**Notes on Tonight’s Program**

As a chemist by profession, Alexander Borodin found precious little time to compose, but his small body of work is of extremely high quality. His “symphonic picture” *In the Steppes of Central Asia* was written for festivities celebrating the 25th year of Czar Alexander’s reign, and is dedicated to Franz Liszt. The work suggests a caravan moving along an endless expanse in a gliding march, with long pedal notes in the upper register and gentle plucked notes in the low strings accompanying a seamless interweaving of several beautiful themes.

Dmitri Shostakovich submitted his First Symphony as his graduation exercise from the composition class of Maximilian Steinberg at the Leningrad Conservatory in late 1925, when the composer was nineteen; he had been a pupil at the conservatory since 1919. The piece had its premiere with the Leningrad Philharmonic in 1926, and was immediately taken up by orchestras in Western Europe and America. We hear echoes of many of Shostakovich’s Russian contemporaries and predecessors, but even in his teens many of the composer’s stylistic hallmarks are already in evidence. Most interesting among these here is his penchant for thematic transformation. In the first movement, for example, an introduction lays out in fits and starts several ideas (often just fragmentary hints) that will later coalesce into the main themes, among them a spiky “wrong-note” march theme reminiscent of Prokofiev introduced by solo clarinet. The opening trumpet call reappears as an important transitional device, and a halting, “walking” quarter-note chromatic ascent (itself prefigured in a nervous rush in the cellos) is the basis of a central developmental episode for solo strings. Beneath all the rhapsodic juxtaposition of contrasting sections, though, is a secure link to the Sonata-Allegro symphonic formal tradition: the second theme, a lilting, if eerie, waltz, first appears in A-flat major, the conventional contrasting key for a movement in F minor, and is recapitulated in the home key. (A charming music-box passage here is a seeming nod to Stravinsky’s *Petroushka*.) The movement closes with a reprise of the introduction.

The second movement is a scherzo with a lively main theme presented first in the clarinets, then taken up by the violins and solo piano. The trio has a quiet chant-like wind theme set against a hushed ostinato in the second violins. Both themes ultimately come together simultaneously in explosive fashion before the movement concludes on a more subdued level. The mood turns to pathos in the third movement, with a plaintive main theme in the oboe over murmuring strings. The theme repeats in the violins as the intensity builds and the trumpets introduce a severe fanfare. A central section is based on a dirge theme, again entrusted to the oboe; this section also gains in power until fading away to a reprise of the first section, with a solo violin assuming the oboe’s initial role.

A swelling snare roll leads directly to the finale’s darkly-hued slow introduction. Soon solo clarinets introduce an agitated, chromatic main theme. At the crest of a glissando a fragment of a new theme appears forcefully in strings and winds the strings against fortissimo brass, but the mood rapidly changes and a solo violin again emerges with the theme in its (proper?) cantabile guise. A development of sorts follows, beginning with the main theme and culminating with a broad tutti and trombone solo. The timpani then takes a remarkable solo turn on an inverted version of the third movement’s fanfare; there follows a wonderful reprise of the second theme by a solo cello, this time much slower and answered by fanfare calls in the upper winds. Ultimately, pulsing winds and soaring violins that evoke nothing so much as the apotheosis of Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet* lead us to a blistering coda based on the second theme and the fanfare motive.

Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto arose from the ashes of his failed marriage and resulting psychological collapse. He found himself in Switzerland in early 1878, in the presence of the violinist Joseph Korek, the intermediary between the composer and his mysterious patroness Nadezhda von Meck. They played through works for violin and piano, including Lalo’s *Symphonie espagnole*, which may have served as the catalyst for Tchaikovsky’s composition. He wrote the concerto quickly, within about a month during March and April, during which time he wrote admiringly to his brother of Kotek’s technical assistance on the solo part. It was initially dedicated to violinist Leopold Auer of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, who promptly declared it unplayable; ultimately, Adolf Brodsky was the soloist at the premiere at Vienna in December 1881. Critical reception was mixed—Eduard Hanslick termed the finale “odorously Russian”—but within a decade the work was established in the repertory. The solo part is one of the most virtuostic in the literature, and the grand first theme of the opening movement is one of Tchaikovsky’s most memorable creations; the tender second theme is a brief lyrical interlude among the soloist’s blazing figuration. The current second movement, a lovely, melancholy song set mainly in the violin’s lower register, is Tchaikovsky’s second version—his initial effort became instead the first of three meditations for violin and piano published as his Opus 43. The slow movement’s wind introduction returns to serve as a transition to the finale, its characteristic rocking rhythm suddenly re-emerging explosively as the final movement’s signature motive. The ensuing sonata-rondo structure resembles that of the finale of Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto, though Tchaikovsky’s central slow episode has a decided Gypsy feel in its rhythmic license and theatrical bent.