



OMAHA  
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2021/2022 SEASON

# Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 4 with Maestro Bahl

Friday, May 20, 2022 - 7:30 PM | Saturday, May 21, 2022 - 7:30 PM

Holland Performing Arts Center

Ankush Kumar Bahl, conductor

Deanna Tham, conductor

Lara St. John, violin

WAGNER

*Overture to Tannhäuser*

MARTIN KENNEDY

*Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*

I. Allegro con spirito

II. Andante doloroso - Cadenza -

III. Allegro gioioso

Lara St. John, violin

INTERMISSION

TCHAIKOVSKY

*Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36*

I. Andante sostenuto

II. Andantino in modo di canzona

III. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato

IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco

SPONSORED BY:



# program notes by Steven Lowe; transcription by Dani Meier

## **Overture to *Tannhäuser***

**Richard Wagner**

Born: Leipzig, Germany, May 22, 1813 | Died: Venice, Italy, February 13, 1883

Richard Wagner's influence extended far beyond music. Writers, philosophers, other musicians and artists of all persuasions fell under his sway well into the 20th century. A slim but incisive book, *Aspects of Wagner* by Bryan Magee (1969), is worthy of attention a half-century after its publication, as is the recent and ambitious 784-page tome *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* by esteemed New Yorker music critic Alex Ross (2020).

Wagner was a great composer whose life exemplified the bromide "Do as I say, not as I do." Several of his operas extol religious and spiritual virtues while his affairs with the wives of admirers and colleagues blemish his ethical and moral character. His opera *Tannhäuser* exemplifies the conflicts between the polar opposites of his life: the carnal appeal of his obsessive attraction to Venus, goddess of sensuous delight, vies with the purity of the woman Elizabeth. Many of the motifs from the opera appear in the overture to *Tannhäuser*, a veritable tone poem.

The overture opens with a pilgrim's hymn emerging from the clarinets, bassoons and horns, repeated but in a more stentorian manner by the trombones. The libidinous Venusberg music follows at a faster pace before one hears the reprise of the pilgrim's hymn, now with a murmuring string accompaniment. A Heaven-sent peroration ends the overture, letting us know in advance that the Spirit is stronger than the Profane.

## **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra**

**Martin Kennedy**

Born: Wakefield, England, March 24, 1978

Although it's not every day that you get to hear a world premiere, have the composer in attendance and the artist-muse on stage, we've been pretty fortunate at the Omaha Symphony to bring all of these things together for the final Masterworks of the season. Just in case you don't have time to talk with our composer yourself this weekend, I spoke with Martin Kennedy about his glorious new violin concerto, working with friend Lara St. John, and thoughts on being a 21st century classical musician.

"I've been working with Lara for almost 20 years now; we play concerts together (I'm a pianist), so we've toured together quite a bit and I've written a number of smaller pieces for her, but she asked if I wanted to write her a violin concerto.

"One advantage [of writing for Lara] is that I know her playing very well; I anticipated the kind of things that she'd like to do [as the soloist] and even what she'd like to hear in the orchestration. There's a laundry list of things she does so well – she has an incredible sense of rhythm and energy, a sense of the natural melodic line. I've seen her do violin tricks over the years that no one else can do, like this harmonic feat that I had to put in there for her to show off.

"With this particular piece, I wanted to make sure the audience was drawn in straight away. Without dismissing pieces that gather you in slowly – for example, Berg's violin concerto has a slow opening and I think it's the greatest concerto ever – I had a laundry list of things I wanted to do in this piece, and I wanted it to get going. It starts with a hoe-down, and generally a lot of fiddle playing, so that your eye is drawn to Lara immediately. I wanted to have a double cadenza with Lara and the concertmaster [Susanna Perry Gilmore], because I'd never seen that before. And – I wanted that to be a surprise, not unlike when composers put solos in non-obvious parts of the orchestra. Think about the Mahler [Symphony No. 1] bass solo; where is it coming from? I wanted the audience to sense that the violin sounded louder, but to take the time to force them to pan out to the rest of the ensemble. For overall structure, there are three movements, but the final two are attacca.

"I've written other concertos before – for piano and flute – and a number of smaller things. I've also orchestrated Liszt's *Totentanz* for Lara and John Corigliano's Suite from *The Red Violin*. Feeling comfortable writing for other instruments, whether in the solo line or in the orchestration, comes mostly from score study – looking carefully at orchestration. There are some surprises; for example, with Liszt's *Totentanz*, there's a massive fugal moment that's extraordinarily difficult for piano, but weirdly became much easier for violin. There's also a lot of trial and error; you may think something is well orchestrated and you find out otherwise in rehearsals. Even Mahler had to rewrite things after hearing the first rehearsal!

“I studied with Don Freund, David Dzubay, and Claude Baker at Indiana, and Milton Babbitt at Juilliard. [Milton Babbitt famously penned the “Who Cares If You Listen?” essay regarding audiences’ reception of modern classical music.] Good teachers make you realize that the ideal style of composition for students is not molding a student into the teacher’s voice, but to take the voice the student already has and make it better. Milton Babbitt may have been a strict serialist, but he was [Stephen] Sondheim’s teacher! No matter what you brought to Milton, he’d make you better. He wanted to make you into the composer you were, not the composer he wanted you to be.

“My style has been called ‘Neo-Romantic’ but I never really understood that term; every composer wants to be innovative, but whether by design or how I grew up, my voice and ears tend to lean more toward melody, more toward accessibility. The composers and music I personally gravitate toward are all over the place. Berg – I appreciate his attention to detail, with his sudden bursts of romanticism. He was schooled on Brahms but then went to study with Schoenberg; even with the Second Viennese School he just couldn’t get this Brahmsian bent out of his ear. Even in his 12-tone opera, *Lulu*, there are these moments of gorgeousness. Stravinsky is the embodiment of what happens when a composer sits at the piano and plays. Your fingers are glomming out what you know, your past, everything you’ve studied – you’re shaped by the music that you hear throughout your life. I didn’t really grow up on classical music, but Stravinsky’s music feels like he’s constantly glomming out everything he’s learned and trying something fresh with it. With melody, with lush, melodic drive, I feel I owe most to Ravel and Debussy, which I did hear more often growing up. However, I was much more likely to be listening to Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, jazz, then any of the above as a kid. It was only when I went to school that I truly dove into the deep-end.

“Composition wise, I wouldn’t say I have a bucket list, but I’d love to try a viola concerto at some point – for some reason, its voice just appeals to me. I would also enjoy getting to try a staged work, which is something I’ve never done before. I enjoy almost everything; arranging projects are enjoyable, because you’re taking something that exists and making it brand new, and performing is still shaping what’s on the page in front of you. An individual voice is always at the fore.”

Soloist Lara St. John had one additional note to add regarding her and Martin’s preparation for the world premiere: “One last thing I’ll say about the concerto – Martin and I managed to count every note in the violin part, after laughing about how huge this piece is for the performer, and... there are 10,061 notes in my part alone.”

Don’t try counting along – just sit back and enjoy.

Transcribed by Dani Meier, 2022

### **Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36** **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky**

Born: Votkinsk, district of Viatka, Russia, May 7, 1840 | Died: St. Petersburg, Russia, November 6, 1893

Tchaikovsky’s music, more than almost any we can think of, goes “straight from the heart to the heart,” to borrow Beethoven’s description of his own music. Tchaikovsky’s melodic gift is second to none, sharing a well-deserved berth along with Mozart, Schubert and Dvořák as classical music’s great tunesmiths. Though working within a harmonic framework far less adventurous than, say, Wagner, Tchaikovsky had an unerring instinct for the right sequence of chords to intensify feeling, and a generous and well-chosen palette of orchestral sonorities with which to drape his musical narrative. The spirit of dance is ever-present; no wonder that he still remains the paragon of ballet composition. Above all, there is an emotional immediacy in this music that appeals to a broad spectrum of people, yet a sophistication in manipulating musical materials that engages cognoscenti.

Whatever personal demons tormented him—and there were many, ranging from his extraordinary sensitivity to noise and to slights intended and imagined, to inner turmoil attending his homosexuality—he bravely tried his compositional hand at all the genres of his time. Operas, symphonies, concertos, chamber music, solo piano works, song and ballets flowed from his ever-active pen.

The year 1877 was fraught with emotional turmoil for Tchaikovsky, which focused on a former student, Antonina Miliukhova, who proclaimed her love for the composer in a passionate letter. Tchaikovsky claimed to have not even remembered the young woman whom he had met 12 years earlier. As unlikely as it might seem at first blush, their re-acquaintance resulted in marriage—ultimately ill-fated to be sure. Tchaikovsky had confided in his brother Modest that he thought he should marry to defuse potential ruination lest the knowledge of his homosexuality be exposed. In 19th-century Russia, arrest and exile to Siberia was a likely consequence of such practice. Antonina’s amorous desires conflicted with Tchaikovsky’s sexual preferences resulting, not surprisingly in an unconsummated marriage and a suicide attempt by the distraught composer.

That same year Tchaikovsky entered a long epistolary relationship with Madame Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy patron of the arts who insisted that they never actually meet. Until shortly before his death she provided much-needed financial assistance as well as deeply considered exchanges on esthetic matters. As a counterpoise to the strife engendered by his catastrophic marriage to Antonina, Mme. von Meck's participation in Tchaikovsky's life helped stabilize his labile emotions. In gratitude he dedicated his Symphony No. 4 to her.

Emotion is never lacking in Tchaikovsky's symphonic canon, but clearly the extreme mood shifts in the Fourth reflect the turmoil of his life at the time, especially in the opening almost frenzied first movement. The composer, who had provided a program at von Meck's request, noted "This is Fate, the power that hinders one in the pursuit of happiness from gaining the goal, which jealousy provides that peace and comfort do not prevail, that the sky is not free from clouds—a might that swings, like the sword of Damocles, constantly over the head, that poisons continually the soul. This might is overpowering and invincible. There is nothing to do but submit and vainly to complain."

This epic movement, *Andante sostenuto* – as long as the remaining three – opens with a recurring fierce brass fanfare that serves as a kind of emotionally generative leitmotif. Two contrasting themes emerge: an aching melody in the strings and a tender dance-inspired tune first sung by a solo clarinet. Structurally the movement seems like an uneasy partnership of sonata-allegro and the free-ranging traits of a tone poem. It is easy to fault Tchaikovsky for his discomfort with traditional German/Austrian form, yet the very duality of its layout actually enhances its wildly veering range of emotional utterance. The unquestionably bleak mood of the coda seems to assert the triumph of Fate over joy.

Marked *Andantino in modo di canzona*, the second movement flows from a long and exquisitely melancholy theme courtesy of the oboe that largely avoids the tempestuous atmosphere of the opening *Andante sostenuto* except for the compellingly dark climax, which recalls the continuing presence of unkind Fate.

The sun shines in the light and deftly written *Scherzo*, novel and enchanting in having the strings play pizzicato throughout the entire movement. Tchaikovsky noted, "Here are capricious arabesques, vague figures that slip into the imagination when one has taken wine and is slightly intoxicated." Oboes and bassoons fill the central Trio with suggestions of a rustic dance punctuated by droll asides from brass and piccolo lampooning military band music.

The *Allegro con fuoco* finale surges from the gate with manic energy largely unabated in this frantic romp. Winds introduce the primary theme, a Russian folk song called "In the Meadow there Stands a Birch Tree." A swaggering march-like theme enters, seemingly self-assured, before Tchaikovsky reprises the fearsome Fate motif, ending the presumed defeat of negativism. However - Tchaikovsky did not want the symphony to end in despair and resumes the optimistic momentum, noting "There is still happiness...Rejoice in the happiness of others—and you can still live."

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## Lara St. John, violin

Canadian-born violinist Lara St. John has been described as "something of a phenomenon" by *The Strad* and a "high-powered soloist" by the *New York Times*.

She has performed as soloist with the orchestras of Cleveland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, the Boston Pops, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, the Royal Philharmonic, NDR Symphony, Zurich Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Queensland Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony, Auckland Philharmonia, Hong Kong Philharmonic, China Philharmonic, and the symphonies of Tokyo, Kyoto, Shanghai, Sao Paolo, Montevideo, Ecuador, Mexico and Lima as well as the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra.

*The Los Angeles Times* wrote, "Lara St. John happens to be a volcanic violinist with a huge, fabulous tone that pours out of her like molten lava. She has technique to burn and plays at a constant high heat."

Lara owns and runs her own label, *Ancalagon*, which she founded in 1999. She has recorded with the Royal Philharmonic, the Simon Bolívar Youth Orchestra, The Knights, pianist Matt Herskowitz, and Berlin Philharmonic principal harpist Marie-Pierre Langlamet. Her *Mozart* recording with The Knights won a Juno Award in 2011.

Her 2016 release of *Shiksa*, an album of re-imagined folk music, received a five-star review from *All About Jazz*: "Music like this is beyond imagination and talent. It exists only in the loosely-held molecules found on the razor's edge of Creation."

She has been featured in *People*, *US News and World Report*, on CNN's *Showbiz Today*, NPR's *All Things Considered*, CBC, BBC, a Bravo! Special: *Live at the Rehearsal Hall*, and twice on the cover of *Strings*.

In 2020 Lara was invested with the Order of Canada by the Governor General of Canada.

Lara began playing the violin when she was two years old. She made her first appearance as soloist with orchestra at age four, and her European debut with the Gulbenkian Orchestra when she was 10. She toured Spain, France, Portugal and Hungary at ages 12 and 13 and entered the Curtis Institute at 13. Her teachers have included Felix Galimir and Joey Corpus.

Lara owns and performs on the 1779 "Ex-Salubue" Guaragnini.



## Martin Kennedy, composer

Martin Kennedy's music has been performed the world over, having been featured by such ensembles as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra Teatro Comunale di Bologna, South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra, Wisconsin Philharmonic, American Composers Orchestra, Symphony in C, and the Alabama Symphony, where he served as Composer-In-Residence.

Much sought after as a composer, Kennedy has received commissions from such distinguished artists as countertenor Ryland Angel, Parthenia Viol Consort, flutist Thomas Robertello, trombonists Rebecca Cherian and Jay Evans, pianist Soheil Nasser, The Trombones of the St. Louis Symphony, and violinist Lara St. John, with whom he has enjoyed a long collaboration, both as a composer and pianist.

He is the recipient of several prestigious prizes, including the ASCAP Foundation Rudolf Nissim Prize for Best Orchestral Work, the '2 Agosto' International Composition Prize, five ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Awards, the BMI Student Composer Award, the Suzanne and Lee Ettleson prize, fellowships

at the MacDowell and Yaddo Artist Colonies, and was twice awarded the Indiana University Dean's Prize in Composition.

Kennedy holds a Master's Degree in Composition from the Jacobs School of Music, where he also earned dual Bachelor's degrees in Composition and Piano Performance. He went on to receive a Doctor of Musical Arts at The Juilliard School as a C.V. Starr Doctoral Fellow. His principal teachers in composition included Samuel Adler, Milton Babbitt, Claude Baker, David Dzubay, and Don Freund.

Kennedy also remains in demand as a pianist and collaborator, appearing on concert stages worldwide. He has toured with violinist Lara St. John and flutist Thomas Robertello, both of whom he has recorded with and composed for. Kennedy is also committed to the performance of new works, having premiered numerous compositions as both a soloist and as a member of the Indiana University New Music Ensemble, New Juilliard Ensemble, and St. Louis Symphony's Pulitzer New Music Concerts.

A passionate teacher and mentor, Kennedy is highly active in the development of young composers. He has served as an adjudicator for the ASCAP Morton Gould Awards, National Association for Music Education, as well as administrator for both the Washington State Music Teachers Association Composition Competition and the Washington State Young Composers Project.

Kennedy has served on the faculties of Washington University in St. Louis and Central Washington University. His music is published by Theodore Presser Company and G. Schirmer Inc.





## Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

Currently in his first season as Music Director of the Omaha Symphony, Ankush Kumar Bahl has delivered resonant performances of masterworks, new and old, championing American composers and artists while pursuing innovative, community-based concert design. Bahl is recognized by orchestras and audiences alike for his impressive conducting technique, thoughtful interpretations, and engaging podium presence. In concert, he has left *The Washington Post* “wanting to hear more” and has been praised by *The New York Times* for his “clear authority and enthusiasm” and ability to “inspire.”

Highlights of previous and upcoming guest engagements include concerts with the New York Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México, Richmond Symphony, Virginia Symphony, Louisiana Philharmonic, and the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO, in Washington, D.C.). Summer festival appearances engagements include the Copenhagen Philharmonic at Tivoli, Sun Valley Summer Symphony, Wintergreen Summer Music

Festival, Chautauqua Institute, Wolf Trap with the NSO, and a debut at the Brevard Music Center in the summer of 2022. An experienced collaborator, Bahl has worked with many prominent soloists, among them Daniil Trifonov, Lang Lang, Sarah Chang, Lara St. John, Karen Gomyo, Aaron Diehl, Bhezod Abduraimov, Benjamin Grosvenor, Orion Weiss, Conrad Tao, Charlie Albright, Anthony McGill, Kelley O'Connor, Philadelphia Orchestra Concertmaster David Kim, and Vesko Eschkenazy, concertmaster of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Bahl is a proud recipient of four separate Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Awards between 2011 and 2016 and the 2009 Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Scholarship. A protégé of former New York Philharmonic Music Director Kurt Masur, he served as his assistant conductor at the Orchestre National de France, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. From 2011 to 2015, he was assistant conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra under Christoph Eschenbach, leading a variety of concerts over the course of 100 performances. Bahl has been fortunate to also count Maestros Jaap van Zweden, Zdenek Macal, David Zinman, and Gianandrea Noseda among his mentors.

American born and of Indian descent, Ankush Kumar Bahl is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area and received a double degree in music and rhetoric from the University of California at Berkeley. He was a conducting fellow at the Aspen Music Festival with David Zinman and completed his master's degree in orchestral conducting at the Manhattan School of Music with Zdenek Macal and George Manahan. In recent years, Bahl has been a frequent collaborator with jazz legend Wayne Shorter, conducting his quartet in concerts of his orchestral music at The Kennedy Center and Detroit Free Jazz Festival.



## Deanna Tham, Assistant Conductor

Powerfully compelling, Deanna Tham is known for her captivating and tenacious spirit on and off the podium. Appointed the Omaha Symphony's Assistant Conductor in spring of 2021, Tham began her inaugural season as Music Director with the Union Symphony Orchestra (Monroe, N.C.) in 2020-2021, a season that also marked her fourth as Assistant Conductor of the Jacksonville Symphony and Principal Conductor of the Jacksonville Symphony Youth Orchestras.

As recently as 2019, Tham has performed at the Proms in Royal Albert Hall, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, and Seiji Ozawa Hall at the Tanglewood Music Center working with Maestros James Ross, Joseph Young, and Sir Antonio Pappano, as well as renowned artists Isobel Leonard and Joyce DiDonato. Highlights of the 2019-2020 season also included leading the Jacksonville Symphony's first educational Martin Luther King Jr. tribute concert and the Union Symphony's first city-community Pops on the Plaza collaboration of Latin American pop and classical music. Additional

recent engagements include Assistant Conductor of the National Youth Orchestra (NYO-USA and NYO2) and Assistant Conductor of the Chicago Sinfonietta with Maestro Mei-Ann Chen. Tham has also regularly guest conducted with the Boise Philharmonic and Ballet Idaho and worked with soloists including Melissa White.

Tham is also equally at home with a variety of musical genres. These projects include full-feature blockbuster movie scores, collaborations with Cirque Musica and pops groups like Cherish the Ladies and Jeans 'n' Classics, and independent artists like Silent Film Score connoisseur and composer, Ben Model.

Tham is a staunch advocate of music education from school education engagement and youth orchestral performing opportunities to lifelong learning. In 2018, Tham and the Jacksonville Symphony Youth Orchestras made their debut at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, California. Previously, she has worked with the Louisville Youth Orchestras and the Boise Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. Tham has also created and presented educational concert series in a variety of formats. She has written original school-curriculum-based programs and collaborated with organizations including Really Inventive Stuff, the Louisville Ballet Academy, and the International Culinary Arts and Sciences Institute.

Tham is a second-place winner in the Youth Orchestra Conductor division of the American Prize. Tham was invited as a scholarship participant to the 2015 Conductors Guild Conductor/Composer Training Workshop at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music working with renowned conductors Marin Alsop and James Ross. Additionally, she was the recipient of the 2015 Wintergreen Summer Music Academy Conductor's Guild Scholarship where she worked with Master Teacher Victor Yampolsky. In 2013, Tham made her debut with the National Music Festival. Her work with the festival has been featured on National Public Radio as well as American Public Media. She has also made appearances at the Cadaques Orchestra International Conducting Competition.

Previously, Tham was the Music Director of the American Chamber Orchestra. Her work with the company includes a groundbreaking semi-staged version of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, staged in English for the South Chicago community. During her time with the company, she worked with many talented musicians, including those who sing with the Lyric Opera of Chicago. She made great strides making the company a strong presence in the Chicago area and has sold recordings of her work with the company on iTunes.

Tham holds a Professional Studies Certificate from the Cleveland Institute of Music in Orchestral Conducting studying with Maestro Carl Topilow. She received her Master of Music in conducting with conducting program honors from Northwestern University studying with Dr. Mallory Thompson. There, she additionally worked with Dr. Robert Harris, Victor Yampolsky, and Dr. Robert Hasty, making her equally at home in wind, orchestral, and vocal settings. Tham received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in horn performance studying with Dennis Abelson, Zachary Smith, Bob Lauver, and Steven Kostyniak at Carnegie Mellon University.