

LIVE

FROM LINCOLN CENTER



December 31, 2010 at 8:30 on PBS
New York Philharmonic: New Year's Eve Gala

Each New Year's Eve the New York Philharmonic plays a Gala Concert in Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. The musical content is appropriately festive, and the stage is festooned with balloon and floral decorations. Over the years it has been the pleasure of Live From Lincoln Center to bring many of those concerts into your homes; and we shall do so again this year on Friday evening, December 31. The event will mark the second New Year's Eve Gala conducted by the Philharmonic's still-new Music Director, Alan Gilbert. Last year he chose American music ranging from Aaron Copland to Cole Porter. This year we'll be treated to an all-Tchaikovsky program, with the blazing young pianist, Lang Lang, playing the composer's Piano Concerto No. 1. It was this Concerto that Lang Lang played to great acclaim at the age of 17 with Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony as a last-minute substitute for an ailing colleague. The concert will begin with the Polonaise from the opera, *Eugene Onegin*, and after the intermission we'll have the music for the complete Second Act of the beloved ballet, *The Nutcracker*.

Come back with me to the Live From Lincoln Center telecast of July 29, 2003, a concert given in the course of summertime New York's Mostly Mozart Festival. The program was indeed made up of music mostly by Mozart, but also scheduled was Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 with the very young (barely into his twenties) Lang Lang as soloist. Several Mozart opera arias, lasting a total of about 15 minutes, were also scheduled. But literally minutes before concert time the soprano conceded victory to the laryngitis that had attacked her and she informed us she would be unable to perform. What to do on a live telecast scheduled to occupy two hours of air time? Into the breach stepped Lang Lang, offering to perform Liszt's knuckle-busting "Reminiscences of Mozart's *Don Juan*", which mercifully runs just about the same length as the scheduled soprano arias. His offer was immediately accepted, and I remember Lang Lang running through the corridor on the broadcast booth level in order to get to one of the dressing rooms that was equipped with a piano. A few quick "licks" on the keyboard and Lang Lang was ready to go onstage. His performance of the Liszt was electrifying, and I daresay it served to ignite his remarkable ensuing global career.

Lang Lang returned to Live From Lincoln Center, this time as soloist with the New York Philharmonic, in Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 on the occasion of the Orchestra's inaugural concert of its 2005-2006 season. Thus his appearance on this year's New Year's Eve Gala will mark the third time our Live From Lincoln Center audience will be treated to the playing of this remarkable young man.

The three Tchaikovsky works on the program come from the last 18 years of the composer's lifetime (1840-1893). Earliest was the Piano Concerto, whose first version was completed in 1875. Tchaikovsky intended the Concerto for the reigning Russian pianist of the time, Nicholas Rubinstein. But when he showed the manuscript to Rubinstein, the latter vehemently criticized the piece and declared he would not play it. It then came to the attention of the pianist and conductor, Hans von Bülow, who eagerly became its champion and gave the world premier not in Moscow, or St. Petersburg, or some other Russian city,

but in a concert he played on tour in Boston, Massachusetts on October 25, 1875. Tchaikovsky subsequently made slight revisions in the score; the final version as we know it came in 1888. It is perhaps the best-known piano concerto in the literature, and even attracted the attention of Tin Pan Alley some 65 years ago when the theme of its Introduction became the basis of a Pop song titled "Tonight We Love".

The Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin* that opens our program is a high-spirited moment from a basically gloom-laden opera that includes a murder by duel, an early unrequited love, and an ultimate rejection of that early love on moral and ethical grounds. The opera dates from 1878.

As to *The Nutcracker* of 1892, it is the last of Tchaikovsky's three great ballet scores, the other two being *Swan Lake* (1875-76) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889). *The Nutcracker* is in two acts. In the First Act we are set up for the primacy of the children, Clara and Fritz, and the toy nutcracker, whose victory over the Mouse King transforms him into a handsome Prince. The Second Act takes the children on a visit to the Kingdom of the Prince and presents us with all the music familiar from the concert suite Tchaikovsky extracted from the score, among them The Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy, the Arab Dance, the Chinese Dance, the Russian Dance and ultimately the Waltz of the Flowers. No offense meant to diehard balletomanes, but all by itself Act 2 of "The Nutcracker", without choreography, makes for a rewarding concert experience.

So there we have it: Live From Lincoln Center ushers in the year 2011 with the New York Philharmonic's Gala New Year's Eve all-Tchaikovsky concert on Friday evening, December 31. Alan Gilbert conducts, and pianist Lang Lang is the soloist. As usual I leave you with the suggestion that you contact your local PBS station for information as to the exact day and time of the program in your area.

Happy New Year everyone!

MARTIN BOOKSPAN