

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT
David Danzmayr, conductor**

November 1, 2 and 4, 2018

JAVIER ÁLVAREZ

Brazos de niebla (Arms of Mist)
based on text by Juan Felipe Herrera
(World premiere commissioned by the SDSO)

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23
Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso
Andante semplice
Allegro con fuoco
Conrad Tao, piano

INTERMISSION

SERGE PROKOFIEV

Symphony No. 7 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131
Moderato
Allegretto
Andante espressivo
Vivace
[Performed Nov. 2 and 4 only.]

***Brazos de niebla* (Arms of Mist) (World Premiere)**

JAVIER ÁLVAREZ

Born May 8, 1956, Mexico City

Composer Javier Álvarez has provided a program note:

A year before I began working on *Brazos de niebla*, I read an article in the Spanish newspaper *El País* that described in considerable detail the plight of immigrants who habitually embark on a perilous journey between Colombia and Panama. I was deeply moved by the article, so much so that by the time I started composing *Brazos de niebla*, I knew I wanted to create a piece which would in some way deal with the calamitous phenomenon of immigration. Things became clearer when I first discussed the idea with my admired friend, the poet laureate Juan Felipe Herrera. Auspiciously, during our conversations we tacitly understood each other; we brain-stormed for a while and finally agreed to focus the project on the depiction of the thoughts and feelings of an imaginary young immigrant child.

Brazos de niebla (Arms of Mist) takes its title from the extraordinary poem that Juan Felipe eventually wrote: a poignant lament of a youngster lost in the haze of circumstances that ignore him, a child mislaid in the solitude, events and delusions that encircle his jumbled experience as an immigrant. In reading the poem for the first time, the line "brazos de niebla" (arms of mist) struck me as a peculiar deep and immensely persuasive image that not only encapsulated the formidable strength of the poem's metaphors but also gave rise to my overall conception of the work. Thus, *Brazos de niebla* is structured in three complete parts, each one organized as a sequence of rhythmic musical "outbreaks" which take place in the course of a fictional (but essentially musical) journey. Though these episodes do not necessarily bear a programmatic intention, they serve as emotional landmarks that allow me to frame the extended middle section where a boy soprano intones Juan Felipe's compelling words. The work also features an instrumental section within the orchestra made up of four of Mexican vihuelas; these small strumming guitars pervade the music with a distinctive color which I trust acts as an additional symbol of the transcultural and transient territories implicit in the poetry.

The work was composed in the spring of 2018 on a commission from the San Diego Symphony Orchestra, to which it is dedicated.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

PETER ILYCH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk

Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

Tchaikovsky drafted this most famous of piano concertos in November and December 1874, when he was a young professor at the Moscow Conservatory. Only modestly talented as a pianist and insecure about his handling of larger forms, Tchaikovsky sought the advice of Nikolai Rubinstein, head of the Conservatory and the man to whom he intended to dedicate the concerto. Rubinstein listened in silence as Tchaikovsky played the new work through, and then

there burst from Rubinstein's mouth a mighty torrent of words. He spoke quietly at first, then he waxed hot, and finally he resembled Zeus hurling thunderbolts. It seems that my concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable. Certain passages were so commonplace and awkward they could not be improved, and the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar. I had stolen this from somebody and that from somebody else, so that only two or three pages were good for anything and all the rest should be wiped out or radically rewritten.

Stung (and furious), Tchaikovsky refused to change a note, erased the dedication to Rubinstein, and instead dedicated the concerto to the German pianist-conductor Hans von Bülow, who had championed his music. Bülow promptly took the concerto on a tour of the United States, and it was in Boston on October 25, 1875, that Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto was heard for the first time.

It was a huge success on that occasion, and Bülow played it repeatedly in this country to rhapsodic reviews. A critic in Boston, taking note of that success, described the concerto as an "extremely difficult, strange, wild, ultra-modern Russian Concerto," but back in Russia the composer read the press clippings and was beside himself with happiness: "Think what healthy appetites these Americans must have! Each time Bülow was obliged to repeat the whole finale of my concerto! Nothing like that happens in our country." It only remains to be said that Rubinstein eventually saw the error of his early condemnation and became one of the concerto's great champions. (It should also be noted that in 1889 – perhaps more aware of Rubinstein's criticisms than he cared to admit – Tchaikovsky did in fact take the concerto through a major revision, and it is in this form that we know it today.)

The concerto has one of the most dramatic beginnings in all the literature, ringing with horn fanfares and cannonades of huge piano chords, followed by one of Tchaikovsky's Great Tunes, in which that horn fanfare is transformed into a flowing melody for strings. This opening has become

extremely famous, but this introductory section has many quirks. It is in the “wrong” key (D-flat Major), and – however striking it may be – it never returns in any form: Tchaikovsky simply abandons all this tremendous material when he gets to the main section of the movement. This “real” beginning, marked *Allegro con spirito*, is finally in the correct key of B-flat minor, and the piano’s skittering main subject is reportedly based on a tune Tchaikovsky heard a blind beggar whistle at a fair in the Ukraine. To his patroness, Madame von Meck, Tchaikovsky wrote: “It is curious that in [the Ukraine] every blind beggar sings exactly the same tune with the same refrain. I have used part of this refrain in my pianoforte concerto.” The expected secondary material quickly appears – a chorale-like theme for winds and a surging, climbing figure for strings – though Tchaikovsky evades expectations by including multiple cadenzas for the soloist in this movement. The piano writing is of the greatest difficulty, with much of it in great hammered octaves.

The *Andantino semplice* is aptly named, for this truly *is* simple music in the best sense of that term: over pizzicato chords, solo flute sings the gentle main theme, an island of calm after the searing first movement. A scherzo-like central episode marked *Prestissimo* leads to the return of the opening material. The finale, marked *Allegro con fuoco*, is also well named, for here *is* music full of fire. It is a rondo based on the piano’s nervous, dancing main theme, and while calmer episodes break into this furious rush, the principal impression this music makes is of white-hot energy, and this “strange, wild, ultra-modern Russian Concerto” rushes to a knock-out close that is just as impressive to audiences today as it was to that first Boston audience in 1875.

Symphony No. 7 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131 [Performed Nov. 2 and 4 only.]

SERGE PROKOFIEV

Born April 23, 1891, Sontsovka

Died March 5, 1953, Moscow

Prokofiev composed his seventh – and final – symphony in 1951-52. This was not a good time for the composer. He had fallen and suffered a concussion from which he never really recovered, and now – only 60 years old – he was so frail that he could work for barely an hour each day. And he was working under horrific conditions. Three years earlier, in February 1948, Stalin’s ideological watchdog Andrei Zhdanov convened the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Composers specifically to crack down on Russian composers and bring them into ideological conformity. Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, Miaskovsky and others were attacked for writing “confused, neuropathological combinations which transform music into cacophony,” music that

“dwells too much on the dark and fearful aspects of reality.” Prokofiev, who had made his reputation 40 years earlier as the *enfant terrible* of Russian music, was reduced to writing sanitized and politically-correct scores, such as a symphonic poem composed for the opening of the Volga Dam canal and the oratorio *On Guard for Peace*. Fearful for their lives, Russian artists were keeping a low profile during the paranoia and repression of Stalin’s icy final years. Prokofiev was well enough that his doctors let him attend the premiere of his Seventh Symphony in Moscow on October 11, 1952, but that would prove his final public appearance – he died five months later (by a bitter irony, on the same day Stalin died).

The Seventh Symphony has come in for a hard time from Western critics, who see it as a product of the composer’s “tired” final years, a sign of his “capitulation” to Soviet demands for music for the masses. It is true that – coming after Prokofiev’s heroic Fifth Symphony and anguished Sixth, two of the twentieth century’s finest symphonies – the Seventh can seem gentle and understated. It was commissioned by the Children’s Division of Moscow Radio, and Prokofiev himself described it as “a simple symphony, for young listeners.” Yet after the first run-through at rehearsal, he appeared to have doubts, worrying: “Isn’t the music rather too simple?” Some of the difficulty lies in the title “symphony,” a term that seems to imply a substantial and dramatic work. Perhaps calling the music a symphonic suite would have occasioned less criticism. In any case, this music – for all its light spirits – is clearly symphonic in form, and it calls for a large orchestra.

The Seventh Symphony bursts to life on a soaring theme that conveys a wonderful sense of space, and this idea will recur throughout the movement. The second subject is a broad melody that rises out of the low strings and winds, and Prokofiev closes out the exposition with a piquant little tune for oboe and flute enlivened by the accompaniment of bells and harp – Prokofiev’s keen sense of instrumental color remained strong throughout his career. This movement is in sonata form, but it is without the conflict, without the tension and resolution that mark most symphonic opening movements. Even Prokofiev’s tempo indication for this movement – *Moderato* rather than the expected *Allegro* – suggests a relaxation of mood, and the music closes with quiet reminiscences of the opening theme.

The second movement is a waltz, but this is one of those wonderful Prokofiev waltzes that dance vigorously and never quite settle into the rhythms we expect. He marks the beginning *Allegretto*, but this quickly accelerates into an *Allegro* as the music begins to dance; two trio sections break the progress of this waltz. The *Andante espressivo*, lyric and brief, is based on a theme Prokofiev had originally written in 1936.

The last movement, marked *Vivace*, is the expected good-natured finale. Full of energy, it does feel as if it had been conceived for children. Throughout, one is reminded of a youth festival or a circus or a sleigh-ride – some lighthearted occasion brimming with happy energy. It is an appropriate ending for a piece of music intended, at least in part, for children. But the very end brings surprises. Prokofiev recalls themes from earlier movements, and the music slows to a quiet conclusion with the unusual marking *pensieroso*: “thoughtful.” At the first rehearsal of this symphony, some of those in the audience convinced Prokofiev that the symphony needed a “happy” ending, so he wrote a 26-measure addition – essentially a quick variant of the movement’s main theme – to bring the symphony to its close. Mstislav Rostropovich is reported to have said that Prokofiev hoped the more abrupt conclusion would eventually be the accepted one, but at the premiere – and in virtually all subsequent performances – it is the “happy” ending that brings Prokofiev’s Seventh Symphony to its sunny conclusion; it is perhaps no accident that at the first performance the audience demanded that the finale be repeated.

Shortly after the symphony’s premiere, the frail Prokofiev made a list of the next seven pieces that he planned to compose, but at this point further work was beyond him. The Seventh Symphony was his final completed composition.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PROGRAM HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

These concerts offer a world premiere, *Brazos de neibla* by Javier Álvarez, commissioned by the San Diego Symphony. The famous First Piano Concerto by Tchaikovsky was first heard at these concerts when Fabien Sevitzky led its initial performance here during the summer season of 1949, the first season available to the newly reorganized San Diego Symphony (and all civilians) in Balboa Park after its closing in World War II. Holdz Zepeda was the soloist, and since then 22 more hearings of this concerto were given here, most recently in the 2010-11 season, when Lang Lang was the soloist under Jahja Ling's baton. In the 1975-76 season, Peter Erős conducted the only performances of the Prokofiev Seventh Symphony to be played at these concerts until these current hearings.