

Each year as part of the fourth of July celebration in Boston, Tchaikovsky's The Year 1812, Festival Overture in E-Flat Major, Op. 49, also known as the 1812 Overture, or, more fondly, the cannon symphony, is played along with an impressive display of fireworks. It is a wonderful and awe inspiring piece of Romantic era music.

There is a prodigious use of dynamics all throughout this piece. The range goes all the way from pianissimo to fortissimo and louder. This is aided by the intermittent use of only select instruments and the entire ensemble. In some cases dynamic contrast is used to help distinguish between different phrases in the music, as there are copious phrases in this long piece. An example of this is seen before the second feature of the Eastern Orthodox hymn Troparion of the Holy Cross, where the low pitched strings of the ensemble have a repeating fragment of a descending scale slowly decrescendoing. When Troparion of the Holy Cross jumps back into being the featured melody at a much louder dynamic level it is clearly a new phrase in the overture. As this is a piece of romantic era music, dynamics are incredibly important in helping to convey the mood of the music. As such, there are micro dynamics for nearly every phrase. Every melodic line has shaping both to push it towards the next phrase and to emphasize the musicality. One example of that is the near constant use of scalar lines in the background of the music. Each run as such is not cast aside as merely an insignificant line, secondary to the melody and meant to remain exclusively at a lower dynamic. Instead each scalar run has dynamic shaping and contour meant to push and pull the music in a significant manner, helping to deliver the emotional impact. For example, as tension increases in the music, these runs will grow dynamically to help achieve the high point of the phrase. These dynamics also serve to assist in conveying the different moods expressed by the same melody at different points in the piece. For example, at the very beginning of his overture, Tchaikovsky employs very low, mellow dynamics for his first iteration of the Eastern Orthodox hymn

Troparion of the Holy Cross. Later, near the end of the overture, the Troparion of the Holy Cross is featured again. This time with booming, powerful dynamics so that it soars over the complementary chaos of background noise and creates a triumphant feeling in the music.

For his overture, Tchaikovsky employs a full symphony orchestra. The score calls for a full orchestra with a brass band, to be used in the finale only, a piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, one english horn, two B flat clarinets, two bassoons, four horns in F, two B flat cornets, two E flat trumpets, two tenor trombones, one bass trombone, and a tuba (Alexander Street). Tchaikovsky makes excellent use of the sheer number of voices possible to achieve with these combinations of instruments. The strings have a prominent part, per the tendencies of Tchaikovsky's time, but the woodwind and brass voices are also used extensively to, again, achieve a maximal emotional impact. Low brass commonly features in tense, exciting, or otherwise anxiety inducing passages. A full use of the brass voicings appear for triumphant passages as well as trading voices in rising tension. Woodwinds commonly take control of the melody when Tchaikovsky uses folk tunes or otherwise wants to convey a vocal aspect to instrumental music. More formal, introspective, or otherwise somber passages are generally given over to the orchestra. Despite the full voicing of the piece, there are no extreme or reaching uses of any of these instruments. A full, clear tone quality is maintained. There are no mutes or other implements for distorting the sound of any instrument.

One of the most important sections for this overture is the percussion section. While nearly every section in the orchestra has a feature at some point in this overture, Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture is most well known for its use of cannons. The score calls for cannons to be fired sixteen times in total, the first five precede a descending line of a fragment of the french national anthem, signaling their retreat. The remaining eleven are also scored in time to the music, this time to the Russian national anthem God Save the Czar (The History of Tchaikovsky's 1812

Overture). Another distinct feature of the piece is the haphazard use of bell and chime noises in conjunction with the cannon blasts at the climax of the piece. It creates an immensely powerful wall of joyous noise that makes it hard to breath.

As for the texture, the entirety of this piece is polyphonic, with sections of both imitative and non imitative polyphony. Tchaikovsky's score calls for a full conventional orchestra with brass and woodwind parts along with the percussive accoutrements.

Schonberg said that Tchaikovsky's works "have such personality and such melodic appeal that they to sound eternally fresh" (The Lives of Great Composers. 371). It holds true with this work of Tchaikovsky's. He heavily implements Russian folk songs along with the Russian and French national anthems (Tchaikovsky). Most of his lines are written stepwise, and if they do leap it is generally to stable notes and proceeds to step away in the opposite direction of the leap. A large range is employed through voice trading of many melodic lines. The difficulty level of the piece is very high, not purely because of the melodic lines, but also the musicality needed to execute this piece correctly and the incredibly fast tempos employed in some passages. Harmonically, Tchaikovsky uses the number of players to his advantage. There are passages that are filled with chords as well as lighter sections. Dissonance is used to build the tension of some passages though consonance is more prevalent in the work as a whole. True to his style, Tchaikovsky, while not writing exceedingly complex rhythms, pushes and pulls the tempo for desired musical effect.

A great deal of repetition is used in this piece, as the motives come from folk songs and the two countries national anthems. Melodic lines are repeated frequently with changes that amount to different moods. Kregor remarks that this work of Tchaikovsky's contains many "traditional battle elements" for what he labels an "instrumental battle piece" (Disavowing the Traditional Battle Piece.1).

The final impact of this composition is exuberantly triumphant, though it is quite a journey to get there. It opens with a slow, heavy, solemn, and almost reverent passage. From there the bulk of the piece is fraught with tension, which builds in waves until the final moment conveying ebullient victory. It is an incredibly moving emotional piece, true to its romantic classification.

As a preface to the score, a brief history is given.

"The work was composed in 1880 for the All-Russian Exhibition of Arts and Crafts in Moscow, but first performed on the 8th, August, 1882, at the Consecration of the Cathedral of the Savior in Moscow, which was built in commemoration of the Russian victory over Napoleon in 1812" (1812 Festival Overture in E Flat Major, Op. 49. New York: Boosey and Hawkes).

Now this is traditionally played for Independence day type celebrations in America along with fireworks, so much so that many believe it was written for the war of 1812 in America, labeled by James Moore "The heroic efforts of those who fought for our country in the War of 1812 tell the story of the Canada we know today" (*Canadian History: the 1812 Overture*). It was, in reality, written to commemorate the Russian victory over the attempted invasion of the Russian army in 1812. This beautiful piece has remained popular since it's invention, and will retain its status by the virtue of it's powerful emotions, involved playing, and cannons.

Works Cited

Ala-Pöllänen, Kari. Europe into the New Millennium: The National Anthems of the European Countries in Their Original Languages. Helsinki: Ondine, 2000. Internet resource

An audio recording of the French national Anthem

Lvov, Alexei, and Vasily Zhukovsky. Imperial Anthem of the Russian Empire (1833-1917). Admiralty Navy Band of Russia. 1833. YouTube. Web. 02 Dec. 2016.

An audio recording of the Russian national Anthem between 1833 and 1917.

Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich. Tchaikovsky - 1812 Overture (Full with Cannons). Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra. Avrilfan2213, 1880. YouTube. Web. 01 Dec. 2016.

An audio recording of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture by the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra.

Jonathan, Gregor. "Disavowing the Instrumental Battle Piece." Journal of Musicological Research. 34.3 (2015): 204-223. Print.

An article on music written about battles.

"Canadian History: the 1812 Overture." Economist London Economist Newspaper Limited. (2012): 39. Print.

An article on the war of 1812 in America and Canada's involvement.

Laura O'Malley

12/6/16

Allison Smith

Music 101

Dutcher, George M. "Napoleon's Invasion of Russia-1812. Eugene Tarlé." *The Journal of Modern History*. 14.4 (1942): 537-538. Print.

An article detailing Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia.

Schonberg, Harold C. *The Lives of the Great Composers*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997. Print.

A book containing information about Tchaikovsky's life.

Wiley, Roland J. *Tchaikovsky*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

A book written exclusively about Tchaikovsky.

Evans, Edwin. *Tchaikovsky*. London: Dent, 1966. Print.

A book written about Tchaikovsky and his more popular works.

Tchaikovsky, Peter I. *1812 Festival Overture in E Flat Major, Op. 49*. New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1942. Internet resource.

A full score of Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture containing a brief history of why it was written.