

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Thu. February 23 The 107th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

Sun. February 26 The 890th Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

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Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) Russian-style Scherzo (ca. 4 min)

This *Scherzo*, written in a Russian style, was originally composed as music for a film, though later Stravinsky would clarify that it was “not ‘film music,’ which is... an emotional counterpart to scenery, but music for film use.” The film, *The North Star*, by Samuel Goldwyn was intended as a kind of war propaganda piece to try to persuade audiences to be more accepting of Russia’s position. Ultimately, the composer and director went their separate ways, with another composer Aaron Copland scoring the music for the film.

Stravinsky ended up using the ideas from this film work to fulfill a commission from Paul Whiteman, who had become well-known when he had commissioned George Gershwin to write “Rhapsody in Blue” almost twenty years earlier. The arrangement for a jazz band featured six saxophones and was premiered in a radio broadcast in September of 1944. The composer indicated that he didn’t feel it was received all that well in this setting, so he eventually re-arranged the work for orchestra, which was premiered in 1946 with the San Francisco Symphony and the composer conducting.

The *Scherzo* opens with a jovial tune that imitates the sound of a village band, with the brass instruments creating an accordion-like sound effect using a special crescendo technique implemented for each chordal harmony played. In addition, this opening section features off-beat rhythms that create a strong rhythmic energy, a hallmark of Stravinsky’s works.

The first contrasting section, a Trio, is signaled by a sudden stop in the action and single intonation on the harp. The piano and harp are then featured in canon on a folk melody passage, with textural and timbral variety added by three muted violins, xylophone and interjections by the trumpets. The opening section then returns before leading to a second contrasting Trio section, with even more emphasis on off-beat rhythms and unexpected silences that create an even stronger rhythmic energy, featuring additional interjections to keep the audience on their toes. The opening village band returns to close the short work, leaving you hanging on the final chord, perhaps wondering if there will be another Trio to come.

It may be hard to imagine how this *Scherzo*, literally a musical joke, was intended for a war propaganda film. In addition, it may be difficult to understand how it fit within the jazz idiom before finding it’s ultimate ‘home’ in the orchestral concert hall. Stravinsky would later arrange a version of the *Scherzo* for two pianos in 1954, however this brief curtain opener in this symphonic setting seems to be performed most often of all versions of the work, bringing a taste of Russia to audiences worldwide.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (xylophone, tambourine, triangle, high-hat cymbal, snare drum, bass drum), harp, piano, strings

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Sinfonia Concertante (Cello Concerto No. 2 in E minor, op. 125)

- I. Andante (ca. 11 min)
- II. Allegro giusto (ca. 18 min)
- III. Andante con moto – Allegretto – Allegro marcato (ca. 10 min)

Originally written as Prokofiev's First Cello Concerto in the mid-1930's, the work dates from the time when the composer produced some of his most well-known pieces of music, including *Peter and the Wolf* and *Romeo and Juliet*. When the Cello Concerto No. 1 premiered in Moscow in November of 1938 it was not received as well as Prokofiev's other works, however, partly due to its level of difficulty and the performer's interpretation. The composer removed it from his catalog and never published it, only hearing it performed again in 1947, when Rostropovich, as a young cellist in his twenties, presented a performance of it at Moscow Conservatory.

Prokofiev was quite impressed by this performance to the point that he approached the young cellist and asked for his assistance in revising the concerto. In the meantime, the composer would compose a Sonata for Cello for the soloist, before starting on revisions to the Concerto. Rostropovich spent a few summers with Prokofiev working on revisions of the concerto. Eventually the work was modified to such an extent, that it was re-titled as Cello Concerto No. 2 when it was premiered in February of 1952 by Rostropovich.

Prokofiev was still not satisfied with the work and continued re-working the piece to the point that it was re-titled yet one more time, given the Russian title *Sinfonia-Kontstert*. Scholars have debated on the proper translation of this final title, sometimes referred to as a Symphony-

Concerto and other times presented as *Sinfonia Concertante*. The latter often refers to the late 18th century form which presents more than one soloist with an orchestra, so was considered by some scholars to be a mis-leading translation. Instead, the composer may have wanted to emphasize that the work, which had begun as a concerto and developed into more of a symphonic form, presented the soloist and orchestra more as equal partners. Hence the Symphony-Concerto title seemed to more accurately convey the work's history to some scholars as well as give a better indication of its hybrid form.

Prokofiev would not live to hear the premiere of this final revision which was given by Rostropovich in Copenhagen in 1954. Presented in three movements, the work opens unusually with a slow movement (*Andante*) and an opening four-note rising motive, with the cello playing almost immediately against the rising four-note theme. The middle movement (*Allegro giusto*) presents the faster tempo and a much longer section of the work, including a challenging cadenza, which takes up two full pages in the score. It is here in the score that the composer offers some soloists alternatives to the main cadenza, calling them *facilitazione*. The final movement, (*Andante con moto – Allegretto – Allegro marcato*), presents a set of variations on a lyrical theme played by the soloist, and closes with another cadenza, punctuated by the sounds of the timpani.

This Symphony-Concerto was described by one biographer, Israel Nestyev:

"In the Symphony-Concerto,...the old and the new in Prokofiev stand side by side. The old manifests itself chiefly in the harshness of timbre and harmony

and in the deliberately disjointed character of certain passages... But these particular passages... must not be construed as the predominant stylistic elements of the work. On the contrary, it is the broad and idiomatic singing themes...that [constitute] the most prominent feature of this composition."

One of the new elements that had been added to the latest version of the work, was the incorporation of a certain melody, which created some controversy, the source of which Rostropovich identified:

"In the finale...Prokofiev incorporated a theme that was similar to a popular

song by Vladimir Zakharov, an *apparatchik* who mercilessly vilified all formalists. After the work was played at the Union of Composers, Zakharov stood up and said indignantly that he would write to the papers complaining that his own wonderful tune had been totally distorted. When I related this to Prokofiev he wrote a replacement tune (a waltz, which I never played), and said that once everything had settled down we would quietly revert to the original tune. The manuscript, which is in my keeping includes both versions."

Instrumentation: 2 flute (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbal, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, bass drum), celesta, strings

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Suite "The Firebird" (1945 version) (ca. 31 min)

- Introduction
- Prelude, Dance of the Firebird
- Variations – Firebird
- Pantomime I
- Pas de deux
- Pantomime II
- Scherzo (Dance of the Princesses)
- Pantomime III
- Rondo
- Infernal Dance
- Lullaby (Berceuse)
- Final Hymn

The Firebird was the first of three ballets for which Stravinsky would compose music, the other two being *Petrouchka* and *The Rite of Spring*. The turn of events that led to this first work, and consequently to the others as well, is notable. Originally, Sergei Diaghilev commissioned another composer (and his former teacher) Anatol Liadov, to compose the score for this ballet, which

is based on a famous Russian folk tale. However, after a year had passed and no score was forth coming, Diaghilev took a chance and turned to the star pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov for the job. At only twenty-seven years of age, it seemed a daunting proposition, but Stravinsky accepted and made his international debut in Paris in 1910 with great success.

The description given to Stravinsky, on which he based his score, was as follows:

(Introduction) The czar's son, Prince Ivan, has an unexpected meeting with "a fabulous bird with plumage of fire" during a hunting excursion. In exchange for not being hunted down by Ivan, the fabulous Firebird bargains her freedom by giving Ivan a magic feather (The Firebird and Her Dance). Later, Ivan chances upon an enchanted castle with a courtyard full of lovely maidens (Round Dance of the

Princesses). They warn Ivan of the evil Kastchei in the castle who, for his own amusement, turns travelers into stone. Ivan, undaunted, enters the castle, and is faced by the evil Kastchei. The magic feather shields him from harm, and the Firebird appears, sending Kastchei and his ogres into a mad dance (Infernal Dance of the King Kastchei). The evil ones are left exhausted and eventually destroyed by the Firebird (Berceuse). Kastchei's victims are freed from their stone spells, and Ivan wins the hand of a lovely Princess (Finale).

Stravinsky dedicated this work to his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, who had died in 1908, two years before the work was premiered. Within the work itself, homage is paid to his teacher as well, utilizing two themes that he had used in previous works: The principal theme of the second movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sinfonietta on Russian Themes* is the basis for the Khorovod in the 'Dance of the Princesses'. And the music heard in 'Witches' Sabbath' from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mlada*, is brought back to life as the theme of the 'Infernal Dance of Kastchei and His Subjects.' The reference is deliberate, as Kastchei was one of the characters in the opera *Mlada*.

Stravinsky took much of what he had learned from Rimsky-Korsakov to contrast the supernatural with the earthly beings, as well. Diatonic music, including the use of folk tunes, was used primarily to depict the human world, while the supernatural is given over to chromaticism. And the brilliant effects of various colorations of orchestration can be attributed to Rimsky-Korsakov's influence as well.

Eventually, Stravinsky would draw from his ballet score of *The Firebird* to create several concert suites for orchestra. The first of these would include: Introduction; The Firebird and Her Dance; The Firebird's Entreaties; Game of the Princesses with the Golden Apples; Round Dance of the Princesses (*Khorovod*); and Infernal Dance. Later Stravinsky determined that the original Finale itself was perhaps a more satisfying conclusion and revised the suite accordingly in 1919, eliminating two sections and adding the *Berceuse* (Lullaby) and Finale to close the work. Yet another revised version was published in 1945, in which all the sections of the previous two suites were combined and orchestrated for a smaller ensemble (and which is being performed for this concert series). This last version was used by George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet to bring the work back to the stage in an adapted version of the original scenes.

The composer himself was very critical of this work later in his life, along with the two ballets that followed, indicating that he thought many conductors included the works in their repertoire simply as necessary accomplishments in their careers. Yet audiences have continued to enjoy performances of all three of these works, and he himself seemed to have eased his own harsh opinion when he made his last recording as a conductor sixty years after its premiere at the age of eighty-five, with one final performance of music from *The Firebird*.

Instrumentation: 2 flute (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbal, triangle, tambourine, xylophone), harp, piano, strings

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