

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30

Although Rachmaninov is well known as a successful composer, conductor and performer, it seemed he felt he could only do his best when concentrating on one role at a time. In fact, it was during a composing drought after an unsuccessful performance of his first symphony that he was given the opportunity to focus on his conducting, for which he was received warmly. It was in this same period, when he was battling his own demons regarding his compositional abilities that he went several years with virtually no works forthcoming. Only after sessions with Dr. Nikolay Dahl, did Rachmaninov regain his compositional confidence with his Second Piano Concerto, which he finally wrote in the summer of 1900.

The second and third movements of that work were performed in December of that same year and were received with such great success that it gave him the needed push to add the first movement. He gave the first performance of the entire Second Piano Concerto in the fall of 1901, complete with a dedication to Dr. Dahl, and displaying the duality of the pianist, as much accompanist as soloist. And although the work was received successfully, he continued to have doubts just days before its opening, due to some constructive criticism by a friend and former fellow student, which, not surprisingly, gave him pause for thought after the last public performance of one of his symphonies had been such a traumatic failure for him.

Following his work on the Second Piano Concerto, Rachmaninov was due to embark on his first concert tour of America in the fall of 1909, with the plan to unveil his latest work, the Third Piano Concerto, which is being performed by the TPO for this concert series. He was sequestered away in the family's country estate, Ivanovka, where he finally completed the piece, dating it 23

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September 1909 (in the traditional Julian calendar of the time). This was only nine days before he was to leave on his journey to America, hardly enough time to prepare sufficiently for a performance of a work of such magnitude. So Rachmaninov, now replacing his composer's hat for that of his performer's tails, resorted to practicing the work on board the ship using a silent keyboard.

The *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor* was premiered on November 28th at the New Theatre in New York with Walter Damrosch conducting. In January of the following year, Rachmaninov performed the work again, this time at Carnegie Hall with Gustav Mahler conducting. One review in the *New York Herald* commented that 'its great length and extreme difficulties bar it from performances by any but pianists of exceptional technical powers.' In fact, in ensuing years, Rachmaninov himself made various cuts and revisions of cadenzas, perhaps in response to some of the critics.

However, many now believe those cuts to have been to the detriment of the work as a whole, so that most often the work is now performed as originally composed, with the choice of the various revised cadenzas left up to the preference of the soloist. And while Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto continues to be renowned for its technical and musical demands on the pianist, it has been said that the composer's intentions were not 'virtuosity for the sake of virtuosity,' (Evgeny Kissin); instead the writing displays the passion and musical genius of Rachmaninov as both composer and performer.

Work composed: 1909 **World premiere:** November 28, 1909 in New York conducted by Walter Damrosch with the composer as the soloist
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals), strings, solo piano

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) Symphonie Fantastique, Op. 14

Inspired by his love for actress Harriet Smithson, after seeing her performance as Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Berlioz began composing this work in 1830. Within this work one can see the influence of the famous playwright that he had long admired, as well as the musical impact that Beethoven's symphonies had had on him. Berlioz also borrowed music from his own previous compositions and took the symphony to a new level with his *idée fixe* permeating throughout, a representation, and perhaps courting, of his true love.

Symphonie Fantastique was premiered in December of 1830, and it seems the effects of his courting did not go unnoticed, as Berlioz and Smithson were married in 1833. The symphony went through numerous revisions through 1855, (which included revisions to the musical score up through 1832), with Berlioz himself writing *programme* notes for the various versions. In his autobiography, the composer indicated his intentions that the text of these *programme* notes “must be considered as the spoken text of an opera, which serves to introduce musical movements and to motivate their character and expression” [from *Memoirs* by Hector Berlioz]:

I. Visions and Passions

A young musician sees the woman of his dreams and falls hopelessly in love. Each time her image comes into his mind, it evokes a musical thought [represented by an *idée fixe*] that is impassioned in character, but also noble and shy, as he imagines her to be.

II. A Ball

The artist finds himself in the swirl of a party, but the beloved image appears before him and troubles his soul.

III. In the Country

In the distance, two shepherds play a “*Ranz des vaches*” in dialogue. The pastoral setting, the gentle evening breeze, the hopeful feelings he has begun to have—all conspire to bring to his spirit an unaccustomed

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calm, and his thoughts take on a more cheerful cast. He hopes not to be lonely much longer. But his happiness is disturbed by dark premonitions. What if she is deceiving him! One of the shepherds resumes his playing, but the other makes no response.... In the distance, one can hear thunder. Solitude. Silence.

IV. The Procession to the Stake

Convinced that his love is unrequited, the artist takes an overdose of opium. It plunges him into a sleep accompanied by horrifying visions. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, has been condemned and led to the scaffold, and is witnessing his own execution. The procession advances to a march that is now somber and savage, now brilliant and solemn. At its conclusion the *idée fixe* returns, like a final thought of the beloved, cut off by the fatal blow.

V. A Witches' Sabbath

He sees himself in the midst of a frightful throng of ghosts, witches, monsters of every kind, who have assembled for his funeral. Strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter, distant cries. The beloved melody again reappears, but it has lost its modesty and nobility; it is no more than a vulgar dance tune, trivial and grotesque; it is she, coming to the Sabbath. A joyous roar greets her arrival.... She joins in the devilish orgy.... A funeral knell, a parody of the *Dies irae*. A Sabbath round-dance. The *Dies irae* and the round-dance are combined.

Work composed: 1830 World premiere: December 5, 1830 at the Paris Conservatoire

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling on english horn), 2 clarinets (1st doubling on E \flat -clarinet), 4 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, 2 timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tubular bells), harp, strings / banda: oboe

April L. Racana / As a Music Specialist, Ms. Racana completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (BS/Piano Pedagogy) and her graduate studies at San Francisco State University (MA/Music). In addition, she was accepted as part of a post-graduate fellowship at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music, as well as for the Japan Studies Program at International Christian University. Having been a Music Specialist teaching both in California for nearly a decade, and at Nishimachi International School where she taught for more than 25 years, she feels she has learned as much from her many students as she has taught them over more than three decades, and especially appreciates the opportunity to share her musical insights to an even wider community, as program annotator for the TPO.