

Mikhail Glinka

Born June 1, 1804 – Novospasskoe, Russia

Died February 15, 1857 – Berlin, Germany

Ruslan and Ludmilla Overture

Opera is art on the grandest scale, a combination of them all on one stage: Vocal music, instrumental music, choreography, visual art, and literature. It is a remarkable achievement of human creativity, but it can be a double-edged sword. Even the lightest, most efficient opera productions can require immense preparation, which in and of itself should be celebrated. The result is an unmatched medium that comes at the price of manpower and patience.

Fortunately for opera lovers, the genre has crept into other channels of the art music industry. Opera overtures, non-staged music-only introductions, have become some of the most popular ways to open symphony orchestra concerts. They also offer hors d'oeuvres for what we might find across the street at the opera house.

Mikhail Glinka's four-and-a-half-hour *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (1842) is not performed much today, but its overture has become a modern delight. This five-minute spitfire of an overture has been extensively recorded and remains ever-reliable programming for both youth and professional orchestras.

A great overture is a priceless tool for a composer; it grabs the audience's attention and prepares them for the full story. In the case of *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, it is a Russian take on a damsel in distress and a knight in shining armor.

Edvard Grieg

Born June 15, 1843 – Bergen, Norway

Died September 4, 1907 – Bergen, Norway

Piano Concerto in A minor, op. 16

Today's pop music industry revolves around catchy singles that can top Billboard charts for extended periods of time, seeing millions, if not billions, of plays on music streaming services. However, before the era of recordings, when music was only experienced live and face-to-face, another sort of music was getting listeners excited.

Concertos offer an impressive spectacle as well as a sonic experience. Obsession with technique and physical possibilities has been a mainstay of music for hundreds of years, leading to a modern industry driven by tremendous talent. It can be difficult to find a symphony orchestra concert that doesn't have a concerto on the bill, and that's just what makes classical music such a precious commodity. There are things you can experience in the concert hall that simply aren't thought of much in modern pop music production.

Many of the world's most famous concerti have been scored for the piano. Being an instrument of nearly unlimited technical capability and an enormous range, the piano fits the bill for any occasion, especially one that is meant to impress. Piano concerti of Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninoff remain some of the most exciting classical music today and can be heard live easily year-

round. However, occasionally there are works that achieve success through unconventional means, or in this case, not trying to impress “too” much.

Edvard Grieg’s *Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 16* is a gem. Composed in 1868, it is the Nordic pianist’s only piano concerto, written while he was still a student. Today, it remains Grieg’s most popular piece, right alongside his timeless *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1*.

Grieg’s *Piano Concerto* relies on melody to deliver its charm. Yes, a live performance is impressive to behold, but the work’s brilliance is not in the skills it requires of its pianist, but in its musical storytelling. It is an effortless listen as each movement communicates its emotions clearly and concisely. Approachable is an understatement — Grieg achieved a rare feat, music that is so charming it transcends its genre and makes you forget you’re there to be impressed.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840 – Votkinsky, Russia

Died November 6, 1893 – St. Petersburg, Russia

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, op. 36

Tchaikovsky’s symphonies represent an unfortunate reality in today’s programming practices within the genre. Having composed seven in total, fewer than half of Tchaikovsky’s symphonies see regular performance. Today, composers across the classical, romantic, and modernist periods have fallen victim to this pattern.

For example, Antonín Dvořák wrote nine full-length symphonies, with only the final four having any chance of seeing the stage today, with the vast majority of performances being of *Symphony No. 9, from the “New World”*. It’s a similar story with Dimitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev, with their more “popular” and/or “approachable” symphonies being cherry-picked away from the rest. That being said, what exactly “popular” and “approachable” mean in this context has never been easy to understand.

The classical era sees this pattern as well, a perfect example being the prolific Joseph Haydn, whose contribution of one hundred and four works within the symphony genre alone makes him one of the greatest contributors to Western music. Out of all those symphonies, it would be a challenge for an enthusiast to name just ten that they may have heard live.

The only major symphonist who has avoided this fate is Beethoven, whose nine symphonies all see programming. This is understandable, being they provide an audible timeline for one of history’s most crucial periods of musical transformation.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s symphonies take this practice to a bizarre level. Contrary to popular belief, Tchaikovsky composed seven symphonies, not six. Most are not familiar with *Manfred: Symphony in Four Scenes*, or simply the *Manfred Symphony*. It was completed in 1885, lying between the composer’s fourth and fifth symphonies. Although Tchaikovsky himself considered *Manfred* a full-fledged symphony, it is rarely performed today and is often ignored completely when discussing the composer’s other symphonies.

Out of Tchaikovsky’s six well-known symphonies, numbers four, five, and six are programmed far more than the first three. This separation can be attributed to *Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, op. 36*, completed

in 1878. The fourth symphony marks a turning point in Tchaikovsky's output — a grand collection of high emotion and drama that would remain the composer's staple until he died in 1893.

Symphony No. 4 is a superb example of the evolving romantic style. Its vast first movement contains endless dramatic assaults that can make its nearly 20-minute run time feel like an entire first act of an opera. And separate from the context, Tchaikovsky pushes the limits of musical construction, taking the guidelines and boundaries of the traditional "sonata-allegro form" and pushing them further than ever before.

Like the many other composers with several symphonies to choose from, nothing negative is preventing Tchaikovsky's earlier opuses from seeing more limelight. However, the thirst for what many see as Tchaikovsky's signature style is difficult to overcome.

Nathan Black is the music director of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP's *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast* and is the resident lecturer of EPSO's "Opening Notes" series.