in April 2009), and the orchestral tone poem *In the Steppes of Central Asia* (Russian: *V srednyei Azii*), composed and premiered in 1880, which we enjoy in today's concert.

The work was originally intended to be included in the celebrations of the silver anniversary of reign of Tsar Alexander II, but the celebration was cancelled due to the assassination of Alexander that year. The work has, however, remained a concert favorite to this day. There are three primary themes in this work, the *Russian*, *Traveling*,

and *Eastern* themes. The themes are skillfully interwoven, with composition beginning and concluding with the Russian theme.

**Alexander Konstantinovich Glazunov - Concerto in A minor for Violin and Orchestra (1904), op.82**

Alexander Glazunov (1865, St. Petersburg, Russia - 1936, Paris, France) was a Russian composer of the late Romantic period. He was also a noted conductor and music educator, having served from 1905 to 1930 as director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He continued to head the Conservatory *in absentia* for the final two years of his tenure, as he left the Soviet Union in 1928 and settled in Paris the following year. The best known student under his early Soviet-era tenure was Dmitri Shostakovich.

Glazunov was a child prodigy who began composing at age 11 and had his work premiered in 1882 to critical acclaim. He soon enjoyed international acclaim and reached the height of his creative powers in the first decade of the twentieth century, his best works from this period being his Eighth Symphony and his Concerto in A minor for Violin and Orchestra (1904), op.82, which we enjoy in today's concert.

The Violin Concerto is recognized as one of his most popular works. Glazunov wrote the Concerto in 1904 and dedicated the work to the legendary violinist Leopold Auer, who gave the premiere performance at a Russian Musical Society concert in St. Petersburg in 1905. The violin concerto is representative of Glazunov's brilliant style, and is in three movements: *Moderato*, *Allegro sostenuto*, and *Allegro*, which are performed without pauses between the movements. The composer seamlessly inserted the slow second movement into the middle of the first movement, which is a rare and original structural aspect of this work. Glazunov himself composed the main cadenza at the end of the second movement. This cadenza is considered one of the most difficult parts of the concerto.