

## **Program Notes for VSO Concert – September 20-22, 2024**

### **Stravinsky – Firebird; Rachmaninoff – Piano Concerto #3**

#### **By Jonathan Berkowitz**

Why are Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff on the same program? The easy answer is that they are both Russian. But that's the only thing they had in common. In every other way, they are dramatically different: their lives, musical education, composing style, reputation, and indeed their musical gifts.

#### **IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)**

Stravinsky's musical talents did not become evident until his early twenties, when he began to create truly revolutionary works. But the fireworks fizzled out after a couple of decades. Above all else, he was an experimentalist.

Although Stravinsky's parents paid for his piano lessons, he had to learn the basics of harmony and counterpoint on his own. Not especially dedicated to music at first, he followed his mother's wishes and attended law school. It did take him some time to mature and find his metier.

The first turning point in his musical life was meeting the son of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov at university, and later the father. Upon seeing Stravinsky's first attempts at composition, Rimsky-Korsakov Senior advised him to continue with law but agreed to look at any future compositions. It took five years of effort before Stravinsky produced anything that Rimsky-Korsakov judged suitable for performance.

His early works barely captured public attention. But by 1908, he was working on an opera, an orchestral Scherzo fantastique, and a small tone poem called *Feu d'artifice*. The latter two were first performed in 1909. In the audience was Sergei Diaghilev, one of the greatest "talent scouts" of the century. Diaghilev was enthralled and immediately commissioned Stravinsky to orchestrate a Chopin nocturne and valse for the Ballet Russe's version of *Les Sylphides*. Stravinsky's career was truly launched. Diaghilev asked Stravinsky to compose a completely new work for the 1910 season of the Ballet Russe. The result was *L'Oiseau de feu (The Firebird)*, the first real modern ballet. Stravinsky went to Paris and very rapidly achieved fame by age 28; his name spread worldwide.

A year later came *Petrouchka*, a ballet based on the ancient pagan rites of Stravinsky's native land. It was performed in Paris, with the great Nijinsky. It was considered the perfect ballet: a combination of completely danceable action and vividly illustrative music. Its polytonality would have a considerable effect on European music.

His third great work was *Le Sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)*. First performed in 1913, it created a scandal unmatched in the annals of music. Harold Schonberg wrote, "Hardly anybody in the audience was prepared for a score of such dissonance and ferocity, such complexity and such rhythmic oddity. Nobody connected with the production had the faintest idea that the music would provoke a visceral reaction." But acceptance of it did come. In 1940 it was featured in the memorable Disney film *Fantasia*, where many people first heard the piece.

These compositions made him a star and the champion of modernism. There is much to explore about the subsequent strange serpentine line of Stravinsky's career. He turned away from big scores and big orchestras to small groups and precise writing. His preoccupation with rhythm overshadowed his lack of melodic gift. He left Russia after the Revolution, never to return. He became a French citizen in 1934 and an American citizen in 1945.

Stravinsky's music is anti-sentimental, and anti-romantic. He believed that music was, at its heart, form and logic and, by its very nature, cannot express anything but music. He said, "Composers combine notes. That is all." Harold Schonberg commented, "Where Beethoven, Schubert, or even Bach appear to appeal to all listeners on all levels, Stravinsky does not have that universal quality. Stravinsky will end up living more on what he did to music rather than for what his music did to the majority of his listeners."

Join us at the end of November when, as part of the Masterworks Diamond series, Leila Josefowicz will perform Stravinsky's Violin Concerto, which premiered in 1931. And in the Musically Speaking series, the October 18 concert will include Stravinsky's ballet music called *The Fairy's Kiss*.

### ***The Firebird (1910) – Stravinsky***

**Scored for:** piccolo, 3 flutes (3rd = piccolo 2), 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets (3rd = clarinet in E-flat), bass clarinet, 3 bassoons (3rd = contrabassoon 2), contrabassoon, 4 horns (3rd and 4th = Wagner tubas), 3 trumpets (+ offstage trumpet), 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, bells, cymbals, glockenspiel, tam-tam, tambourine, triangle, xylophone), 2 harps, piano, celesta, and strings

Every ballet needs a story. *The Firebird*, based on old Russian folklore, concerns the downfall of a powerful, immortal figure of evil, Kashchei, at the hands of Prince Ivan, with the help of a rare, magical firebird. The bird's beautiful feathers flicker like flames.

The story has both mortal and supernatural elements, distinguished through a system of *leitmotifs*. This is a signature melodic phrase associated with a character or idea that accompanies the reappearance of the character or idea. Stravinsky called the system "leit-harmony". He may have gotten the idea from Rimsky-Korsakov's operas where diatonic scales indicated mortal elements and chromatic scales indicated supernatural elements. The effect creates a dazzling, evocative atmosphere.

The leit-harmony of Kashchei, which Stravinsky described as consisting of "Magic Thirds". The harmony starts with a major or minor third. Then the lower voice goes up a tritone while the upper voice drops a half step. The tritone is also known as the "devil's interval" because it makes an evil-sound and creates a foreboding atmosphere. The Firebird's leit-harmony starts with four half steps descending and then reversing those notes; this creates a lustrous, sparkly sound.

*The Firebird* can be a bit startling for the first-time listener partly because of what Stravinsky called "metrical irregularity"—we are more accustomed to consistent musical pulses—and partly because of unusual specialist techniques for the orchestra. Stravinsky commented that he composed *The Firebird* in an attempt to outdo Rimsky-Korsakov.

Here are some of the techniques:

- Ponticello has the violinist playing near the bridge of the instrument which makes the strings vibrate in an odd way that produces a glassy, metallic sound.
- Col legno means the string player should strike the string with the stick of the bow.
- Flautando produces delicate, airy, harmonically rich tones like a flute, by bowing lightly and quickly over the fingerboard instead of closer to the bridge.
- Glissando has the musicians glide or slide from one note to the next.
- Flutter-tonguing is a technique for wind instruments where the player “flutters their tongue” to make a “frrrrfrrrr” sound.

With all the intriguing musical ideas in *The Firebird*, the best idea would be to just immerse yourself in the experience.

Later in his career, Stravinsky created three different concert versions of *The Firebird* that he conducted himself many times. The 1919 suite is the most popular; it is less than half as long and uses simpler orchestration. He did very well financially by the piece.

After *The Firebird* orchestral music was never the same. From it emerged a new and revolutionary rhythmic vibrancy. Stravinsky’s career was on fire, and he flew high like a bird!

### **SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)**

There was never a time when the music of Rachmaninoff was out of the repertory. He is as popular as ever, largely on the strength of two marvellous piano concertos, the second and the third.

His music is vastly different from that of Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Scriabin and Stravinsky, and the group known as The Five—Cui, Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov, who tried to create a truly national school of Russian music.

Rachmaninoff entered the Moscow Conservatory at the age of fourteen. He was described as dour, serious, taciturn, private, and stubborn. At seventeen he composed his first piano concerto, which he later revised. A one-act opera, written for his graduation, was admired by Tchaikovsky, who perhaps saw his successor in Rachmaninoff.

Although a formidable pianist, Rachmaninoff’s career—teaching and performing—progressed slowly. He wrote his famous *Prelude in C sharp minor* for piano in 1892. However, the premiere of a symphony three years later was a fiasco, liked by nobody. A crisis of confidence was remedied by a Moscow psychiatrist. Hypnosis and autosuggestion convinced Rachmaninoff that he would write “a concerto of excellent quality.” The result was the great *Piano Concerto #2 in C minor*, the *Rach 2*, finished in 1901. It remains the most popular work he ever composed. Three pop songs have their roots in this concerto: *I Think of You* and *Full Moon and Empty Arms*, both made famous by Frank Sinatra, and *All By Myself*, a 1975 ballad by Eric Carmen.

Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1909 with wife and daughters in a country house far away from Moscow. He loved how the natural setting stimulated his imagination. He commented, “...and they come: all voices at one. Not a bit here, a bit there. All.”

Soon those voices sang a new work, his *Piano Concerto No. 3*. Years later, Rachmaninoff recalled that the first theme just ‘wrote itself.’ The piece grew into one of the towering masterpieces of the piano concerto repertoire. Rachmaninoff performed it at the premiere and many times after, including a memorable performance with Gustav Mahler conducting the New York Philharmonic.

Because of the concerto’s extreme technical requirements, most pianists shied away from playing it. Although dedicated to the pianist Joseph Hoffman, he never dared to play it. It was not until Vladimir Horowitz championed the concerto in the 1930s that it began to be widely performed. It received another boost as the feature piece in the Academy Award-winning 1996 film *Shine*, based on the life of David Helfgott. Calvin Dotsey, writing for the Houston Symphony commented, “Today it is recognized as one of the greatest of all concertos, a test for all pianists and a breathtaking emotional journey for listeners.”

Like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff wrote in a completely traditional framework but infused with Russian melancholy. His style of composition never really deviated from what he began with his second piano concerto. Critics and the listening public were diametrically opposed in their opinions of his music.

While critics admired his pianistic prowess, they sneered at his use of nineteenth century models for his music. Rachmaninoff is summarily disposed of in only five paragraphs in *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition.

But Rachmaninoff gets the last laugh. His music has indeed lasted and remains as popular as ever, for good reason. His music is internationally renowned and that is part of its appeal. Although he contributed little to twentieth-century form or harmony, he took the old forms and breathed new life into them, with memorable, distinctive melodies, just as Tchaikovsky did. You recognize his work after hearing just a few measures. And you leave the concert humming his melodies over and over again.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Rachmaninoff left Russia for good. He moved to Switzerland and started a new life as a piano virtuoso. Settling permanently in the US in 1935, he decided to concentrate on the piano. His piano music was tailored to his own spectacular hands: it was difficult, made use of wide stretches, and displayed tremendous virtuosity but without the pyrotechnics associated with Liszt. Compositions during his time in the US include the *Piano Concerto # 4*, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, *Symphony #3* and *Symphonic Dances*. Rachmaninoff died in Beverly Hills in 1943.

You will have multiple opportunities to hear more Rachmaninoff. His beloved Second Piano Concerto (in C minor) with soloist Alexei Volodin, will be performed on Feb. 21 and 23 in the Musically Speaking series; his Third Symphony, on Apr. 11, 12, 13 in Masterworks Gold, and his symphonic poem *Isle of the Dead*, on May 9, 10 in Masterworks Diamond.

### **Piano Concerto No.3, op.30, D minor – Rachmaninoff**

**Scored for:** solo piano, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings.

One does not need to wait long to hear the concerto's main theme in the opening movement titled *Allegro ma non tanto*. It comes in almost from the start and is the most important one in the composition, returning in various ways in all three movements. It is both simple and haunting, as great melodies are. The development of the theme is characteristic of Rachmaninoff in how his musical ideas swell and die down to enhance the dramatic effect.

The second theme is a dialogue between piano and orchestra, which sounds march-like at the beginning but becomes more lyrical. The opening theme returns and then embarks on a journey of huge chords and octaves—watch the pianist's hands traversing the keyboard—and then quiet, shadowy passages, all leading inexorably to a brilliantly virtuosic cadenza. If asked to describe it in one word, it would be “wow”. Fasten your seat belts. The cadenza recaps the musical ideas of the movement with a monumental version of the main theme. Listen for the woodwinds partway through the cadenza as they contribute bits of the main theme. The soloist then reprises the second theme. The conclusion is different from what the listener might expect given the fire and passion that has gone before. The orchestra restates yet again the main theme and the movement ends with a short, quiet coda. No massive chords to end, just an ebbing away. Perhaps that will help forestall the listening audience from applauding after the first movement!

The second movement, titled *Intermezzo: Adagio* begins with a plaintive theme introduced by the oboe. The soloist enters suddenly with a trademark Rachmaninoff melodic treatment, followed by a more energetic version. Listen carefully for the violins hinting at the first movement's main theme. Next comes a fast *scherzando* section for piano, marked by delicate runs, and backed up by the woodwinds playing a waltz that echoes again the first movement's main theme. The orchestra reprises the second movement's main theme until the soloist reenters with a dramatic invitation to the third movement; it follows immediately after three power chords by the orchestra!

The *Finale: Alla breve* could be called the *Finale: Alla 'breathless'*, because it will leave both the listener and the soloist breathless. The main theme is best described as brilliant and powerfully rhythmic like a Russian dance, in the same style as Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev. Variations with different tempi and character sound march-like—imagine drums and fanfares—and then more lyrical. If you close your eyes and just listen, you might recognize that the variations are based on the second theme of the first movement. But don't close your eyes—watch the soloist's fingers fly!

The main theme of the first movement is heard in the violas and cellos, followed by the first movement's second theme. There is a peaceful meditative moment, and then the floodgates open. The orchestra reenters with the dramatic rhythms of the finale's main themes. Watch and listen to the soloist's virtuoso feats and you will realize immediately why *Rach 3* has the reputation it so richly deserves. The tempo increases to *Vivace*, *Vivacissimo*, and finally a blazing *Presto* as the piece races to an exhilarating conclusion. It ends with what may be Rachmaninoff's musical signature: a long-short-short-long rhythm that matches the syllables of his name.

When the last notes are struck, if you don't have goosebumps, check your pulse. It should be racing too, as fast as the soloist's and orchestra's pulses! I hope you enjoy this as much as I do; this concerto really Rachs (rocks).