

Wilmington Symphony Orchestra

PROJECT 1898 - PROGRAM NOTES

Written by Dr. Steven Errante

November 11, 2023

Project 1898

To commemorate the 125th Anniversary of the 1898 Wilmington coup d'état and massacre, the WSO is presenting a narrated portrait of the musical world of 1898. There are reconstructions of spirituals sung by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers as well as popular songs that would have been distributed as sheet music or by means of the newly invented phonograph. The concert begins with excerpt from Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, a work which was given its premiere in London on November 11, 1898, exactly 125 years ago. Coleridge-Taylor's father was Sierra Leonian, and an encounter with the Fisk University Jubilee Singers during one of their visits to England inspired a lifelong interest in African-American music. One of the members of that touring group was Carrie Sadgwar, the fiancée of Alexander Manly, whose newspaper the Wilmington Daily Record was a target of the white supremacists who overthrew the elected government of Wilmington.

Algernon Robinson: Elegy for the Victims of 1898 (Premiere)

Moving from the musical snapshot of 1898 to a view of the future, the Wilmington Symphony offers a new work by Algernon Robinson especially commissioned for tonight's commemoration. Robinson grew up in Wilmington and as a high-school student was a member of the Wilmington Symphony Youth Orchestra. The new work is titled *Elegy for the Victims of 1989*, and its prominent tone is indeed elegiac. After a mournful clarinet solo, undulations begin in the lower register and ripple up through the orchestra. The melodies pass from solo horn to oboes and then to the violins. When the solo trombone assumes the melodic role, there is a crescendo in the rest of the orchestra culminating in the emotional high point of the work, accompanied by clanging chords in the upper register of the piano. From here, the intensity gradually subsides and the solo clarinet returns to conclude the music as it started, punctuated by a deep chord in the piano.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto, Op. 35

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's life as a composer developed astride the rift between Russian music and the music of Western Europe. Born in 1840 into a Russia that offered few opportunities for the study of music, he reached his twenties just as the Saint Petersburg Conservatory was

founded. There he received training in Western European music techniques, but also benefitted from the support of the recently-formed Russian Music Society, which promoted native Russian musicians over European imports. One of the struggles of his career was reconciling the distinctively Russian elements of his style with the extended musical structures of Western music. He felt he was more successful in smaller forms like the movements of his ever-popular ballets, but audiences have loved his gift for creating engaging and memorable melodies, colorful harmonies, and dazzling orchestration in both short and long works.

In 1878, following his disastrous marriage and suicide attempt, Tchaikovsky escaped to a resort in Switzerland where he and his pupil violinist Iosif Kotek played through music for violin and piano, including the recently published *Symphonie Espagnole* of French composer Édouard Lalo. Tchaikovsky praised the work saying that “It has a lot of freshness, lightness, of piquant rhythms, of beautiful and excellently harmonized melodies.... He [Lalo], in the same way as Léo Delibes and Bizet, does not strive after profundity, but he carefully avoids routine, seeks out new forms, and thinks more about musical beauty than about observing established traditions, as do the Germans.” Inspired, the composer started working on his own violin concerto, which was quickly completed and but not premiered for another three years due to several soloists turning it down because of reservations about its quality and suitability for the violin. The first performance was given in Vienna, and a negative review by Austrian critic Eduard Hanslick shows some of the barely-disguised contempt regarding music from the East when he called the last movement “odorously Russian.”

The Violin Concerto has three movements, the middle one being a short, wistful Canzonetta in G Minor. The outer movements are weightier, with the first taking the traditional function of dramatically developing its themes and displaying the virtuosity of the soloist. After the orchestral introduction, the soloist introduces the main theme of the movement, one that will return in many transformations throughout (including a boisterous version for the orchestra featuring a martial rhythm in the woodwinds and brass). There is also a second theme (set in keeping with classical tradition in the dominant key) and a closing section. It seems like the movement is overflowing with almost too many memorable ideas but in fact many of them grow organically from what came immediately before.

There is no pause after the Canzonetta because the orchestra explodes with the main theme of the last movement. Its tripping rhythm will be familiar to anyone who has heard the “Trepak” from *Nutcracker* (or the last movement of Felix Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto). The rollicking tempo is occasionally held back by slightly slower sections, but the breathlessly headlong rush soon resumes and the work concludes with a brilliant coda.