



June 29, 2010

Wanted: An '1812 Overture' to call our own for the Fourth of July

Is it just me, or are you likewise confounded by the fact that Americans celebrate their Independence Day every year by thrilling to music that actually commemorates Czarist Russia's defeat of the invading imperialist army of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1812? Don't people remember that we had our own battles in 1812, including one right here in dear old Baltimore that gave birth to our national anthem?

This weekend, there will be innumerable performances of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture," complete with canons (real or on tape) for the grandly pealing finale that leads into the inevitable fireworks display, just as on every Fourth of July. But shouldn't we be listening to music that has a more American stamp on it?

I know it's a little late for a composer to create a stirring orchestral evocation of the bombardment of Fort McHenry -- or, even more appropriately, the Battle of Yorktown. But I'd like to propose a relatively easy solution, and I think it would be exceedingly appropriate for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra to run with it. Here's the pitch:

Somewhere back in the dark, dank Soviet era, the state ordered changes made to Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" so that people wouldn't hear the quotations of the former Russian national anthem in the score; the yucky USSR one was substituted. (I heard a recording of that weird version once, but can't find one now.)

That, of course, was reprehensible on artistic grounds, but it does provide a precedent, of sorts, and has given me the inspiration for my bold, brilliant, path-breaking scheme. Let the BSO hold a competition for the best re-working of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" so that the structure and length stay the same, along with as much as the original musical material as possible, but all French and Russian allusions are transformed into appropriate British and American counterparts. No more "Marseillaise." No more Russian hymns.

The BSO would premiere the new version in a splashy manner, perhaps on the grounds of Fort McHenry, and the whole country would soon want to perform it. (The royalties would guarantee new salary highs for the Baltimore musicians.)

Imagine the extra thrill of having the big build-up in the piece lead not to the Czarist anthem, but to "The Star-Spangled Banner" instead, bringing lumps to throats and audiences to their feet. If you listen carefully near the very end of Tchaikovsky's work, you'll notice that he unintentionally outlines the opening notes of "The Star-Spangled Banner," so maybe that's a sign that he would approve. You'll hear that allusion at 05:48" to 05:52" on the fabulous Swingle Singers version I've attached here, just for the fun of it.

So there you have it. A challenge to create a new, more American tradition for the Fourth of July. (If anyone has already tried something like this, hey, I'm sorry, but it must not have been too successful.) Seems to me that everyone would benefit from an alternative "1812 Overture" we could call our own.

Meanwhile, here's that great Swingle Singers version:



http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lZ5Yez0Hec&feature=player_embedded#!