Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Tchaikovsky and the Funny Englishman

Evie Sullivan · Wednesday, August 14th, 2019

It was the 50th anniversary of one of the most audience-friendly shows at the Hollywood Bowl: The Tchaikovsky Spectacular with Fireworks! This year, the English conductor Bramwell Tovey lead the inspired and sparkling Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra with elegance, precision and virtuosity. But the real stars of the evening were the fireworks that make this event an annual sellout sensation. The Bowl was filled to the brink with cheerful folks and the energy was high. What surprised me most was the generational mix. It was refreshing to see so many young faces in the audience.

Getting to and from the Bowl is always an adventure and this year, my friend and I for the first time took Lyft, choosing to forgo the park&ride option with the old shuttle busses. Lyft has established a real pick-up port, illuminated in pink light and organized like a military operation. Why not go along with the times? No waiting time, at least at the drop-off, a comfortable walking path to the gate where efficient checkers do their job to search for suspicious objects in people's handbags. Once we entered the beautiful and modern shopping area, we were greeted by the friendliest staff in Los Angeles. They ushered us to our box and wished us a wonderful evening. And wonderful, it was. The night was mild, the music invigorating and the conductor funny as only an older Englishman can be. Tovey was self-deprecating, politically astute and full of stories about Tchaikovsky and the pieces that were performed. I wondered: were any of the anecdotes true? No matter. They were hilarious and original. It seemed Bramwell Tovey's motto as MC was, "Never let the truth spoil a good story," and that was just fine with me.

Bramwell Tovey, an elegant conductor and a self-deprecating funnyman

The evening started with the popular polonaise and waltz from the opera "Eugene Onegin," Tchaikovsky's most successful opera, based on Pushkin's verse novel and first performed in 1879. I have never seen the overture performed without a full chorus, but I didn't miss it. Tovey replaced the human voices with memorable instrumental passages where he gave the soloists much opportunity to shine.

The usually serious orchestra leader then took the microphone and started joking in his distinct, very English way, about Tchaikovsky, Brexit and Trump, the music he loves so much and the joy he experiences, performing at the Bowl where things can get a bit out of hand, since not every cork that popped throughout the night was necessarily from a lemonade bottle. The music of the fourth act of Tchaikovsky's ballet "Swan Lake" inspired Tovey to tell the Swan Lake story with a funny

twist: the prince is in love with a swan and his mother is not so happy with the choice (but which mother in law ever is?). He even invented a happy ending for the doomed lovers (not so much for the mother).

Rudolf Nurejev and Margot Fonteyn in Swan Lake

Back on the rostrum, Tovey was again the all-consumed orchestra leader whose elegant gestures set the tempo for the superb interpretation of Tchaikovsky's music. The Los Angeles Philharmonic followed with enthusiasm and joy, and the audience went wild at the end of each piece. The atmosphere was as charged as at a rock concert. Audience members from 12 to 90 screamed their lungs out to give it up for orchestra and conductor.

Did you know that Tchaikovsky and his younger brother went on a miserable vacation to Rome? I didn't know either, but the amusing story Tovey told about the origin of the Capriccio Italien made everybody believe it was so. The hotel where the brothers allegedly stayed was next to a barrack, and every morning they woke up to the sound of fanfare. Peter Ilych's younger brother Modest was offended by the noise, but the genius in the family took the sounds and composed a light-hearted, colorful capriccio. Did Tovey's story about the origin of the piece come close to the truth? No, not at all, but the truth would have been too depressing for an evening of sheer fun and festivity. Tchaikovsky went alone to Rome and there was probably no barrack or fanfare but a composer with a troubled mindset after his father's death and his inner tumult about his homosexuality. How he was able to write such a joyful piece of music in spite of his depression is a riddle.

The last performance of the evening was the 1812 Overture, a crowd-pleaser that Tchaikovsky composed to commemorate the Russian defeat of Napoleon in 1812 and a staple of the yearly Extravaganza. Tchaikovsky crafted a patriotic piece and used the Russian Empire's national anthem "God Save The Czar" to open and close the overture. 137 years since its first performance, the 1812 Overture is still popular, although the composer himself was not a fan of the piece he wrote to order. He took liberties by representing the French with the Marseillaise, a glaring anachronism, since the Marseillaise was not in use during Napoleon's time. In fact, the "Corsican Fiend" banned it, and it was not restored as France's national anthem until the 1870s. But today, even the purists enjoy the quotation of the hymn.

Paul Souza, Show Producer for the Fireworks

The 1812 is famous for the16 cannon shots near the end of the overture, although the Hollywood Bowl replaces them every year with the finest fireworks modern pyrotechnics has to offer. Show producer and organizer of the Pyro Spectacles, Paul Souza, realized the effects that the score of the *1812* requires. The brouhaha of the fireworks was glorious, the synchronization with the music flawless and the enthusiasm of the audience palpable. Was it corny at times? Of course, but who cares? Everybody smiled and had a good time; that's what counts.

The light show ended abruptly, the conductor left the stage to thundering applause, and the lights came on. Then 18,000 people turned to exit the Bowl. We ordered our ride with Lyft and proceeded to the pink illuminated Lot B to meet with the driver. Not so fast! It takes a long time for the cars to arrive! Next time, we'll pay the Lyft Lounge on the Museum Terrace a last visit while we wait for the Lyft to be taken home.

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