

Program Notes for VSO Concert – April 11-13, 2025

Grieg – Piano Concerto; Rachmaninoff – Symphony #3

By Jonathan Berkowitz

EDVARD GRIEG (1843 to 1907)

Edvard Grieg was Norway's most important composer and his music is part of the standard classical repertoire worldwide. Just as Jean Sibelius did in Finland and Bedřich Smetana in Bohemia, Grieg used the folk music of Norway to help develop a national identity.

Grieg's surname is spelled with "i before e". But there is a good reason for misspelling it. Although born in Bergen, Norway in 1843, his family name is associated with the Scottish Clan Gregor. Grieg's great-grandfather, Alexander Greig—spelled "e before i"—settled in Norway about 1770 and established business interests in Bergen.

Edvard was raised in a musical family; his mother was his first piano teacher. Ole Bull, an eminent but eccentric Norwegian violinist convinced Grieg's parents to send him to the Leipzig Conservatory at age fifteen. Despite being a good all-round musician, he hated the Conservatory, telling his biographers that he left it "just as stupid as I entered it." The experience did not allow Grieg to find his individuality and musical voice.

Nevertheless, Grieg made his debut in Leipzig as a concert pianist in 1861. A year later, after finishing his studies, he returned to Norway where he gave piano recitals. The following year he went to Copenhagen to work with Danish composers. Before 1864, Grieg's composed in the style of Schumann, Mendelssohn, and the early Romantics. But when he met fellow Norwegian, Rikard Nordraak, composer of their country's national anthem he became a good friend and major inspiration. Nordraak sparked Grieg's interest in Norwegian music, motivating him to devote the rest of his life to Norwegian nationalism. His concertizing and conducting made him the brightest musical talent in Norway. In 1867 he married his first cousin, a lyric soprano who premiered many of his songs.

During the summer of 1868, while on holiday in Denmark, Grieg wrote his Piano Concerto in A minor. He was supposed to play it at the premiere, but conducting commitments prevented his attendance. That same year, Franz Liszt wrote a testimonial for Grieg, eventually leading to a close friendship. When Grieg showed Liszt the Piano Concerto, Liszt, ever the showman, played it from sight, including the orchestral arrangement. Liszt also gave Grieg advice on orchestration, only some of which Grieg accepted.

In the 1870s, Grieg set several poems by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson to music and was then asked by Henrik Ibsen to write the incidental music for *Peer Gynt*. Orchestral suites based on it became some of Grieg's most familiar compositions. In 1880, Grieg was appointed music director of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra.

In 1899, Grieg cancelled his concerts in France to protest the Dreyfus affair, an antisemitic scandal in French politics. He wrote that he hoped that the French might "soon return to the spirit of 1789, when the French republic declared that it would defend basic human rights." He received a great deal of hate mail for taking that principled stand.

Active throughout his later years, Grieg enthusiastically embraced the new phenomenon of recorded music. During the spring of 1903, Grieg made nine 78-rpm gramophone recordings of his piano music in Paris. All these discs have been reissued on both LPs and CDs, despite limited fidelity. Grieg also recorded player-piano music rolls, which still survive and can be heard today.

When Grieg was 17, he endured two life-threatening lung diseases which impaired his health throughout his life. However, he continued to tour almost until his death. He was set to go to England in 1907 but was ordered to a hospital, where he died the following day at age 64. His last words were, "Well, if it must be so." The funeral drew between 30,000 and 40,000 people in his hometown of Bergen.

Harold Schonberg described Grieg in maturity, as "a short, quiet, exquisite man who specialized in short, quiet, exquisite pieces of music." He had a busy life as a composer, conductor, and critic. He gave annual European tours as a pianist. He had a level-headed view of life and a quiet, enduring wit. When he was made King of the Order of Orange-Nassau, he accepted cheerfully and wrote to a friend, "Orders and medals are most useful to me in the top layer of my trunk. The customs officials are always so kind to me at the sight of them."

Grieg was tremendously popular during his lifetime. But because he wrote primarily short, small compositions, his reputation fell almost as rapidly as it had risen. After his death, few musicians took him seriously. The chromatic harmonies, which can be heard in the Piano Concerto, that had delighted music lovers were now called cloying. A wave of anti-romanticism after World War I swamped Liszt, Mendelssohn, and Grieg. The first two made a comeback; Grieg really didn't, with a few notable exceptions.

Unlikely to be classified as one of the "immortals" of classical music, Grieg was certainly original, and wrote with beauty and style. His compositional technique was perfectly suited to his content. Claude Debussy described Grieg as "bonbons wrapped in snow." His musical range may have been narrow, but his piquant melodies are all Grieg and no one else. Schonberg summed it up succinctly, "He represents charm, grace, sweetness, and still has a good deal to offer, bonbons and all. He was a minor master, and one of the finest."

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16 – Grieg

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings, and solo piano

Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, the most popular of Grieg's compositions, is also one of the most popular of all piano concertos. Clearly inspired by Robert Schumann's only Piano Concerto (Op.54), also written in A minor, Grieg composed it during a visit to Denmark at the young age of 24. The opening descending piano flourish and overall style are very reminiscent of Schumann's, likely because Grieg had heard Clara Schumann play her husband's concerto in Leipzig ten years earlier. By this time, Grieg had committed himself to incorporating Norwegian identity within his personal style. He rarely quoted folk sources directly, preferring melodic lines that hinted at Norway. He once quipped, "I am sure my music has a taste of codfish." As an example the Concerto's typically Norwegian opening flourish uses a falling minor second followed by a falling major third.

I first heard the Concerto when I was a young boy and fell in love with it then. Immediately identifiable from its opening bars, it never fails to put a smile on my face. Pianist Gabriela Montero described the Concerto as “a piece perfectly balanced with virtuosity, melancholy and innocence. Its power lies in its nobility—never showing off and always introspective.”

The first movement—***Allegro molto moderato***—begins with its iconic timpani roll and the opening A minor chord of a dramatic piano flourish, which leads to the main theme. Regardless of what follows, the listener never loses the A minor reference point. First the orchestra and then the piano introduce a lyrical and expressive melody. The secondary theme, in C major, is equally expressive. The development section brings a sense of drama and leads to the triumphant return of the main theme in the recapitulation. The second theme also returns but now in a different key. The closing cadenza showcases the soloist’s technical prowess and expressive depth. Montero commented, “The cadenza is very powerful. The mysterious build up to the climax is extremely moving and always gives me shivers. I love the naïveté of the concerto but also the Nordic masculinity of it. The contrasts, the tenderness...” The closing flourish is similar to the one that starts the movement.

The second movement—***Adagio***—opens with a long orchestral introduction that shows Grieg at his most comfortable, with small, intimate, lyrical scenes for muted strings and woodwind solos. When the piano finally enters, it does so with a simple, but exquisitely decorated theme. In my youth, I loved the opening movement but in my later years, the second movement has become my favourite. Grieg’s delicate textures give the movement grace and elegance.

There is no pause between the second and third movements—***Allegro moderato molto e marcato – Quasi presto – Andante maestoso***. It is a tour de force of energy, wit, and rhythmic vitality. Its foot-stomping theme in 2/4 time was influenced by the *halling*, a Norwegian folk dance. To contrast the A minor first theme, a lyrical second theme is presented in a major key first by the flute and then with piano embellishments. Then the movement returns to first theme. After this recapitulation comes the *Quasi presto* section in infectious 3/4 time, as a variation of the first theme. The movement’s final section is the *Andante maestoso*, a dramatic rendition of the second theme, the opposite of the lyrical way in which this theme was introduced. In the thrilling conclusion, the soloist and orchestra join forces in a grand and majestic finale.

It is impossible not to love the youthful, catchy tunes, brilliant timbres, and flashy virtuoso passages of this piece. But the mature, subtle relationships between parts truly make this a seamless composition. Grieg made many revisions to it, most subtle, but numbering over 300 alterations to the original orchestration. The final version of the Concerto, completed only a few weeks before his death, is this version that has achieved worldwide popularity.

An interesting postscript: sources indicate that this Piano Concerto is the first one ever recorded—by pianist Wilhelm Backhaus in 1909. Due to the technology of the time, it was heavily abridged and ran only six minutes.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

The season opened with a performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. A biography of the composer accompanied the extended program notes for that concert. It is reprised here.

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 his 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 admiring his pianistic prowess, critics 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*, 5th 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.

Symphony No.3, in A minor, Op. 44 – Rachmaninoff

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, xylophone), harp, celesta, and strings

Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 3 was written in 1936, nearly 30 years after his previous symphony. While the Second Symphony is on a grand scale and very long, the Third is concise, less emotional, more transparent, and straightforward. The sparser style gives the work its emotional power. It is written in three movements, rather than the usual four, although the middle movement has a dual role of a slow movement and a scherzo. (Antonín Dvořák used this innovation in his Third Symphony.)

Early reviews were mixed. One called the work "a disappointment, [with] echoes ... of the composer's lyric spaciousness of style, but largely sterile." Another called it "a most excellent work in musical conception, composition and orchestration," and added that Rachmaninoff "has given us another example in this work that it is not necessary to write dissonant music in order to get the originality which is the greatest—and usually the single—demand of the ultra-moderns." W. J. Henderson wrote, "It is the creation of a genial mind laboring in a field well known and loved by it but not seeking now to raise the fruit of heroic proportions." The public was also confused. After Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concertos No. 2 and No. 3*, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and *Isle of the Dead* (which the VSO will perform on May 9-10 in the Masterworks Diamond series) they expected a much different work.

The critics complained that Rachmaninoff had not advanced beyond the 1900s. The public complained that he had! But Rachmaninoff considered the Third Symphony one of his best works, so he was disappointed at the reception it received. Given Rachmaninoff's popularity, it is

surprising that the Third Symphony was quite neglected until the 1970s. (Author's admission: Until my preparations to write these notes, I was not familiar with the piece.)

The first movement—**Lento – Allegro moderato – Allegro**—is marked by one of two characteristic features in the work, a “motto” theme that will recur in many different forms throughout the Symphony. It only covers three notes which turn and wind around as if to indicate a struggle. It is first played by clarinets, muted horns, and cellos, which give it a mysterious feel. An early draft had it scored for horns and trumpets. It takes time for the main theme to appear, but when it does, it is vintage Rachmaninoff. So is the richly romantic second theme, played by the cellos. The motto and the new theme are then developed and expanded. Listen to the rhythmic energy produced by fast-paced triplets. The motto returns on its own—trumpet, bass trombone, pizzicato strings—getting the last “word”, or, more accurately, the last notes.

The second movement—**Adagio ma non troppo – Allegro vivace**—also begins with the motto, but upside-down. It is played by two horns accompanied by harp chords that bring in two themes. The first is heard from a solo violin, the second, by solo flute with the bass clarinet then joining in. These themes are developed and then give way to a passage marked *allegro vivace* that introduces the main scherzo theme in the strings. The scherzo can be regarded as a de facto third movement of a four-movement symphony. Its climax abruptly turns into a march. A brief harp passage reminds us of the opening of the movement, which ends with the inverted motto theme played by the harp and pizzicato strings. The whole movement feels very theatrical.

The bold and vigorous finale has many sections—**Allegro – Allegro vivace – Allegro (Tempo primo) – Allegretto – Allegro vivace**. It begins with Russian marching strings that morph into a fugue. The development is a tour de force of the musical technique of counterpoint. There are several loud climaxes and a gentle flute solo, always set against the ever-present motto. Careful listening will identify the second characteristic feature of the work, Rachmaninoff's use of the “Dies irae” melody from the plainsong *Mass for the Dead*. The dark hints that usually accompany this melody were appropriate for the world in the middle of the 1930s, already on track to global conflict. Finally, Rachmaninoff gives us what musicologist Herbert Glass calls, “a triumphantly thunderous celebratory conclusion, all dark thoughts banished.” It shows off the virtuosity of the modern symphony orchestra.

The last words go to music commentator, Steven Ledbetter, who captured this work beautifully when he wrote, “The refined and compact musical ideas in Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony result in an energetic and relatively transparent piece that still leaves room for passages of soaring and impassioned beauty.”