

The 984th Suntory Subscription Concert
Wed. May 10, 2023, 19:00 at Suntory Hall

The 154th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert
Fri. May 12, 2023, 19:00 at Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall

The 985th Orchard Hall Subscription Concert
Sun. May 14, 2023, 15:00 at Bunkamura Orchard Hall

Mikhail Pletnev, conductor
 Masanobu Yoda, concertmaster

Rachmaninov:
The Rock, Op. 7 (ca. 12 min)

Rachmaninov:
Isle of the Dead, Op. 29 (ca. 20 min)

— intermission (ca. 15 min) —

Rachmaninov:
Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (ca. 38 min)

- I. Non allegro
- II. Andante con moto. Tempo di valse
- III. Lento assai - Allegro vivace

Presented by Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra
 Subsidized by the Agency for Cultural Affairs Government of Japan |
 Japan Arts Council (May 10)
 In Association with **Bunkamura** (May 14)



- ♪ All seats are reserved. Late admittance will be refused during the live performance. If you enter or reenter just before the concert or between movements, we may escort you to a seat different from the one to which you were originally assigned.
- ♪ Exiting during the performance will be tolerated. If you do not feel well, please exit or enter as you need. However, please mind the other listeners so that they will be minimally disturbed.
- ♪ Please refrain from using your cellphone or other electronic devices during performance.
- ♪ Hold applause please. Please cherish the "afterglow" at the end of each piece for a moment before your applause.

Artist Profile



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Mikhail Pletnev, conductor

Special Guest Conductor of
the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra

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Mikhail Pletnev is an artist who cannot be classified in one word. Known as a genius and one of the greatest pianists of our time and also as conductor and composer. Born in Archangel, Russia in 1957. Awarded the 1st prize and Gold Medal at renowned Tchaikovsky Competition in 1978 when he was 21 years old.

The resulting friendship with Mikhail Gorbachev in time gave Pletnev the opportunity to found Russian National Orchestra (RNO) in 1990.

Pletnev is also often invited to conduct noted orchestras such as Staatskapelle Dresden, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and others. Starting from July 2003, he has been invited to conduct the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra and was appointed as Special Guest Conductor from 2015. As a composer, he has been composing numerous works among which there is a cello sonata written for Steven Issarlis. His CDs have been released from Deutsche Grammophon and Pentatone Classics.

In 2022, he founded the Rachmaninov International Orchestra (RIO).

Program Notes

Text by Robert Markow

Rachmaninov: *The Rock*, Op. 7

The Rock was one of Rachmaninov's earliest orchestral works, preceding all the symphonies and concertos except the First Symphony. Nevertheless, by the time he wrote this short mood piece in his twentieth year he had already gained considerable experience in the orchestral medium, including a Scherzo written at age fourteen, the symphonic poem *Prince Rostislav*, attempts at a piano concerto and a symphony, and the opera *Aleko*. The orchestration of *The Rock* is assured and well crafted, even if the thematic material is tenuous and the development of ideas falls short of a true master.

The highly atmospheric work, also known in English as *The Crag*, takes its title from Mikhail Lermontov's poem of the same name. The poem's first two lines appear at the top of Rachmaninov's score as follows: "The little golden cloud spent the night/On the breast of the giant crag." But the perceptive listener will sense that there is more to Rachmaninov's thirteen-minute piece than clouds and crags. Indeed, the true inspiration comes from another literary source, Anton Chekhov's story "On the Road," in which crags and clouds are allegorical symbols for an older man and a younger woman who meet briefly at a roadside inn.

The music follows the narrative of Chekhov's story in a series of moods ranging from loneliness and despair to hope to joy to passion and back to loneliness and despair at the end. The main musical building blocks are the man's motif (opening bars in the lower strings) and the woman's motif (solo flute). Listeners familiar with Tchaikovsky's music will hear numerous touches of orchestration reminiscent of the older composer, whom Rachmaninov met shortly after completing *The Rock*. Rachmaninov played Tchaikovsky a piano reduction of the score, which earned Tchaikovsky's strong approval.

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The first performance took place at a Russian Music Society Concert conducted by Vasily Ilyich Safonoff in Moscow on the composer's 21st birthday, April 1, 1894.

SERGEI RACHMANINOV: Born at Oneg, an estate near Novgorod, April 1, 1873; died in Beverly Hills, California, March 28, 1943

Work composed: 1893 World premiere: April 1, 1894 in Moscow, conducted by Vasily Ilyich Safonoff

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam), harp, strings

Rachmaninov: *Isle of the Dead, Op. 29*

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Rachmaninov's predilection for dark colors, somber moods, and pathos found no greater manifestation than in his symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*. Inspiration for this remarkable score came from a painting of the same title by the Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901). Böcklin's painting exists in five versions (1880-1886; a sixth was done in 1901 with his son Carlo). But Rachmaninov's direct source was a black and white reproduction he saw in Paris in 1907. His imagination was seized by this grim, gloomy picture with its stark, brooding cliffs, ghostly cypress trees and the image of a black-draped rower steering a small boat across the water with a casket and a single mourner.

The association with Greek mythology – Charon gliding across the black water of the Styx – is too close to be ignored. Böcklin, who spent much of his life in Italy, presumably had a specific Mediterranean island in mind for his painting (perhaps Pondikonisi, which lies off the shores of Corfu; some authorities maintain it was Ponza, largest of the Pontine Islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea), but, as biographer Patrick Piggott observes, “the suggestive power of Rachmaninov's music carries the listener into regions of the imagination far beyond the range of the Swiss painter's art, and it must be emphasized that it was not so much the quality of Böcklin's painting that stimulated Rachmaninov as its subject.” The score was

composed in 1909 and first performed on May 1 of that year in Moscow with the composer conducting.

The baleful mood is established in the opening bars. A mantle of oppressive gloom hangs over the music. A restless, undulating motif with five beats to the bar (usually 2 + 3; sometimes 3 + 2) suggests the slow dip and pull of Charon's oars, or perhaps the gentle lapping of the waves. The pervasive motif slowly builds to a powerful climax. Solemn brass pronouncements punctuate the way. Despite the muted colors and grave mood, there is an awesome sense of impending doom. Suddenly the spirit takes flight: the lopsided 5/8 rhythm changes to a regular 3/4, the minor tonality yields to major, the mood becomes urgent and even passionate. Rachmaninov referred to the long-breathed melody in E-flat major as the "life" theme, to which the dead soul recalls the pleasures of life on earth. Intimations of the "Dies irae" motif (the Latin chant for the dead in the Catholic liturgy) mingle with the "life" theme. The latter is finally stamped out; dark mutterings of the "Dies irae" float about; the unnerving, rocking motif in 5/8 rhythm returns; the colors darken; Charon continues on his way in Stygian gloom as the music dies away into inaudibility.

Work composed: 1909 World premiere: May 1, 1909 in Moscow, conducted by the composer

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1st doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals), harp, strings

Rachmaninov: *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45

Rachmaninov wrote his last composition in a surge of creative inspiration while recuperating from an illness at his summer home near Huntington, Long Island. On August 21, 1940, he wrote to Eugene Ormandy, conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra: "Last week I finished a new symphonic piece, which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra. It is called *Fantastic Dances*. I shall now begin the

orchestration.” Rachmaninov had enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with the Philadelphia Orchestra, so it was only natural that he offer this superb ensemble the honor of the world premiere, which took place on January 3, 1941. The original title, later changed, was probably given in memory of Shostakovich’s work of the same title for solo piano.

Exceptionally brilliant orchestration contributes significantly to making the *Symphonic Dances* one of the finest scores in Rachmaninov’s catalogue. Nevertheless, it should be noted that he also prepared a two-piano version of the score that, in its own medium, is as masterly as the full orchestral work. The composer enjoyed playing this privately with his friend and neighbor in New York, Vladimir Horowitz. The care Rachmaninov lavished on the orchestration can be seen in his taking the trouble to consult Robert Russell Bennett about the use of the saxophone, which Rachmaninov used for the first and only time in this work. To an otherwise normal-sized orchestra, the composer also added a large number of percussion instruments that shine, glisten and tinkle: glockenspiel, xylophone, piano, harp, chimes, triangle, tambourine, and cymbals.

The first movement is characterized by vigorous rhythmic drive and a theme built from a tiny, three-note motif announced first by the English horn and followed immediately by clarinet, then bassoon. The pervasive use of this three-note motif, which is found in nearly every measure of the opening and closing sections of the movement, calls to mind Beethoven’s use of a four-note motif in the first movement of his Fifth Symphony. The central lyrical section features the solo saxophone in an expressive melody reminiscent of a Russian folk song. Near the end of the movement we hear another new theme, this one warmly consoling and played by violins and cellos. The theme actually evokes a poignant autobiographical memory, as it is derived from a theme in the composer’s First Symphony, written nearly half a century earlier.

Sinister harmonies from the brass introduce the second movement, an uneasy, mysterious waltz tinged with nostalgia and melancholy. On and on the music swirls, becoming increasingly energetic, gyrating passionately.

The final movement too opens with mysterious, ominous mutterings and rumblings, but soon launches into a rousing, brilliantly scored movement full of fantastic images, rhythmic excitement, and tintinnabulation from

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the percussion department. The music winds down for a somber central section full of haunting, spectral sounds and evocations of lost worlds. Here Rachmaninov introduces the “Dies irae” motif of which he was so fond. But shortly before the end of the movement, the word “Alliluya” appears in the score. This provided a clue that led to Geoffrey Norris’ discovery that the coda is derived from the Russian chant *Blagosloven esi Gospedi*, which Rachmaninov had used in his *All-Night Vigil*, op. 37. Musicologist Michael Steinberg sums up the importance of this fact by stating: “Given what we know of Rachmaninov’s state of mind in 1940, it is likely that he thought of this as his last composition even as he was getting it onto paper with such intensity and speed. We see him then taking leave of his craft with a hymn of thanks and praise. Perhaps it is not too much to imagine that the symbolic victory of the *Blagosloven* theme over the “Dies irae” is Rachmaninov’s own affirmation of the faith that ‘Death shall be swallowed up in Victory.’” The *Symphonic Dances* end in a blaze of colors that bring to mind some of the most memorable pages of Ravel and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Work composed: 1940 **World premiere:** January 3, 1941 in Philadelphia, by the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (tambourine, side drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, 3 bells, glockenspiel, xylophone), harp, piano, strings

Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, **Robert Markow** now writes program notes for orchestras as well as for numerous other musical organizations in North America and Asia. He taught at Montreal’s McGill University for many years, has led music tours to several countries, and writes for numerous leading classical music journals.