

TCHAIKOVSKY The Seasons **JANÁČEK** On an Overgrown Path bk.2

MICHAEL BELL

POULENC Three Novelettes **SEABOURNE** Trois Petits Adieux

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) was born in Votkinsk, in the Ural Mountains. When aged eight his family moved to St. Petersburg. Although musically gifted in his youth he was sent to law school but continued to study music, eventually abandoning his legal path to attend the St. Petersburg Conservatory. On graduation he moved to Moscow to teach at its new conservatory.

His life was punctuated by personal crises centred around the losses of his mother and his close friend Nikolai Rubinstein, as well as his private homosexuality and the eventual collapse of a protracted relationship with his patroness Nadezhda von Meck. The manner of his death is a matter of ongoing controversy.

Tchaikovsky's output, seen by some of his contemporary compatriots as not sufficiently Russian, contains some of the best loved works in the standard repertoire, including the three famous ballets *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, the last three of his six symphonies, concerti for piano and violin, operas including *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*, along with beloved smaller works such as the *Serenade for Strings*, the overture *Romeo and Juliet*, and the *Rococo Variations*. His scores are imbued with a seemingly endless gift for memorable melody, an overt Romanticism, and a strong sense of drama.

Tchaikovsky travelled widely for performances of his music, including to America in 1891 where he conducted his work at the opening of Carnegie Hall.



The Seasons In 1875 Tchaikovsky received a commission from Nikolay Matveyevich Bernard, the editor of the St. Petersburg music magazine *Nouvelist*, to compose a series of twelve pieces for solo piano, to reflect upon poetic aspects of the months of the year. Tchaikovsky accepted the commission and the cycle of pieces, which would appear in monthly instalments, eventually became published as *The Seasons*, curiously sharing opus number 37 with the composer's *Grand Sonata in G Major* which he completed in 1878.

Given the immense and enduring popularity of Tchaikovsky's symphonies, ballet scores and the *1st Piano Concerto* (completed in the previous year to *The Seasons*, 1874), it is surprising that the composer's solo piano works have been relatively overlooked by generations of pianists.

The twelve characteristic miniatures making up *The Seasons* have perhaps become the most performed, best known and loved of Tchaikovsky's works in this medium. Although they are mostly cast in a simple ABA structure, they display an extensive spectrum of inventive and exquisitely crafted figurations, exploiting finely nuanced textures and the full range of sonorities available to the instrument.

Although the majority of the pieces reflect on outdoor events in the Russian calendar - social, of work, and of nature - the cycle opens and closes with 'indoor' imagery for the deep winter months of January and December.

January's *At the Fireside* recalls Schumann, not only through the title, which it shares with a piece from *Kinderszenen* op.15, but with its fluid figuration in the extended central episode. The descending quaver theme at the opening of this section perhaps anticipates a recurring motif from his celebrated opera *Eugene Onegin* which he would

complete in 1879.

February presents a raucous and excitable depiction of Carnival, marking the approach of winter's closure, whilst *March* offers a reflective and plaintive song, but nonetheless one of considerable wisdom, from the lark.

April's *Snowdrops* has a simple melody in compound time running through the entire piece, occasionally interchanging registers from violin to viola and with brief cello interjections in the central section. A falling octave sigh of joy is a recurring feature of the song line here.

In May's *Starry Night* the tranquil outer episodes frame an agitated, but joyous central section, which in turn has its own eight bar subsidiary episode.

June is set as a *Barcarolle* and this has become one of the most popular pieces of the set, often performed in isolation from the others. The beautiful, languid soprano line at the opening is joined by a tenor counterpoint in the repeated 'A' section, creating a sumptuous love duet. The central rustic section opens gently but leads to one of the cycle's most forceful climaxes whilst the extended coda sees the camera panning away, ever more distant from the lovers.

July picks up on the rustic episode from *June* with the robust *Song of the Reapers*. The repeated 'A' section introduces a calming 'viola' triplet figure to the song which perhaps reflects the approach of the setting sun and closure of the day's work.

August's *Harvest Song* continues this rural theme and the rapid, busy outer sections frame a hymn of thanksgiving in the central part.

A suitably boisterous *Hunting Song* represents September, whilst October's melancholic *Autumn Song*, as with *June*, develops into a vocal duet in the central section with beautifully crafted dialogue between soprano and tenor parts.

By contrast, November's *Troika Ride* offers one of the most outwardly joyous pieces in the set and was a great favourite of Rachmaninov who would often perform it as an encore in recitals.

December brings us back indoors to close the year and the cycle with a typically engaging and elegant *Christmas waltz*, warmly acknowledging the season while perhaps reflecting poignantly on the passing of the year.

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) is widely considered the most important Czech composer of the early 20th century. The folk music of his native Moravia was an important stepping stone to the formation of an idiosyncratic style. Indeed in his early years he was primarily known as a musicologist. Under the influence of his friend Dvořák his first works portray few of the characteristics of his mature output; he was a late developer and it could be said that had he died before his 50th year probably little would still be played.

A pivotal point in his development was the opera *Jenůfa* (1904), later to shoot him to international fame after its performance in Prague in 1916. His final years were heavily inspired by his infatuations, firstly with soprano Gabriela Horvátová and then, more



significantly, with a much younger, married Jewish woman, Kamila Stosslová. Inspired, or perhaps more accurately obsessed, by her he produced a stream of masterpieces including the operas *Káťa Kabanová*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *The Makropulos Case*, and *The House of the Dead*; also the *Sinfonietta*, the rhapsody *Taras Bulba*, the *Glagolitic Mass*, and the two extraordinary late string quartets. His revolutionary voice remained firmly rooted in tonality, but his approach to melody, harmony, rhythm, orchestration and motivic development are utterly unique. His is music of full-throated, unapologetic passion.

On an Overgrown Path (Book 2) Janáček's solo piano music represents only a very small, yet important part of his output with just three works of maturity: the *Sonata 1.X.* (1905), *On an Overgrown Path* (1901-1909) and *In the Mists* (1912). The creation of *On an Overgrown Path* was spread over several years which coincided and overlapped with the composition and première of *Jenůfa*. Originally conceived for harmonium, the cycle evolved into ten pieces for piano published in 1911. The subject matter is not perhaps merely one of experiences within nature, as the titles might suggest, but more a deeply personal reflection of life journeys, specifically the death of his daughter Olga at the age of 21.

The second book of five pieces is even more enigmatic than the first; a strong sense of improvisation pervading. The first piece was published in the *Lidové noviny* newspaper but the complete second book was only printed by *Hudební matice* in 1942, long after the composer's death. Unlike the first book, here we find movements without titles, yet no less evocative or without potential narrative. The first four follow an ABA form, the last flowering into something far grander. They are, as with all mature Janáček, built upon simple but telling figurations, the journey coloured by repetition in different harmonic contexts.

Nos. 1 and 2 were composed last. The first paints an exploratory, somewhat questioning canvas but with a passionately soaring, almost operatic, central aria (echoes of Beethoven's op.110); the second is more wistful; perhaps another "Blown Away Leaf" (book 1), but again with a stormy heart. No.3 is something of a peasant dance, alternating flat-footed stomping and (perhaps mock-)courtly niceties. In no.4 we again find the composer in lyrical but somewhat troubled mood; yet twice the sun breaks through in music of innocent, tender recollection.

No.5 takes us into wholly different territory with a movement cast on a more ambitious scale. Beginning with great earnestness and drama in C minor, the textures are almost orchestral. Dotted rhythms dominate, but frequent melismatic cadenzas intrude, as if seeking escape. These act as transitional "revolving doors". The music settles to an extended, passionately cantabile section in E flat major, with tremolandi accompaniments, and the earlier dotted rhythms providing now a rhythmic bass. Eventually the opening drama returns, but quickly another candeza takes us into more sombre, funereal, E flat minor territory. The final section is quasi-valedictory, the melody turning to a warm C major where it gently subsides into tranquil contentment.

The eminent Czech pianist Rudolf Firkušný (1912-1994) first recorded these works. He had, as a child, studied piano and composition with Janáček. He recounted how the composer would, during lessons on these pieces, constantly offer alternatives to the text, never fully satisfied with one version. He wrote: 'Janáček could be inconsistent, often altering the printed text - probably on account of his impulsive nature'. Indeed two versions of no.3 exist.

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), French composer and pianist, came from a wealthy bourgeois family but tragically both parents died whilst he was in his teens. Playing the piano at an early age, from 1914 onwards he produced a stream of pieces characterised by high spirits and irreverence, somewhat under the influence of Erik Satie. In 1920 he became part of the group known as *Les Six* with works such as the *Concert Champêtre* and the ballet *Les Biches*. In the 1930s a second, more serious side developed; founded partly in a deep Catholic faith and in the loss of two friends, it resulted in works synthesising opposing elements such as the *Concerto for Two Pianos* - burlesque and profundity, sentimental cabaret and Mozartian neoclassicism, geniality and biting wit - which forge themselves into the composer's idiosyncratic, often self-referential sound world.



From the 1940s onwards chamber music became increasingly important with a series of sonatas and mixed ensemble works. He toured the United States as pianist and duo partner of lifelong collaborator, the baritone Pierre Bernac, and wrote works as diverse as the *Piano Concerto* and the *Gloria*. Seen, unfairly by the younger Boulez generation, as a frivolous anachronism, he continued to write music of melody, traditional (if spicy) harmony, and to use familiar forms. His later years were dominated by the opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (1955) completed amidst a nervous breakdown. In 1963 he suffered a heart attack, leaving a musical legacy loved by countless musicians.

Trois Novelettes Poulenc once asserted that he considered his best piano writing was to be found in his 'mélodies' and there can be no doubt that the piano accompaniments to his numerous cycles and individual songs play an integral part in confirming a widely held view of Poulenc as one of the greatest composers in the 20th century of 'art song'. His settings of the poetry of amongst others, Paul Eluard, Guillaume Apollinaire and Louise de Vilmorin, display a vast palette of pianistic texture and colour with highly inventive and personal figurations superbly expressing the complex emotional world of these texts.

However, his claim also unjustly undervalues his works for solo piano which share many of the creative qualities and craftsmanship found in the songs. Poulenc composed the majority of his piano works in the 1920s and 30s, and the first two *Novelettes* date from 1927 and 1928 respectively, whilst the third, from 1959 was the only occasion Poulenc wrote for solo piano after the war years, standing as his final work in the medium.

The first *Novelette* reveals an overt lyricism, initially in a light, Mozartian style but quickly developing into richer, more sumptuous textures in the outer sections of the ABA structure. These frame a short central episode suggestive of a minuet. This at first seems to pay homage to Rameau and Couperin with its idiomatic ornamentation, before becoming more robust and evolving into something of a scherzo in character, some bars marked 'un peu plus vite'. A beautiful reflective phrase, again reminiscent of the early 'clavecinists', links back to the opening section, achieving even greater poignancy here through its subtle variation of the material.

The second *Novelette* is an extrovert canvas full of life, brimming with humour, simultaneously good-natured and

black, with a faux, circus-style drama. Any of the bright, vividly-coloured, 'en dehors' social-scene pictures of Raoul Dufy come to mind.

The third *Novelette* was completed at the end of the 1950s, a few years before Poulenc's relatively early and sudden death. He bases the piece on a theme from De Falla's ballet *El Amor Brujo* turning the original 7/8 metre into a regular 3/8. This short piece retains the profundity and gravitas found in all of his major late works. The underlying emotion and nostalgia is deeply moving but Poulenc expresses it with a typically French laconic 'indifference'; much as Ravel used this characteristic in the final song from *Scherherazade*, and before him Rameau in his keyboard piece *L'Indifferent*.

Peter Seabourne (b.1960 UK) grew up in a large farmhouse with his grandmother. Somehow this fostered a childhood passion for composing. He won a place in 1980 to Cambridge to read Music, studying with Robin Holloway. In 1983 he moved to York University, taking a doctorate in composition. During these student years he won two national prizes and was widely performed in the UK. However, he became increasingly dissatisfied with his work, and grew to hate much in the new music world. This led to him to abandon writing completely for some twelve years.



In 2001 a chance set of circumstances caused a sudden reawakening; a new voice simply "arrived", along with a flood of new pieces, including four symphonies, seven concerti, chamber and vocal pieces, and a widely acclaimed series of eight large-scale piano cycles called *Steps*. Since 2004 he has won several international prizes and his work has been played, broadcast and commissioned across Europe, the Americas and China. It has drawn repeated plaudits from leading journals such as *Gramophone* and from respected musicians.

Seabourne's language stands apart from much in contemporary writing, for which he retains a large measure of distrust. It is overtly communicative, emotionally powerful, often lyrical and always rhythmically inventive, yet shuns thin "accessibility". He follows his own path...

Trois Petits Adieux were composed in 2001 as a parting gift for a talented pupil of the composer's friend Michael Bell together with a longer piece, *Split the Lark...* Both were completed in just a few days and mark Seabourne's re-birth as a composer. Each of the three little farewells was inspired by a poem of Emily Dickinson whose work has provided many other titles and inspirations since.

The first piece is a cantinlena, emotionally charged yet with a sense of resignation. The second is playfully capricious with patterns of interlocked thirds providing the main material. The third paints a bleak scene where delicate, ghostly echoes flit nervously across the dark landscape.

The set was intended to be playable by younger pianists, or amateurs, but perhaps in retrospect the final one goes

rather beyond this.

*To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it -
Block it up
With Other - and 'twill yawn the more -
You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air.*

*By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.*

*Image of Light, Adieu -
Thanks for the interview -
So long - so short -
Preceptor of the whole -
Coeval Cardinal -
Impart - Depart -*



Michael Bell is a distinguished pianist, and a widely respected pedagogue. Having studied at the Royal Northern College of Music with Derryck Wyndham and Sulamita Aronovsky, he was awarded a Chopin Fellowship from the Polish Government, enabling him to move to the State Academy in Warsaw. Subsequent national and international prizes led to numerous live concert performances and broadcasts on radio and TV throughout Europe, Australia and Africa.

More recent highlights have included concerts at London's Southbank Centre, in Bulgaria with the Sofia Philharmonic, and return invitations to the Kharkiv Assemblies Festival in Ukraine.

His solo repertoire is diverse and extensive, with recordings of solo works by Granados, Haydn, Grieg, Janacek, Seabourne, and of 20th Century English trios. Partnering clarinettist Victoria Samek, his disc of the complete duo works by Richard Rodney Bennett received much critical acclaim, as did his recording of Seabourne's *Steps Volume 3: Arabesques*.

Michael Bell is also in demand as an acknowledged Lieder accompanist and is a member of the Chamber Players of London. A versatile and exciting musician, he has over thirty concertos in his repertoire, and has performed the complete Beethoven cycle. He has given premières of works dedicated to him by Peter Seabourne and Miroslav Spasov.

His playing is characterised by a vast palette of pianistic colour, great attention to articulation, and always the communication of an intensely personal vision.

Sound recording/editing - Peter Seabourne [these are archive recordings made in 2004, re-edited and re-mastered]

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MICHAEL BELL

TCHAIKOVSKY - The Seasons op.37a

1	January: At the Fireside	5:02
2	February: Carnival	2:51
3	March: Song of the Lark	2:52
4	April: Snowdrop	3:14
5	May: Starlit Nights	3:34
6	June: Barcarolle	4:42
7	July: Song of the Reaper	1:52
8	August: Harvest	3:52
9	September: The Hunt	2:58
10	October: Autumn Song	4:21
11	November: Troika	3:03
12	December: Christmas	5:16

JANÁČEK - On an Overgrown Path bk. 2

13	Andante	3:51
14	Allegretto	3:41
15	Vivo	2:50
16	Più mosso	3:00
17	Allegro	7:59

POULENC - Trois Novelettes

18	Modéré sans lenteur	2:59
19	Très rapide et rythmé	1:41
20	Andantino tranquillo	2:34

SEABOURNE - Trois Petits Adieux

21	♩ = 76	2:07
22	Playful yet poignant	1:09
23	Sombre	2:35

Total playing time 77.52

