

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Subscription Program No. 2 – Laura Jackson Conducts Tchaikovsky
October 16-17-18, 2026

This is a historical moment in the history of the MSO! This program marks the formal debut of Music Director Designate Laura Jackson—one of two subscription programs she will conduct this year. We begin with a work by Carlos Simon, *AMEN!*—a piece Maestra Jackson had a hand in commissioning in 2019. Pianist Joyce Yang, in her third appearance with the MSO, is featured in the Rachmaninoff *Piano Concerto No. 2*. This work, now a mainstay of the solo piano repertoire, represented Rachmaninoff's triumph over a deep depression. He published it with a dedication to the doctor who had helped him shake his illness. (Ms. Yang's previous appearances with the MSO featured her in the Prokofiev *Piano Concerto No. 3* in 2019 and the Mozart *Piano Concerto No. 24* in 2024.) Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 4* is tied together by a powerful musical motive that he identifies as "Fate." This searing autobiographical work comes from one of the most painful periods in his life: following his disastrous, short-lived marriage.

The music of Grammy-nominated composer Carlos Simon is notable for its broad stylistic reach: incorporating influences from across the spectrum of African American music.

Carlos Simon

Born: April 13, 1986, Washington, DC.



AMEN!

- **Composed:** 2017 for concert band; revised 2019 for orchestra.
- **Premiere:** The concert band version was premiered on November 21, 2017 by the University of Michigan Symphony Band. The orchestral version heard here was premiered on August 11, 2019, in Rochester, New York, by the Gateways Music Festival Orchestra under Michael Morgan
- **Previous MSO Performance:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 14xa:00.

This work was inspired by Simon's experience growing up in a Pentecostal church.

Background

Born in Washington DC, but raised in Atlanta, composer and activist Carlos Simon comes from a long line of preachers. He notes “My dad, he always gets on me. He wants me to be a preacher, but I always tell him, ‘Music is my pulpit. That’s where I preach,’” Simon’s successful music for orchestra channels a wide range of Black American styles, including the Gospel music he grew up with. Simon is the current composer-in-residence for the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and frequently writes for the National Symphony Orchestra and Washington National Opera. Simon also holds the position of inaugural Composer Chair of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the first in the institution’s 144-year history.

Simon has often drawn on Gospel music and his own Pentecostal upbringing for inspiration. For example, in 2025, the Los Angeles Philharmonic commissioned his *Gospel Mass*. Regarding *AMEN!* Simon noted that:

The orchestral arrangement of *AMEN!* was commissioned by the Reno Philharmonic (Laura Jackson, conductor), Gateways Music Festival (Michael Morgan, conductor) and the American Composers Orchestra. The original commission was by the University of Michigan Symphony Band. This piece pays homage to my family's four generational affiliation with the Pentecostal church. My intent is to re-create the musical experience of an African American Pentecostal church services that I enjoyed being a part of while growing up in this denomination.

AMEN! is laid out in three interconnected movements, depicting the seamless flow of a Pentecostal service.

What You’ll Hear

Simon says the following about the work:

Pentecostal denominations, such as Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), Pentecostal Assemblies of God, Apostolic, Holiness Church, among many others, are known for their exuberant outward expressions of worship. The worship services in these churches will often have joyous dancing, spontaneous shouting, and soulful singing. The music in these worship services is a vital vehicle in fostering a genuine spiritual experience for the congregation. The three movements in *AMEN!* are performed without break to depict how the different parts of a worship services flows into the next. In the first movement, [*Lively*] I’ve imagined the sound of an exuberant choir and congregation singing harmoniously together in a call-and-response

fashion. The soulful second movement [*Soulfully*] quotes a gospel song, *I'll Take Jesus For Mine*, that I frequently heard in many services. The title, *AMEN!*, refers to the plagal or "Amen" cadence (IV-I), which is the focal point of the climax in the final movement [*Mysteriously*]. Along with heavily syncopated rhythms and interjecting contrapuntal lines, this cadence modulates up by half step until we reach a frenzied state, emulating a spiritually heightened state of worship.

The piece opens with smeary, blue-note proclamations from the trombones, which leads into rhythmically fragmented music that tosses short ideas back and forth. Another trombone proclamation seems to calm things, and the middle section opens with bluesy solos from clarinet and trombone, before the entire congregation (um...orchestra) picks up the tune. A chattering drum rhythm leads into the final section, increasingly frenetic music, eventually presided over by the trombone section.

Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto is one of the great landmark works of the romantic piano repertoire.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873, Staryia Russa, Russia.

Died: March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California.



Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

- **Composed:** 1900-01.
- **Premiere:** October 14, 1901, by the Moscow Philharmonic Society, with the composer at the piano.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** Soloists at these programs have included: Emma Endres (1940), Jean Geiss (1950), James Mathis (1965), Misha Dichter (1973), Marylène Dosse (1981), Cecile Licad (1989), André Watts (2002), and Olga Kern (2010).
- **Duration:** 33:00.

This concerto was written after the composer had recovered from a serious bout of depression.

Background

In the years prior to 1900, Rachmaninoff was at the lowest point in his musical career and personal life. His *Memoirs* describe the crushing self-doubt and apathy

that ruled his life after a disastrous premiere performance of his first symphony in St. Petersburg in 1897. He considered giving up composition, and according to the *Memoirs* “I did nothing and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent lying on a couch and sighing over my ruined life.” Even a highly successful tour to London, where he performed his first piano concerto with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, did not break this prolonged depression. It was not until 1900, when his relatives sent Rachmaninoff to a hypnotist, Dr. Nikolai Dahl, that the depression broke. The composer had promised during his London tour to provide a second piano concerto for a return engagement but had given up the effort. Rachmaninoff described the many sessions with Dr. Dahl where he would “lay half asleep” while the doctor planted suggestions in his mind about his ability to write the concerto. The *Concerto No. 2* quickly began to take shape, and the last two movements were ready to be performed at a Moscow charity concert in December of 1900, where the audience was wildly enthusiastic. His confidence restored, Rachmaninoff completed in quick succession the *Op. 17* suite for two pianos and the opening movement of the concerto. When the *Piano Concerto No. 2* was published in 1901, it was gratefully dedicated to “Monsieur N. Dahl.”

This concerto is in three movements:

- A lengthy opening movement in sonata form.
- A sentimental slow movement with a lush main theme.
- A forceful finale.

What You’ll Hear

The first movement (*Moderato*) opens with piano chords that lead into the first theme: a thoroughly Russian melody decorated by piano filigree. After a very broad presentation of this first theme, the piano is left exposed to play the lyrical second theme. The development is mainly concerned with the first theme: it is fragmented among the sections of the orchestra, supporting increasingly flashy writing in the piano. Near the end of the development, the piano introduces a march-like figure that carries into the somewhat varied recapitulation.

After a chromatic introduction, the piano begins the second movement (*Adagio sostenuto*) with a triplets that continue beneath the presentation of the main theme by the clarinet. (This melody will also be recognizable to those of us of a certain age as a rather schmaltzy 1970s pop song.) The soloist and orchestra then trade roles: the piano plays the theme, while the woodwinds and strings pick up the triplet figure. A central section develops the theme slightly, and a piano flourish leads into a much more agitated version by strings and woodwinds. The piano inserts a brilliant cadenza, and the theme makes one final appearance.

The final movement (*Allegro scherzando*) begins with extremely sparse orchestration. However instruments are added in quick succession, and brief *fortissimo* passage establishes the key. The piano begins with a cadenza, followed by the re-entrance of the woodwinds and strings in close rhythmic interplay with the solo line. The first theme is introduced by the soloist and immediately developed. A short passage by the soloist leads into the second theme, which is played by violas and oboe. The development section introduces new material—a dotted figure—and both themes return, with further development. After a brief cadenza, the second theme returns again, *fortissimo* for full orchestra, followed by a blazing coda.

This passionate symphony by Tchaikovsky is tied together musically by the brooding “Fate” motive

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia.

Died: November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia.



Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

- **Composed:** Between May 1877 and January 1878.
- **Premiere:** February 22, 1878. in Moscow.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1978, 1992, 2001, 2007 and 2015.
- **Duration:** 43:00.

This intensely autobiographical work was written during one of the most troubled times in Tchaikovsky’s life.

Background

Tchaikovsky was capable of profound musical creation even during the most disastrous times in his life. In the spring of 1877, when he was hard at work on sketches for his fourth symphony and doing preliminary work on his opera *Eugene Onegin*, he received an increasingly passionate series of love letters from Antonina Milyukova, a conservatory student. When she finally threatened to commit suicide if he refused to meet her, Tchaikovsky visited her but firmly refused her proposals of marriage. Within a few weeks, however, he relented, and they were married in July. Just why Tchaikovsky—rarely a completely balanced individual in his own right—impetuously agreed to this marriage remains something of a mystery. He

may have wanted to silence nasty whisperings about his homosexuality. He had in fact, announced to his family in the fall of 1876 that he intended to “fight my nature with all of my strength” and marry as soon as possible. Whatever the reason, this marriage was an unmitigated disaster for both of them. Within a few days of the wedding, Tchaikovsky found Antonina's presence unbearable, and he fled Moscow to Kamenka, making weak excuses about needing seclusion to compose. His teaching position forced Tchaikovsky to return to Moscow and his wife in September, and he promptly attempted suicide. Failing suicide, he left again, now to St. Petersburg, where doctors recommended a permanent separation from Antonina and a change of scenery. He fled to the small Swiss town of Clarens in October and stayed away from Russia for nearly six months. Though he made trips to Paris, Florence, and Vienna during this period, he found Clarens a congenial place to work. He finished three large works there during the early months of 1878: finishing the *Symphony No. 4* on January 6, *Eugene Onegin* just a month later, and in a final burst of creative energy, composing the *Violin Concerto* during March and April. Several smaller works come from this same amazing period as well.

At the very time he was going through his tragic marriage with Antonina, Tchaikovsky was forging a much longer lasting and in many ways more significant relationship with another woman. Madame von Meck was an enormously wealthy widow who became attracted to Tchaikovsky's music and began to write to him in 1877. Tchaikovsky eagerly seized upon this relationship, and for the next fourteen years they carried on a deeply personal correspondence, each sharing their most innermost thoughts with the other. They purposely never met one another in person—it is reported that they did run into one another by chance on at least two occasions but never spoke. (This may seem to have been a curious and barren relationship, but is it really so different from countless romances conducted exclusively online in our own time?) The benefits to Tchaikovsky were boundless: here was a woman who was not even remotely interested in a conventional marriage or a physical relationship, but who nonetheless wanted to share his intellectual and emotional life. Beyond the emotional support he craved, Madame von Meck also became his patron, granting him an annual salary that allowed him freedom from teaching duties to compose. This passionate long-distance relationship continued until 1891, when it was broken off, apparently at her insistence.

The *Symphony No. 4* is perhaps the greatest work of this calamitous period, and its success did much to restore Tchaikovsky's confidence. The work is a masterpiece in purely musical terms, but the composer himself invited a much more personal

interpretation. In explaining the work to Madame von Meck, he wrote: “I should be sorry if symphonies that mean nothing should flow from my pen, consisting only of a progression of harmonies, rhythms and modulations. Most assuredly, my symphony has a program, but one that cannot be expressed in words; the very attempt would be ludicrous...shouldn’t a symphony reveal those wordless urges that hide in the heart, asking earnestly for expression?” Nevertheless, Tchaikovsky continued his letter with a long and detailed description of the program. Although he never mentions the disastrous marriage in this letter—she was, after all, intimate with the details, and had given him financial support throughout the episode—his narration is painfully autobiographical.

This symphony is set in four movements.

- A dramatic opening movement beginning with the “Fate” theme.

Tchaikovsky’s themes

alternate between anger and resignation, until a peaceful interlude. This mood is broken by

return of “Fate.”

- A wistful and sad set of variations.
- An uneasy scherzo.
- An outwardly exuberant, finale, in which even “Fate” is lost in rejoicing.

What You’ll Hear

The opening movement (*Andante sostenuto*) begins with a massive statement by the brass and woodwinds. In his narration, Tchaikovsky described this theme as “...Fate, the inevitable force which halts our aspirations towards happiness.” If the opening theme is angry and powerful, the *cantabile* second theme is more resigned. “The feeling of despondency and despair grows ever stronger and more passionate. Isn’t it better to turn from reality and lose ourselves in dreams?” As an answer to Tchaikovsky’s plea, there is a dreamlike interlude of happiness and relaxation, marked by a lilting oboe solo. This dream is of course rudely shattered by Fate, with a mighty recapitulation of the opening material.

The second movement, marked “*Andantino* in the manner of a song,” presents a lovely but dejected melody in a very free set of variations. Tchaikovsky describes the movement as “another phase of suffering.” As narrator, he sits alone late at night, recalling happy and sad scenes from his youth. “How sad, yet sweet, to lose ourselves in memories of the past.” The melody stated in the opening by the oboe, returns in undecorated form at the very end, played in darker tones by the bassoon.

The outer sections of the scherzo (*Allegro vivace*) are dominated by light *pizzicato* playing by the strings. Here, Tchaikovsky describes the music as “fleeting arabesques” coming into the mind of a man who has drunk just a little bit too much wine before falling into a troubled sleep. There is a central episode, lightly played by woodwinds and brass; a brief memory of a drunken peasant singing with a distant military band.

The famous opening passage of the finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) provides a technical display for the strings and woodwinds, but it also represents the narrator’s observations of the festive and rather frenzied happiness of those around him. Darker moods intrude, in the guise of a minor-key Russian folk melody played by the woodwinds, but these are always overcome by exuberance. The movement’s climax comes with a restatement of the “Fate” theme from the first movement. Even this forbidding theme is conquered by the festive opening melody, and the symphony closes with a brilliant coda. In Tchaikovsky’s words, “Rejoice in the happiness of others, and life will still be possible.”