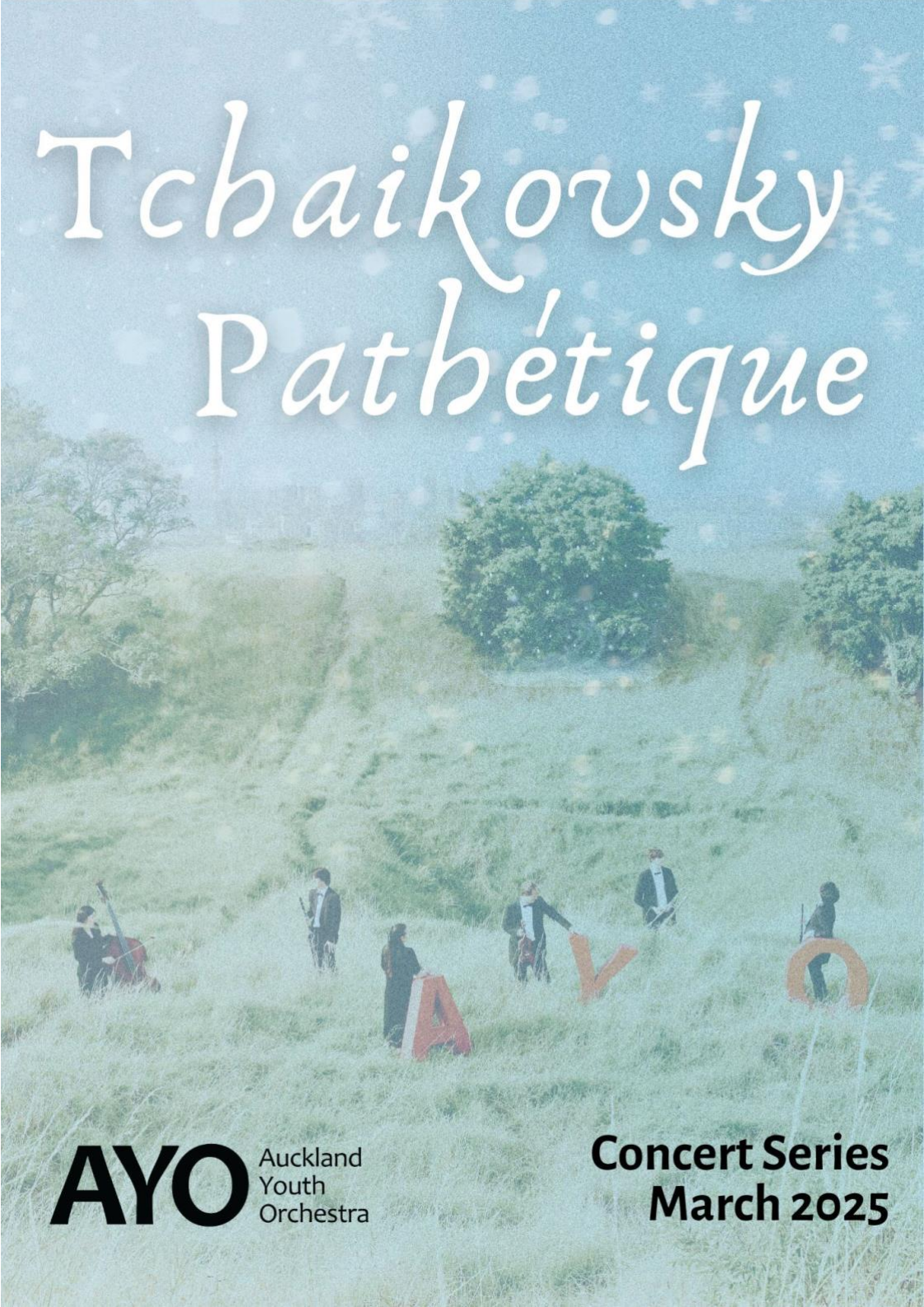
Tchaikovsky Pathétique



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Concert Series
March 2025

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Sat. 22 March 4pm

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Sun. 23 March 2.30pm

All Saints Church, Howick
Sat. 29 March, 7.30pm

Auckland Town Hall
Sun. 30 March, 2.30pm

PROGRAMME

Sibelius
Impromptu for Strings

Vaughan Williams
Oboe Concerto in A minor

INTERVAL

Tchaikovsky
Symphony No.6 (Pathétique)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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UPCOMING 2025 TOWN HALL CONCERTS

Sunday 15 June, 2.30pm
Dukas: Villanelle for French horn and Orchestra *(Soloist: Evan Metcalfe)*
Khachaturian: Gayane - Ballet music from Suites 1, 2 and 3
Tchaikovsky: Concerto no. 1 *(Soloist: Tony Yan Tong Chen)*

Sunday 7 September, 2.30pm
Beethoven: Symphony No.4
Hamilton: Peace, My Heart (with Auckland Youth Choir)
Lambert: El Rio Grande (with Auckland Youth Choir and Shan Liu, piano

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SOLOIST Alex Wu started playing the oboe at the age of 8. He started learning from Bede Hanley in 2023, after having learned from Martin Lee for 4 years. Alex has previously been the principal oboe of Youth Orchestra Waikato and Aotea Youth Symphony Orchestra. He won the Intermediate section of the New Zealand Double Reed Society Competition in 2019 and 2021, the Most Promising Oboist Prize in the Intermediate section of the Australian Double Reed Competition in 2020, Second Prize in the Open section of the NZDRS Competition in 2022. In 2023 and 2024, Alex's wind quartet was awarded Second and Third place in the NZCT Chamber Music Contest. In 2024, Alex was selected as an NZSO Emerging Young Artist Soloist and Performed the 3rd movement of the Haydn Oboe Concerto with the NZSO. And in December, Alex won the 2024 AYO Soloist Competition with his performance of the Vaughan Williams Oboe Concerto.

Alex is also a Grade 5 pianist and, outside of Music, he has many hobbies, including speed rollerblading and photography. Alex is also a sabre fencer representing New Zealand at the Commonwealth Juniors and Cadets Fencing Championships in 2024.

MUSIC DIRECTOR Antun Poljanich was born in Croatia, and studied piano and theory at Dubrovnik School for Musical Education and conducting at the University of Ljubljana. Following post-graduate studies in Austria, he won a scholarship which took him to Leningrad for a three-year Master Course in Conducting at the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory.

Antun has since worked with the Leningrad State Symphony Orchestra, the Veneto Philharmonia, the Slovene and Croatian National Orchestras and other prominent orchestras in Russia and Europe.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Impromptu for Strings **Sibelius (1865-1957)**

In 1894, a year after the music was first conceived, Jean Sibelius orchestrated the last two of his *Six Impromptus Op.5* for solo piano. The resulting work, for string orchestra, was simply entitled *Impromptu* and is undeniably a treasure.

Possibly what is most striking about the piece at first glance is the way the harmonies and melodies seem to capture a sense of the most serene joy and yet also the deepest sorrow, depicting perhaps an essential quality of what it means to be human, to experience life as often emotionally contradictory and dichotomous.

The musical substance of *Impromptu*, despite having come from the *Six Impromptus* for solo piano, ultimately belongs to an even earlier melodrama *Svartsjukans nätter ('Nights of Jealousy')* for piano trio, narrator and soprano, composed by Sibelius in early February 1893. In this beautifully emotive setting of a poem by Johan Ludvig Runeberg, the narrator speaks of a dream in which he is reunited with his former lover and relives the joy of their love; a most intense and transcendent feeling of happiness though tainted with a deep sense of knowing that she "was another's". This is perhaps how the poignant sense of sorrowful joy throughout the *Impromptu* can be fully understood and, with its truly human emotional qualities, makes the piece so appealing and deeply touching for the listener.

Programme Note by Archie Lamont-Bowden © 2025

Oboe Concerto in A minor **Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)**

Vaughan Williams's Oboe Concerto in A Minor, composed in 1944, is a reflection of the composer's experiences during World War II and his connection to English "folk-music" heritage. This piece dives deeper than just technical display and is mixed with deep emotions.

The premiere of this concerto was originally scheduled for July 5 1944, but the performance was forced to be postponed due to German air raids. The first performance took place two and a half months later, played by English oboist Leon Goosens with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

Although this concerto may seem tranquil and relaxed at first, it appears to be surrounded by a sense of melancholy, even in the livelier parts of the music. This concerto was composed immediately after Vaughan Williams's 5th Symphony, and there are many similarities in the theme and ideas between the 2 works, yet the timbre in the oboe concerto has a much more restrained and almost introverted

quality. The structure of this piece takes an interesting turn from the traditional concertos written by great composers such as Beethoven and Brahms. Rather than putting all the intense feelings into the first movement, Vaughan Williams saves them for last.

The opening movement of this concerto is quite subtle, and just as the emotions start pouring out, the second movement begins: a peasant dance of modesty. This seemingly lighthearted dance is overshadowed by an underlying sense of anxiety, reflecting the unease of British citizens during the war. The third movement fully unleashes the oboe's wildness and expressive ability, only to return to the melancholy in the opening, and the relaxing sensation disappears. As the piece comes to an end, the music diminishes, as if ascending into heaven.

Programme Note by Alex Wu © 2025

Symphony No. 6 (Pathétique) **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**

Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony represents the pinnacle not only of his compositional career but it also sums up all of Russian music up until November 1893 when the symphony was first performed. It incorporates and bridges many different elements between Russian culture and music, and the influence of western culture, as well as being one of the most intimate and poetic works of art easily felt and understood by so many people regardless of their ethnicity, background or culture.

Tchaikovsky started to work on the symphony in February 1893, during a period of his life that was filled with intense creativity, and this music seems to be an outpouring of his heart onto the paper. He was very satisfied with the progress of the work and found himself often deeply touched by the pages of music that he finished. He called it "a programme symphony", as he announced to his brother Modest: " A programme of a sort that remains enigmatic to everyone - let them guess it who can"

The 1st movement opens with grave pedal notes in the double basses accompanying a solemn bassoon solo, after which a short silence leads us to the first lively but anxious theme, repeated many times in different parts of the orchestra. It culminates with an introduction of low brass which soon dissolves into the beautiful and tender second theme. The development section starts after an abrupt crashing chord which ignites a stormy and angry section in which, for a brief moment, we hear echoes of a Russian Orthodox chorale. The restrained Coda or conclusion of the movement suggests a solemn and noble funeral march.

After the torments and angst of the first movement, the 2nd movement reminds us of the tenderness, beauty and light-heartedness of Tchaikovsky's ballet music. It starts with a strange 5/4 dance which attempts to become an elegant waltz which never eventuates; the underlying sadness is not without humour and irony. A reflective second section evokes distant memories.

The Third movement bursts forth with a marching energy evoking a constant sense of forward movement, but without ever reaching a final destination. Short marching motifs and a dense and perpetual motion produce a sense of military parade or pageantry but without a triumphal celebration. Exchanges of loud crashes and short, delicate, subdued passages, create a vivid tapestry of occasional optimism and a whirlwind of excitement. This goes all the way to the last and final fortissimo triplets that announce the Finale or 4th movement, an elegiac and poignant ode to sadness. It begins with an adagio lamentoso with a melody shared among the strings, a novel compositional approach for 19th century music. A brooding lament takes us through a battle between the abyss and heaven; we hear a reflexion of the Orthodox requiem, struggles of the past, despair and hope that is at the end extinguished in low tolling heartbeats from the double basses, quietly and mournfully expiring into complete silence.

Tchaikovsky died 9 days after the premiere of the symphony which he conducted himself. His sudden death, which was most likely caused by cholera, and the character of the symphony without clear programme notes, opened up possibilities for many theories regarding his death. Was it suicide, or assassination or just an unfortunate, contaminated glass of water that caused cholera? Was the music an epitaph, a premonition of his death, a protest or a love letter? Speculations continued over the last century and a half, and reflection on this music projected all the angst and preoccupation of the times. In the early 20th century, some musical commentators were convinced that "Pathétique" presented a political protest against autocracy; later, Hollywood adopted the symphony and contributed to a perception of banal emotional sentimentality. In the late 1970s and 80s, some music commentators surmised that Symphony No. 6 was exclusively the result of Tchaikovsky's sexual frustrations.

Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" has something that goes way beyond all of that; in its very core we hear tragedy transfigured into ultimate beauty. And while we are deeply touched by its shattering pain, we somehow become elevated by its humanity and sincerity. Symphony No. 6 became an exemplar for symphonic writing and a model that influenced many symphonies to follow - the great symphonies of Sibelius, Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

Programme Note by Antun Poljanich © 2025

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