

PROGRAM NOTES

by Pam Davis

Narong Prangcharoen (born 1973)

Sound, Echo, and Silence: a Concerto for Phin, Khaen, and Orchestra (2021)

Eminent Thai composer Narong Prangcharoen received his DMA from University of Missouri-Kansas City under Chen Yi. He is a Dean of the College of Music of Mahidol University, Thailand and is a composer-in-Residence of the Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra. Dr. Prangcharoen has been the recipient of numerous awards for his compositions, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship.

This is the first composition with symphony orchestra featuring the phin and khaen, traditional instruments popular in northeastern Thailand. The phin is a type of lute, usually with three strings, traditionally played with a thin sharp piece of bamboo. The khaen is a free-reed mouth organ of varied-length bamboo pipes with metal reeds.

The following is from the composer's note in the score:

The relationship between sound, echo, and silence has been long established since the beginning of the creation of music. Many composers have explored this relationship to many possibilities. The most well-known piece for silent music should go to 4'33" by John Cage which explored the audience's expectation with silence. It's like the echo among the noise of the audiences in the venue to create the ambient sound. This is proof that even when the performers are silent; we still hear sounds. Throughout the history of western music, composers have found their way to cooperate with sound, echo, and silence in their own unique way. Asian music also consisted of a strong relationship between sound and silence as well. According to the perspective of Chinese traditional music, a true silence does not exist. Complete absence of sound cannot be achieved because the consideration of silence is represented by the sound of nature as in nature, the sound can't (sic) never be completely absent.

"Sound, Echo, and Silence" is the investigation of the relationship between the sound, echo, and silence in the music. Many parts of music start with a soft and silent sound then gradually get the full sound. Some parts start with the big attack of the full orchestra then suddenly stop to hear the echo fades to silence. Many instruments are playing slightly off to explore the sound of echo to see how to imitate the sound of echo created by the main instrument and soft repeated instrument. This music is also an integration of the traditional instruments and western instruments. The differences between both worlds can harmoniously join together based on the principal relationship of sound and echo. The result of this exploration created a new aspect for Thai traditional music and instruments, not only the way of playing, but also the reaction to play with unfamiliar western orchestras. It certainly sets a new beginning of the combination of the instruments that has never been done before.

♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: January 22, 2022

♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: tonight is the second United States performance

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893)

Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Opus 36 (1877)

During the time that he was composing this symphony, Tchaikovsky met and was influenced by the two most significant women in his life; one for good and the other not so much. Both women came into his life as a result of their obsessions.

The affluent Nadeja von Meck, dedicatee of the symphony, had fallen under the spell of Tchaikovsky's music and became his loyal correspondent and longtime generous patron, but the two never met—a condition set by von Meck. For years he poured out his soul to her in letters, concerning his own self-analysis and that of his music.

The other influential female was Antonina Milyukova, a student at the conservatory. Sending Tchaikovsky multiple unhinged love letters, she eventually persuaded him to marry her, possibly for fear of her harming herself, and to aid his reputation that he felt was damaged due to his homosexuality. The short-lived marriage was such a disaster that Tchaikovsky even attempted suicide in the icy Moscow River.

Tchaikovsky completed his sketch of the symphony at the time of their engagement. It is posited that in the work he attempted to relieve his mounting anxiety. He wrote to von Meck: "We cannot escape our fate, and there was something fatalistic about my meeting with this girl."

Declaring that the symphony has a program, Tchaikovsky revealed it only to von Meck in confidential letters that are quoted here. Referring to the opening fanfare that is repeated over and over, even returning in the finale: "This is Fate, the fatal power which hinders one in the pursuit of happiness from gaining the goal, which jealously provides that peace and comfort do not prevail..." And further in the opening movement: "The feeling of depression and loneliness grows stronger and stronger. Would it not be better to turn away from reality and lull one's self in dreams?... This we see that life is only an everlasting alternation of somber reality and fugitive dreams of happiness."

A wistful oboe solo opens the second movement. Tchaikovsky wrote, "... Here is that melancholy feeling which enwraps one when he sits in the house at night exhausted by work; ... a swarm of reminiscences has arisen. How sad it is that so much has already *been* and *gone!* ... One mourns the past and has neither the courage nor the will to begin a new life. ... It is sad, yet sweet, to lose oneself in the past."

A bright pizzicato tune characterizes the third movement opening and closing. A peasant dance and some marching music in the winds comprise the middle section. "There is no determined feeling, no exact expression in the third movement. Here are capricious arabesques, vague figures which slip into the imagination when one has taken wine and is slightly intoxicated. The mood is now gay, now mournful. ... the picture of a drunk peasant and a gutter song. Military music is heard... disconnected pictures which come and go in the brain of the sleeper. They have nothing to do with reality..."

Out of the delicate close of the third movement, the finale explodes. About the fourth movement, Tchaikovsky writes, "... the picture of a folk holiday. Hardly have we had time to forget ourselves in the happiness of others when indefatigable Fate reminds us once more of its presence. ... They do not spare us a glance nor stop to observe that we are lonely and sad.

...There still *is* happiness, simple naïve happiness. Rejoice in the happiness of others and you can still live.”

- ♪ 1877 WORLD EVENTS: Dancer Isadora Duncan is born, Brahms’s Symphony No.2 premieres, earmuffs are patented
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: February 1878 in Moscow
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: March 2004