

Concerto Classico for Orchestra and Violin

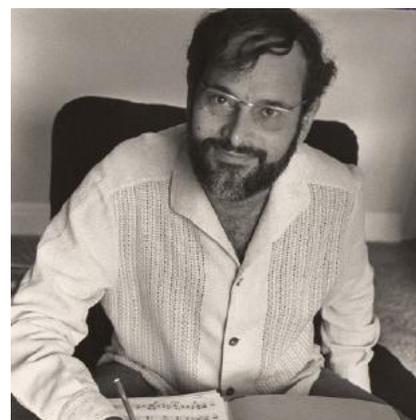
A Review

Robert Ferré

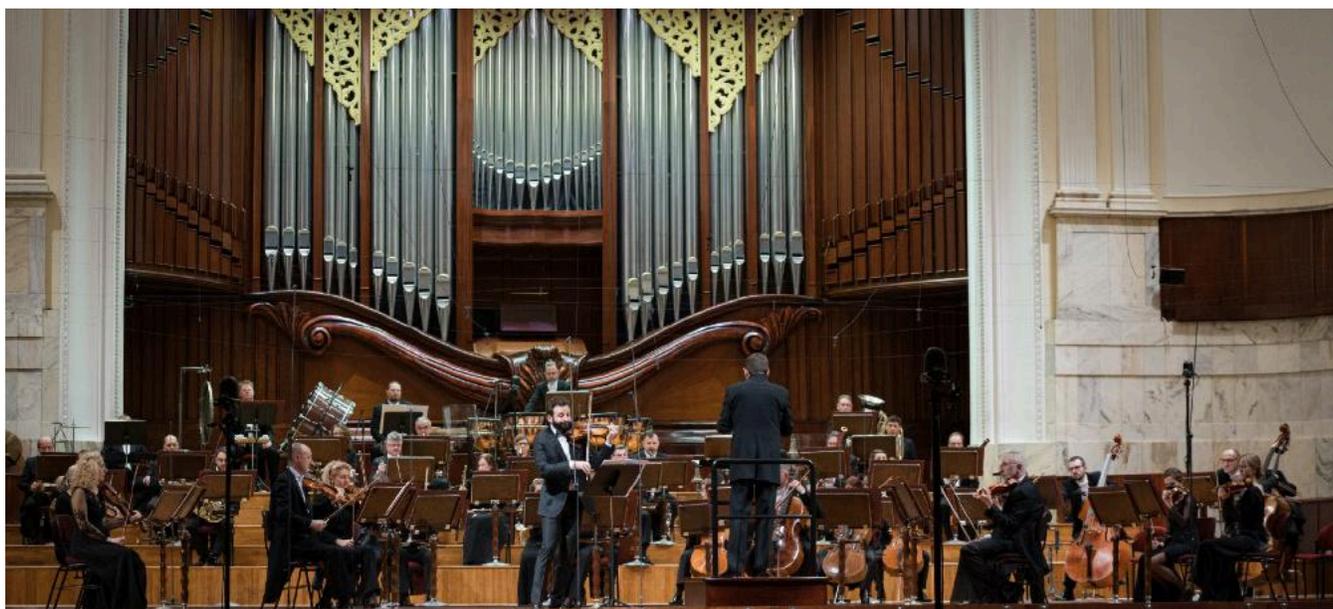
On Thursday, February 4, 2021, I received two emails informing me of the world premiere of André Tchaikowsky's violin concerto the following evening live-streamed from Warsaw, Poland, performed by violinist Ilya Gringolts with the National Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Andrzej Boreyko.

Normally my brother David would be avidly adding relevant information to this prodigious André Tchaikowsky website that contains thirty years of his research. Since his passing last September, I am making a modest attempt to keep the website current. Hence this review.

I watched the concert with relish, sitting in my Ikea chair here at home in San Antonio, Texas. As terrible as the pandemic has been, there have been some bright spots, including the streaming of events that would otherwise have been inaccessible. This was such a case.



André Tchaikowsky in 1975



The setting was Philharmonic Hall in Warsaw, built in 1901 and then rebuilt in 1955. The backdrop is a 71-stop organ built by the German company Schuke with its impressive 32-foot facade petal pipes.

There was no live audience, of course. It must be very strange to play to an empty hall, smiling for the recording while looking out at empty seats (all 1,072 of them, extending to two balconies), receiving no human warmth or encouragement or energy from the crowd. It might seem more like a rehearsal than a performance.

The modest attempt at spacing the musicians apart seemed a bit futile, as they were not wearing masks and were all breathing the same air. I am not a skeptic about proper precautions against the coronavirus. The lack of organization, ignorance of science, and poor individual discipline in the United States has cost hundreds of thousands of needless deaths. While the orchestra's effort may seem perfunctory, ignoring good protocol would set a bad example.

Russian-born violinist Ilya Gringolts (born 1982) had a rather rapid ascent to international recognition, making his debut with the Moscow Symphony Orchestra in 1994, at age 12. In 1998, he was the youngest (age 16) person to ever win the International "Premio Paganini" Violin Competition. Several biographies that I consulted commented on his penchant for playing unknown pieces, particularly contemporary and rarely performed works. Hence his interest in André Tchaikowsky.

Conductor Andrzej Boreyko was born in St. Petersburg, Russia (then Leningrad) as was Ilya Gringolts. It seems to me anyone reaching the high position of conductor of the National Philharmonic Orchestra is going to have an extensive curriculum vitae. It's not surprising that in North America he has led numerous orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, as well as symphony orchestras in Cleveland, Philadelphia, Montreal, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Toronto. That's nice, but did you know that he played keyboards in a rock band called The Model, being fans of Yes, Genesis, and King Crimson? At the end of this article are some links, one of which is an interesting interview with him.



A screen shot of Andrzej Boreyko in action

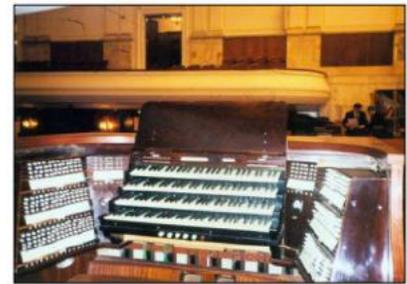
Not being a musician or musicologist and totally lacking any qualifications to make judgments or conclusions about the quality of the performance itself, I will instead describe my personal experience, much as would any ordinary attendee (plus a few extraneous topics). As such, this is more of a memoir than a critique of the performance.

I enjoyed the piece from the very beginning pizzicato plucking to the sudden tumultuous ending. The word "pluck" can also refer to determined courage. The orchestra, soloist, and conductor certainly had that. Because of the fixed camera angles, close-ups of the same musicians were shown over and over. By the end of the evening, I felt like I knew those players personally.

Beyond my comprehension is the artistic temperament that could create such a complex work, including in the instrumentation a xylophone, a tambourine, a gong, and a hand-held percussive thingie (pardon my technical language). I was hoping to hear the impressive pipe organ. No such luck. However, my inquiries about the organ led me to discover a 2015 program on public radio in the U.S. called Pipedreams Tour (of Poland) that shows an astounding

collection of magnificent instruments. (See link at the end of this article.)

Humans are meaning-seeking animals, including me. To wrap my mind around the great variety of what I was hearing, I needed to create some kind of context. I found myself thinking of the concerto as if it were a movie score. Once, the dissonance grew harsh and the music rose to a great crescendo, ending with the crash of cymbals. How can you call that anything but dramatic (if a little bit trite)? When the adagio flowed out and Gringolts closed his eyes and swayed with the music, I pictured myself walking by a lake in a green park. Further on, I felt more like I was sitting on a Texas hill of red ants. And then there was the chase scene, and the back-and-forth bird-like repartee, and the.... Well, you get the idea. Perhaps André would have approved of my naive enjoyment, or perhaps he would be impatient with my ignorance and call this review a sacrilege.



How did my imagined movie end? Did the hero thwart the villain's attempt to destroy the world? Probably not. Nothing so clear cut and formulaic. We're talking André Tchaikowsky here, whose life was filled with conflict. My imaginary film was more like a French film noir, filled with angst and passion, leaving us uncertain as to the outcome. My brother seemed motivated to answer this same question. Here is a passage from his book.

Paramount is the question of personality and its effects on his career, but there is also the question of the motive and intellectual content of his compositions, and what part the unique circumstances and events of his childhood played in these.



Photo: DELUGA.art, courtesy of National Philharmonic Orchestra

Whatever the motivation, Tchaikowsky's music is devilishly difficult. Gratefully, Gringolts did not attempt to memorize the score. I once read of a Japanese man who memorized the value of π to ten thousand decimal places. Impressive. But why? In the concerto, a single fault of memory could lead to disaster. I was impressed by the soloist's calm and aplomb. Of course, as a seasoned performer, he knew the camera was zooming in on him (including close-ups of his face) so it wouldn't look good show signs of terror. Certainly he must have felt it. I did. Did he or the orchestra make any mistakes? How can we tell? It was evident in a few demanding places that Gringolts was rather glued to the score, out of necessity (photo). Personally, I give him kudos just for showing up.

I would hesitate to call even the slower passages melodic, due to the vast range of the notes. To me, a melody is something that you can hum on the way home after hearing, say,

André Bocelli sing *Con Te Partirò*. This was not like that, for me, anyway. But for the likes of André Tchaikowsky, keeping all that in his head...that's why he was so exceptional. Yet, he didn't give this piece an opus number. Did he not consider it finished?

My biggest takeaway has not been the performance itself, as excellent as it was, but rather, my personal entry into the world of André Tchaikowsky aficionados. It is a story filled with synchronicities. David's book, *The Other Tchaikowsky*, begins with an improbable event. It is 1985 and he is in London to see what he could learn about a controversial pianist whom he heard play in 1978 at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Looking for lodging in London, he is riding in a car with a real estate agent he chose at random and offhandedly asks if he has ever heard of Andre Tchaikowsky. After recovering from the initial shock, the agent responds, "André Tchaikowsky lived in my house for three years..." Thus he met Michael Arnold and began his a quest that would last more than 35 years to document this unique musician.

In her review of this concert, Dorota Szwarcman mentions David (thank you) and then reveals that the score for Concerto Classico was found among some of André's things left behind in Eve Harrison's basement in London. Specifically, a laundry basket. And now I am working with Eve and Anastasia Belina to plan my brother's memorial concert in Karlskrona, Sweden, in the fall of 2022. David interacted with hundreds of people, humble and appreciative of their input. In return, he helped others freely in their research or introduction to André's music. It seems everything is connected—people, places, memories, performances. I am currently reading *My Guardian Devil: Letters of André Tchaikowsky & Halina Janowska 1956-1982* to find a more intimate account of this so called "bad boy."

Ilya Gringolts currently plays the 1716 "Provigny" Stradivarius violin (provided by an investor), having previously played the 1723 "Kiesewetter" Stradivarius. The subject of Stradivarius violins fascinates me. If Antonio only knew how revered his instruments would be 300 years hence. Thousands of copies and imitations have been made in the past two centuries, often incorporating the name Stradivarius on the label. Finding such an instrument in their attic has caused many would-be millionaires great disappointment to learn their instrument was only worth a few hundred bucks. Perhaps they read about the sale of the "Penny" Strad in 2008 at Christie's auction for \$16 million. If only! The proceeds from that sale (four times the previous record) went to help tsunami recovery in Japan.

In 2015, the ex-wife of Philip Johnson found a promising looking instrument in his estate and took it to master violinmaker Phillip Injeian for appraisal. He recognized it immediately and called the FBI. It was the "Ames" Stradivarius that had been stolen 35 years earlier (1980) from Polish-born American violinist Roman Totenberg (stolen by Johnson, a former student of Totenberg's). The FBI called Roman's daughter, Nina Totenberg, a National Public Radio legal affaires correspondent. "I really could hardly believe it," she said at the time.

Totenberg, himself a child prodigy, died in 2012 at the age of 101. He knew André Tchaikowsky, and so was interviewed by my brother David several times. Totenberg, at the age of 32, bought the violin in 1943 for a measly \$15,000 (about \$250,000 today). I am very

curious about the circumstances. Quite an investment. It sold for somewhere between five and ten million dollars. Antonio Stradivari made some 1,100 instruments, of which as many as 650 are still in existence.

The three Totenberg sisters (photo) wanted the violin to be played again. After two years of restoration and renamed the Ames Totenberg Stradivarius, it was purchased by an anonymous investor on behalf of In Consortium, a nonprofit organization dedicated to making historic instruments available to musicians who would not otherwise have access to them. The violin is now in the hands of 20-year-old Nathan Meltzer, who was the youngest ever winner of the Windsor Festival International Strings Competition. He has studied since age 15 at the Juilliard School in New York with Itzak Perlman, just as Ilya Gringolts once did when he was a teenager.



So you see, this wasn't just an isolated event with a group of musicians playing in an empty room in a faraway place coldly visible on YouTube. Everything is connected within a few degrees—the competitions, the composers, the teachers, the musicians, the friends and supporters, the listeners, the reviewers, even the instruments themselves. And so, it is no surprise that I now include myself included in this web.

Reviews aren't new to me, having written almost 900 restaurant reviews on Trip Advisor (back when we could travel and go out to eat) including a few dozen in Poland. This review, however, marks my entry into the world of André Tchaikowsky. Where it will lead, I have no idea. I have been to the edge of that world before, peripherally, when I accompanied David to Poland in 2015 to hear the premiere of André Tchaikowsky's Sonata for Viola and Piano. David also had a Chopin connection, having attended the Chopin Competition (2012) to document all 71 performers online. The contestants played different programs except for one instance, in which they were obliged to play the same piece. David heard it 71 times.

So while in Warsaw, we went to a Chopin concert. Having been given passes to the Green Room at intermission, we were drinking our wine when a distinguished white-haired man approached and said, "David, you are in Poland. Why didn't you tell me?" A short conversation ensued. Later I asked who that was? David said it was one of Poland's greatest conductors.

The next day we were given the opportunity to visit Zelazowa Wola, Chopin's birthplace. On the appointed morning a van whisked us off to what turned out to be an extraordinary event. (For a description, see the link below.) David told me that there was a woman at the Chopin Institute who looked after visiting VIPs to make sure they have what they need and David was on her list. He was treated like a super star and I tagged along.

Back to the present, I was surprised when I received two different emails informing me of the Concerto Classico event. One was from Martyna Ówiek from the Philharmonic public

relations department, and the other from a friendly woman named Monika. Both of these people responded promptly to several questions from me regarding the concert and the organ and other things. I wrote to impresario Anastasia Belina to ask who this person Monika was, as her email said only office.strugala. Finally the pieces fell into place. The conductor at the concert was the very famous conductor Tadeusz Strugala, and the helpful woman at the Chopin Institute was in fact Monika Strugala. She is the Monika of my Concerto emails. I have come full circle.

Maybe I'm not so far off considering André's music as a score, not for a movie, but for life itself, his life, your life, my life—our lives, intertwined.

Robert Ferré
February, 2021
(Contact: robert@robertferre.com)

LINKS

<http://youtu.be/QMwzzR-h6tk>
Link to hear the performance of Concerto Classico

<http://www.filharmonia.pl>
The National Philharmonic Orchestra in Warsaw

<http://filharmonia.pl/en/aktualnosci/zapraszamy-publicznosc-do-filharmonii->
News flash: People are being invited back to the hall. See the dates here.

<http://www.andretchaikowsky.com>
André Tchaikowsky website founded by David Ferré, filled with information.

https://www.mariinsky.ru/en/company/orchestra/violin/ilya_gringolts/
A biography of violinist Ilya Gringolts

<http://www.gringoltsquartet.com/index.html>
Website dedicated to the Gringolts quartet

<https://culture.pl/en/article/between-two-civilisations-an-interview-with-andrey-boreyko>
An interview with conductor Andrzej Boreyko.

http://www.strugala.com/index_en.html
English page for conductor Tadeusz Strugala

<https://deluga.art/>

Photographer for the Philharmonic Orchestra.

<http://www.andretchaikowsky.com/DorotySzwarcmanReview.pdf>

Review of this concert by Doroty Szwarcman and a loose English translation.

<http://www.andretchaikowsky.com/PolishOrgans.pdf>

A 23-page article about spectacular Polish pipe organs.

<http://www.andretchaikowsky.com/concertpdf.pdf>

David's memorial concert will be October 15, 2022, as part of the Karlskrona (Sweden) International Piano Festival.

<http://www.andretchaikowsky.com/GoFundMepdf.pdf>

Pictures of the venue and photos of Karlskrona, information about the GoFundMe campaign.

<https://www.anastasiabelina.com/karlskrona-international-piano-fest>

Website for the Karlskrona International Piano Festival

<http://andretchaikowsky.com/travel.pdf>

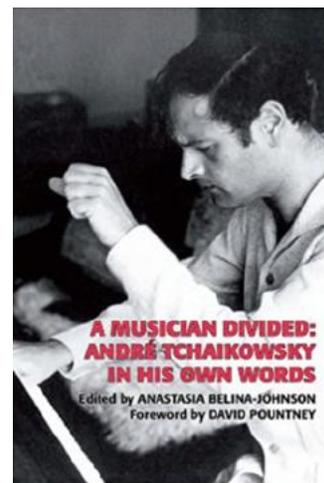
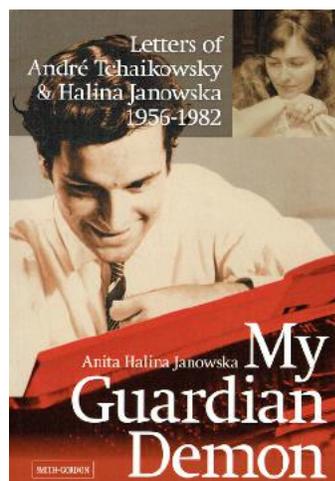
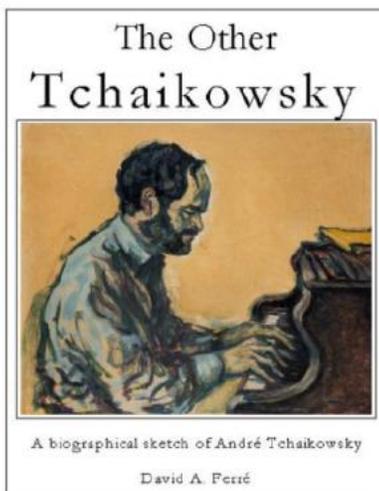
Robert's remembrance of traveling with David to Poland

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Ilya+Gringolts&i=stripbooks&ref=nb_sb_noss_2

Recordings by Ilya Gringolts on Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Andre+Tchaikowsky&ref=nb_sb_noss_2

Recordings by André Tchaikowsky on Amazon



<http://andretchaikowsky.com/biography/Musician%20Divided.pdf>

Link to a free online copy of the book *A Musician Divided*.

<http://andretchaikowsky.com/biography/book/index.htm>

Link to a free online copy of the book, *The Other Tchaikowsky*

https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?sts=t&cm_sp=SearchF--home--Results&an=&tn=My+Guardian+Demon&kn=&isbn=

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