

Program Notes  
Written by Bill Hemminger

ASH  
MICHAEL TORKE

Born in 1961 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Michael Torke studied music composition at Eastman School of Music and Yale University; he states that his music is “influenced by jazz and minimalism.” A prolific composer, arranger, and promoter, he has created musical works in just about every genre. He has written a rock opera influenced by Monteverdi’s *The Coronation of Poppea* and numerous orchestral works; compositions of his have been commissioned by groups from the Walt Disney Company to Absolut Vodka; he has worked with conductors such as Simon Rattle, Kurt Mazur, and David Zinman as well as violinist Tessa Lark (whom Evansville audiences should know well). In addition, he created his own record label, Ecstatic Records, in 2003.

Tonight’s work, “Ash,” written in 1988, is part seven of a larger work, the suite *Color Music*, where each movement of the suite bears the name of a different color. Torke is said to be a synesthete, that is, someone with synesthesia, a condition such that the stimulation of one sense triggers an automatic, involuntary experience in another. The Russian pianist and composer Aleksandr Skryabin famously “suffered” from synesthesia: for him, each key on the piano painted a different color, and each color evoked a different mood in the composer. Similarly, for Torke, each color “sounds” different from others. Of “Ash” Torke notes that the work makes use of a “fundamentally tonal vocabulary,” with chords and chordal fragments leaping from tonic to dominant and back in jerky rhythms. One reviewer finds “echoes of Beethoven” throughout the work in the way the composer deals inventively with small motifs and minimal material. *Gramophone* magazine finds in Torke’s work “some of the most optimistic, joyful, and thoroughly uplifting music to appear in recent years.”

VARIATIONS ON A ROCOCO THEME  
PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1840-1893, was the most popular Russian composer of all time; his music is still loved for its emotional appeal, rich orchestration, and soaring melodies. In his relatively short lifetime he composed seven symphonies, 11 operas, three ballets, three piano concertos, a violin concerto, and a number of solo piano works, choral works, and ensembles for various instruments. Despite evidence of Tchaikovsky’s musical precocity, his family felt he might do better in the civil service (imagine the composer of *Nutcracker* or the giant Piano Concerto No. 1 stamping forms or chasing after late tax payments for life). After a stint at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence, the boy managed to convince his father to let him pursue a musical career. Happily, not long after, Tchaikovsky entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory, completing a degree and moving to Moscow in 1865. In Moscow Tchaikovsky had great success; one of his admirers, patroness Nadezhda von Meck, offered to support the composer financially so that he might be able to give up his teaching and conducting duties (interestingly enough, von Meck also engaged and supported Claude Debussy, truly a different sort of musician). After a tour in the United States to celebrate the inauguration of Carnegie Hall,

Tchaikovsky settled down in a comfortable country house outside of Moscow and continued writing (*Nutcracker* and the Sixth Symphony date from this period) music until his death, which came suddenly and quickly during an outbreak of cholera. Since his time, some music critics have found his music bathetic or poorly developed, but the Soviet Union lionized the composer, making of him a nationalistic hero of sorts.

Stylistically, the *Variations on a Rococo Theme* was inspired by Mozart, whom Tchaikovsky greatly admired. Tchaikovsky wrote the piece (really a cello concerto) for Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, who also taught at the Moscow Conservatory; the first performance took place in 1877. Fitzenhagen made several significant changes to the original score, and his emended version continued to be performed for many years. Much later, upon evidence of musical scholarship, the score was returned to its original, unexpurgated form.

To accompany the cello, Tchaikovsky stipulates a small orchestra, without trumpets or percussion, not unlike the orchestras of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (hence the Rococo connection). The 20-minute virtuoso work consists of a theme and eight variations. But the *Variations on a Rococo Theme* is not, strictly speaking, a concerto—often interspersing extended orchestral interludes with solo passages. In this work the cello soloist rarely gets a break in performance; which adds to the innumerable technical and musical difficulties. The rococo theme was the composer's, and the work displays Tchaikovsky's great skill at spinning out interesting musical metamorphoses of the original, simple melody.

#### SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN B FLAT MAJOR LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

This work, no less inventive or spirited than others in the Beethoven oeuvre, had the misfortune of falling between Symphony No. 3 (which gained a subtitle, "Eroica," so great was its appeal) and Symphony No. 5 (ta-ta-ta-tum and all that razzmatazz). In spirit, Symphony No. 4 is closer to the first two symphonies, both more modest in sound and more classical in design than the burgeoning romantic complexities of works to come. The symphony was composed in 1806 and first performed at a private concert in Vienna in 1807. Evidently, the number four was ascendant that evening, and the wonderful fourth piano concerto (composer-as-soloist) joined ranks on the program with the nascent symphonic work. To this day, Symphony No. 4 is the least performed and the least well known of the Beethoven symphonies, but concerts such as this one aim to change that oversight. As at least one critic has noted: for any of Beethoven's contemporaries, a work like this symphony would surely have been considered a chef d'oeuvre.

Like the first two symphonies, this one begins with a slow introduction, not dissimilar to the openings of Haydn symphonies. This introduction, curiously enough, begins in the tonic minor (i.e. B flat minor) and makes its way, in the words of Leonard Bernstein, "through ambiguous unrelated keys. . .so reluctant to settle down into its final B flat major." Instrumentation is fairly light, another nod to the symphonies of Josef Haydn and the classical composers. Of course Beethoven had been a (recalcitrant) student of Haydn. The second movement is a suave Adagio in E-flat major. After a lively Allegro vivace, the work ends with a sparkling perpetual motion Allegro.