

Cossack Dance from Mazeppa

Instrumentation: piccolo, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings.

Duration: 5 minutes.

THE COMPOSER – PYOTR ILYCH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893) – Operas are not always the first thing that comes to mind at the mention of Tchaikovsky’s name. Symphonies? Yes. Ballets? Absolutely. Concertos? Of course. But operas? We all know *Eugene Onegin* but not many of us can name more than one of the other nine he completed. It’s true that history usually takes it upon itself to curate the reputations of our heroes, but to forget Tchaikovsky’s operatic output is something we do to our own detriment.

THE HISTORY – *Mazeppa* was composed between 1881 and 1883 and premiered at the Bolshoi in early 1884. The Moscow performance was well-received (and well-reviewed) but the ensuing St. Petersburg iteration was not. It seems the quality of the cast was at issue more than the score itself, but the composer was still glad his brother hid the critics’ comments from him. “The truth might have killed me”, he reportedly said when he learned of it much later. The libretto of *Mazeppa* was drawn from a Pushkin play called *Poltova* (1829) and set in 17th-century Ukraine. The story follows the real-life Cossack Head of State Ivan Stepanovych Mazeppa and his plot against Tsar Peter the Great. Opera lovers who don’t know this work well need not worry - this is no mere documentary. There is plenty of intrigue to be had, complete with love interests and even an abduction! During Act I we find ourselves witness to a grand party (another important operatic staple) during which various entertainers are presented to Mazeppa for his amusement. Among them is a Cossack dance troupe that dazzles everyone in attendance with their frenetic athleticism. Tchaikovsky handles the moment with his usual deftness and incredible orchestral color palette.

THE WORLD – Construction on the Washington Monument was completed in 1884. Also that year, Germany took possession of Togoland in West Africa, the Siege of Khartoum began in Sudan and Edwin Abbot published *Flatland*.

THE CONNECTION – The *Cossack Dance* was last performed by the CCSO in _____. _____ was on the podium.
