**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756-1791)
Overture to *Don Giovanni*, K.527 (1787)

Mozart penned the overture to his opera buffa *Don Giovanni* in a single evening, the day before its 1787 premiere in Prague. The work is based on the legend of Don Juan, the notorious seducer and murderer.

Perhaps this rather dark subject matter accounts for the overture’s unusually portentous beginning: an ominous D minor chord, then silence, followed by an equally ominous A major chord.

The music continues on in this rather moody fashion, utilizing materials from the finale of the second act, for exactly two minutes—and then abruptly shifts to D major. From here on, we are back in an atmosphere as sunny as *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the overture unfolds in a typically peppy, brisk Mozartian fashion.

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**Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840-1893)
Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35 (1878)

The story of the birth of Tchaikovsky’s lone violin concerto is strikingly similar to that of his piano concerto. The work was written and dedicated to the great virtuoso Leopold Auer, a Hungarian-born violinist based in Moscow. This is how Auer described the story of the concerto’s presentation to him to a reporter in 1912:

“When Tchaikovsky came to me one evening, about thirty years ago, and presented me with a roll of music, great was my astonishment on finding that this proved to be the Violin Concerto, dedicated to me, completed, and already in print. My first feeling was one of gratitude for this proof of his sympathy toward me, which honored me as an artist. On closer acquaintance with the composition, I regretted that the great composer had not shown it to me before committing it to print. Much unpleasantness might then have been spared us both.”

Auer went on to carefully clarify an earlier remark that the concerto was “unplayable” by smoothing over his indictment: “… It is incorrect to state that I had declared the concerto in original form technically unplayable. What I did say was that some of the passages were not suited to the character of the instrument, and that, however perfectly rendered, they would not sound as well as the composer had imagined.”

However, these remarks came many years after the “unplayable” remark, and Auer was not the performer to premiere the work. That honor instead fell to Adolf Brodsky, who gave its first public performance in Vienna in 1881. It was ill received, despite being performed by the leading musicians of the day. The Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick wrote a review that is too scathing to abbreviate: “The Russian composer Tchaikovsky is surely no ordinary talent, but rather, an inflated one, obsessed with posturing as a man of genius, lacking discrimination and taste... The same can be said for his new, long, and ambitious Violin Concerto. For a while it proceeds soberly, musically, and not mindlessly, but soon vulgarity gains the upper hand and dominates until the end of the first movement. The violin is no longer played; it is tugged about, torn, beaten black and blue... The adagio is well on the way to reconciling us and winning us over, but it soon breaks off to make way for a finale that transports us to the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian church festival. We see a host of savage, vulgar faces, we
hear crude curses, and smell the booze. In the course of a discussion of obscene illustrations, Friedrich Vischer once maintained that there were pictures which one could see stink. Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto for the first time confronts us with the hideous idea that there may be compositions whose stink one can hear."

In a similar manner to Nikolai Rubenstein’s initial dismissal and eventual championing of Tchaikovsky’s piano concerto, Auer rejected Hanslick’s remarks and became the foremost interpreter of the work he had previously deemed “unplayable.”

The work opens with a brief orchestral introduction of the gentle, simple and familiar melody. Tchaikovsky said that the first movement “spring suddenly in my head and quickly ran into its mold.” The lyric writing yields to a difficult cadenza before closing the movement. An elegant canzonetta (a brief, song-like passage) follows, and was the least offensive movement to those first audiences. It fades into the energetic, dance-like finale, with the music exploding with technical fireworks and folk and gypsy influences pushing the soloist to explore the violin’s virtuosic capacity.

Tchaikovsky
Symphony No. 1 in G minor, op. 13, “Winter Daydreams” (1868)

Tchaikovsky was born at a pivotal time during the development of Russian music. A generation earlier, Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857) had become the first Russian composer to gain international stature. Just before Glinka’s death, Vladimir Stasov and Miky Balakirev founded the group of composers known as the “Russian Five,” advancing a distinctly nationalistic style that eschewed formal education and particularly Western influences. (cf. Borodin’s Polovtsian Dances on p. XX.) Resisting their efforts, in 1862 pianist/composer Anton Rubinstein opened the country’s first music conservatory in order to teach those selfsame Western techniques. Tchaikovsky, who abandoned his early career as a civil servant to become a pupil at the Conservatory in 1863, thus found himself caught in the middle between two opposing strains of musical thought.

This tension notwithstanding, the young composer blossomed under Rubinstein’s guidance, graduating with honors in 1865. Anton’s brother Nikolai promptly offered him a post at the new Moscow Conservatory; soon thereafter, Tchaikovsky penned one of the first truly Russian full symphonic works: his G minor Symphony No. 1.

The effort was not without its critics—including his own former teacher, Anton Rubinstein, with whom the composer shared some early sketches. This initial response compounded Tchaikovsky’s already high anxiety; he nearly suffered a nervous breakdown during the compositional process. It was Nikolai who helped turn the tide, welcoming the emotionally fragile young musician into his home and keeping him engaged socially. In December 1866, Nikolai took parts of the new symphony and presented them in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the audience rewarded Tchaikovsky with a warm reception. The full work received its premiere in 1868.

Despite the difficult birth of the symphony, Tchaikovsky came to regard it fondly, calling it “a sin of my sweet youth.” In a November 1883 letter to his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, he remarked, “although it is immature in many respects, it is essentially better and richer in content than many other, more mature works.”
Although “program music” (which attempts to convey an extra-musical storyline) was in vogue at the
time, Symphony No. 1 is not a fully programmatic work, in that it lacks a fully defined narrative. Still,
Tchaikovsky gave it the subtitle “Winter Daydreams,” perhaps as a doff to the prevalent style of the day.

The first movement, “Dreams of a Winter Journey,” uses a flute and bassoon duo to invoke a chilly frost.
The very Russian-sounding theme builds to a climax before yielding to the clarinet solo, presenting the
second theme of the movement. A result of Tchaikovsky’s nearly obsessive revision work, this segment
was not part of the original version, but was added only in 1874. The development section opens with
hints of the Waltz of the Flowers from The Nutcracker, 20 years before its time. The movement reaches
a powerful crescendo before recapping the opening and resuming its mysterious, wintry mood.

The sparkle of the first movement is counteracted by clouds in the second movement, in the moody
“Land of Gloom, Land of Mists.” Out of a string prelude sings an oboe solo, playing a heart-felt melody
that is passed through the instruments with slight variations.

In the scherzo third movement, the clouds have lifted and we return to the sunshine that reflects off of
snow and ice on a brilliant winter day. The theme is borrowed from Tchaikovsky’s 1865 Piano Sonata in
C-sharp minor. Of particular beauty is the romantic, sweeping waltz of the violins in the middle trio
section.

Tchaikovsky again borrows from existing material for the andante finale; this time, the source is a
Russian folk tune, “The Garden Blooms.” He uses the modulation from minor to major to invoke an
orchestral blooming of sound, showing off the previously under-utilized brass in their full triumphant
glory. A small fugue follows, adding to the exuberance. There is a return to the more brooding mood,
but the brass once again step in to part the clouds and the symphony concludes with a carnival-like joy.