

## **Gábor Takács-Nagy conducts the Royal Conservatory Orchestra**

**Friday, October 6, 2017 at 8:00pm**

**Prelude Recital at 6:45pm**

**Pre-concert Talk at 7:15pm**

This is the 756<sup>th</sup> concert in Koerner Hall

**Gábor Takács-Nagy**, conductor

**León Bernsdorf**, piano

**Royal Conservatory Orchestra**

### **PROGRAM**

Felix Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*, Overture in B Minor, op. 26

Franz Liszt: Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, S. 124

- I. Allegro maestoso: Tempo giusto –
- II. Quasi adagio –
- III. Allegretto vivace –
- IV. Allegro marziale animato

(León Bernsdorf, piano)

### **INTERMISSION**

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, op. 36

- I. Andante sostenuto - Moderato con anima (in movimento di valse)
- II. Andantino in modo di canzone
- III. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato
- IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco

## **Felix Mendelssohn**

Born in Hamburg, Germany, February 3, 1809; died in Leipzig, Germany, November 4, 1847

### ***The Hebrides*, Overture in B Minor, op. 26 (1830-32)**

Mendelssohn made his earliest trip to the Scottish Hebrides when he was 20. For an educated German, Scotland was the stuff of legend: a romantic, remote land evoked by the poet Ossian in epic ballads and by Sir Walter Scott in his novels. Travelling from London by stage-coach, Mendelssohn preserved his first glimpse of the islands in a pencil sketch. Later that same day, August 7, 1820, after taking a paddle-steamer to the picturesque fishing village of Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, he wrote a letter to his family back in Germany: "In order to make you realize how extraordinarily the Hebrides have affected me, the following came into my mind here," he wrote. He then made another sketch – this time 21 measures of music, with an indication as to which instruments he imagined in his mind's ear. Later, he used the melody in these sketches in an overture he wrote, precisely replicating all 21 measures in the opening. The complete work, however, was to be several years in the making.

When he jotted down the opening theme, Mendelssohn had not yet seen Fingal's cave, with its dramatic basalt pillars supporting a 170-foot high arch, on the tiny isle of Staffa, seven miles from the Scottish mainland. "Its

many pillars make it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding absolutely without purpose, and quite alone, the wide grey sea within and without,” Mendelssohn’s travelling companion, the young diplomat Carl Klingemann, wrote at the time. Fingal was the hero of what purported to be an old epic Gaelic poem. However, many realized that it was largely a work of fiction by James Macpherson, its 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘translator.’ Even if he was familiar with this debate about a fictional Fingal, this did not inhibit Mendelssohn from exercising his creative imagination. Seasickness seems to have prevented him from doing more work on the overture at the time. Later in the year, he began to refer to the piece as *The Tale of the Hebrides*. Each revision brought a new title, more a matter of detail than its inspiration, which remains intact and remarkably fresh through all the revisions. Mendelssohn’s vivid seascape is a masterpiece of romantic evocation within a classical framework, perfect in form and visceral in its orchestration.

## **Franz Liszt**

Born in Raiding/Doborján, Hungary, October 22, 1811; died in Bayreuth, Germany, July 31, 1886

### **Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, S. 124 (1835-56)**

Although Liszt could improvise a virtuoso showpiece on the spot, he tended to worry over his more ambitious undertakings. It was a quarter of a century before the succinct, unconventional theme he jotted down in 1830 was first heard by an audience as the assertive opening of his E-flat Piano Concerto. Two years after coming up with the idea he was speaking of “a concerto after a plan that I think will be new and whose accompaniment remains to be written.” Along the way to its completion, Liszt encountered Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasy* and the concertos of Henry Litolff. Both made a lasting impression on Liszt’s vivid imagination. From Schubert, Liszt borrowed the single-movement telescoped sonata structure, with constantly evolving, highly contrasted themes, all based on a single melody. From Litolff, he derived the idea of Concerto symphonique, where the piano frequently elaborates the work’s melodic ideas, while the orchestra develops them more thoroughly. Liszt first heard Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* in the 1830s and saw how an *idée fixe* could be transformed from melancholic reverie to demonic witches’ sabbath. Berlioz was to conduct a performance of this symphonic tour de force in the same program that Liszt premiered his E-flat Concerto (Berlioz conducting) in Weimar, February 17, 1855. What a concert that must have been!

The ‘*idée fixe*’ that opens Liszt’s E-flat Concerto is terse and made up of just three adjacent notes. It appears in many transformations throughout the work. It is soon massaged into a lovely descending theme in dialogue with clarinet, then violins, and then cello. Then it is turned upside down in a further metamorphosis as the muted slow movement begins. Again without a break between movements, the soft ring of a triangle takes us into a light-as-air scherzo where Liszt’s theme is whimsically presented. A piano cadenza reintroduces the assertive opening theme and the woodwinds chime in with recollections of the gentler theme from the slow movement. Even here, the opening theme prevails as a drumbeat and soon blazes forth as the basis of the martial finale.

## **Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky**

Born in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, April 25/May 7, 1840; died in St. Petersburg, Russia, October 25/November 6, 1893

### **Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, op. 36 (1887-8)**

“Thus Fate knocks on the door,” Beethoven is reported to have said about the dramatic opening of his Fifth Symphony. Three-quarters of a century later, with the urgent figure that he hurls forward in the first bars of his Fourth, Tchaikovsky echoes Beethoven. “This is Fate,” he wrote to his patron Nadezhda von Meck, “the tragic power that blocks our search for happiness, a power that hangs forever over our heads like the sword of Damocles. One can only resign oneself and lament in vain.” He began the Fourth Symphony shortly after he met von Meck and finished it in the wake of a short-lived marriage to a former pupil, Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova. As he worked, he poured all his

revulsion for the marriage, his pity for Antonina, his self-reproach and longing for death into a long letter to his patron. Compounding the mental anguish was a fear that his wife, who refused to grant him a divorce, might blackmail him because of his admitted homosexuality. His instability demanded a leave of absence from the Moscow conservatory where he taught. He immersed himself in composition and slowly began to regain his mental well-being.

The opening movement carries the emotional weight of the symphony and casts a long shadow over the rest of the work. The 'Fate' motif leads to a theme of resignation and lament (impassioned, in quicker tempo, with melody on strings, then woodwinds) and a theme of self-indulgent dreaming (clarinet, with wispy echoes for flute). The central development, still built on an underlying waltz rhythm, explores the conflict of reality and dreams. But there is no mistaking that reality dominates when the themes return in the final section of the movement. The coda blazes forth the 'Sword of Damocles' theme that the composer refers to in his correspondence. "There is no safe haven," Tchaikovsky says. "You are thrown hither and thither by the waves until the sea swallows you."

The second movement shows suffering in another phase. Tchaikovsky likens it to a swarm of memories filling the mind, many of them melancholy. Still, the experienced composer in Tchaikovsky manages to summon up some happy hours and, in doing so, provides the necessary musical contrast. The third movement, a scherzo, is less specific. Tchaikovsky was particularly proud of his perpetual pizzicato in the strings. Disconnected thoughts and images occur: a drunken peasant's song (woodwinds) and distant military band (brass). "These are the incoherent images which, as we fall asleep, suddenly float before our fancy and rapidly disappear," he said. The finale portrays a peasant festival and quotes from a well-known Russian folksong "In the Fields Stood a Birch Tree." Tragic Fate interrupts but is banished in the merrymaking. "Rejoice in the joy of others," Tchaikovsky says, "and you may still find it possible to live."

- Program notes © 2017 Keith Horner

## **Gábor Takács-Nagy**

### **Conductor**

Born in Budapest, Gábor Takács-Nagy began studying the violin at the age of eight. As a student of the Franz Liszt Academy, he won First Prize in 1979 in the Jenő Hubay Violin Competition and from 1975 to 1992 was founding member and leader of the acclaimed Takács Quartet. After leaving the quartet, he founded the Takács Piano Trio in 1996 and, in 1998, he established the Mikrokosmos string quartet with compatriots Zoltán Tuska, Sándor Papp, and Miklós Perényi.

Gábor Takács-Nagy is considered one of today's most authentic exponents of Hungarian music and was awarded the Liszt Prize in 1982.

In 2002, he turned to conducting, becoming the Music Director of the Weinberger Kammerorchestra in 2006, followed by an appointment in 2007 as Music Director of the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra. From 2010 until 2012, he was music director of the MAV Symphony Orchestra Budapest and since September 2011 he is Music Director of Manchester Camerata, one of the UK's leading chamber orchestras. In September 2012, he became Principal Guest Conductor of the Budapest Festival Orchestra and, in January 2013, he was nominated Principal Artistic Partner of the Irish Chamber Orchestra.

Gábor Takács-Nagy is a dedicated and highly sought-after chamber music teacher. He is Professor of String Quartet at the Haute École de Musique in Geneva and International Chair in Chamber Music at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. In June 2012, he was awarded honorary membership of the Royal Academy of Music in London and in March 2017 the prestigious Bartók-Pásztory Prize by the Franz Liszt Academy Foundation.

## **León Bernsdorf**

### **Piano**

León Bernsdorf received his first piano lessons at the age of five. One year later, he received a scholarship by the Hamburg Youth Music Foundation and was taught by the renowned piano pedagogue Carol Tainton. In 2007, he became a pre-college student at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg under the tutelage of Volker Banfield. After high school, he continued his studies at Boston University, first with Boaz Sharon (BM), then with Pavel Nersessian (MM). He is currently completing an Artist Diploma at The Glenn Gould School, under the guidance of John Perry and David Louie, and is the recipient of a full-tuition Mario Romano Scholarship.

In November 2010, Bernsdorf won the second prize at the Dedication to Liszt Ferenc Competition at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. In March 2015, he won the Solo Concerto Competition at Boston University, which was followed by his Symphony Hall debut with the Boston Pops, performing Grieg's Piano Concerto. In September 2016, he was awarded 3rd Prize at the Liszt Ferenc International Piano Competition in Budapest. This year, he was one of the winners of the Concerto Competition at The Glenn Gould School. Most recently, he won 3rd Prize at the Jaen Competition as well as the Premio Rosa Sabater for the best interpretation of a Spanish composition. As a result of his competition successes, Bernsdorf will be performing in Spain, Germany, and Hungary in the 2017-18 season.

## **Royal Conservatory Orchestra**

### **Joaquin Valdepeñas, Resident Conductor**

The Royal Conservatory Orchestra (RCO), part of the Temerty Orchestral Program, is widely regarded as an outstanding ensemble and one of the best training orchestras in North America. The Conservatory's orchestral students gain critical performance experience in the acoustically renowned Koerner Hall, as well as invaluable musical insights by being led by such distinguished conductors as Gábor Takács-Nagy, Tania Miller, Ihnatowycz Chair in Piano Leon Fleisher, and Johannes Debus this season; past guest conductors have included Sir Roger Norrington, Peter Oundjian, Mario Bernardi, Richard Bradshaw, Ivars Taurins, Julian Kuerti, Nathan Brock, Uri Mayer, Lior Shambadal, Bramwell Tovey, and Tito Muñoz. The RCO ensures that instrumental students in the Performance Diploma Program and the Artist Diploma Program of The Glenn Gould School graduate with extensive orchestral performance experience. Additionally, at least two winners of The Glenn Gould School Concerto Competition have the opportunity to appear each year as soloists with the RCO. Graduates of the RCO have joined the ranks of the greatest orchestras in the world, including the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the BBC Orchestra, the Quebec Symphony Orchestra, the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, the Calgary Philharmonic, Tafelmusik, the Hallé Orchestra of Manchester, the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and Leipzig Gewandhaus. The RCO has been invited to perform at the Isabel Bader Performing Arts Centre in Kingston this season, has been heard on *CBC Radio*, and has toured China during the 2004-05 season.