

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Dutilleux Cello Concerto & Rachmaninoff Symphony No. 2– March 13-14, 2026

By Jonathan Berkowitz

HENRI DUTILLEUX (1916 to 2013)

Henri Dutilleux was a leading French composer of late 20th-century classical music. His work was rooted in the Impressionistic style of Debussy and Ravel, but idiosyncratic enough to be admired across stylistic divides. He was fiercely independent and quietly resistant to musical fashions of the time such as serialism, neoclassicism, and minimalism.

Born in 1916 in Angers, France, Dutilleux grew up in a household steeped in art and scholarship; painting and poetry were part of the family atmosphere. That early exposure left a permanent imprint on his music, metaphorically likened to light on canvas. The colour is carefully layered and the edges either softened or sharpened by orchestral subtlety and nuance.

After early lessons at the Douai Conservatoire, Dutilleux spent five years (1933-1938) studying at the Conservatoire de Paris, winning the Prix de Rome in 1938. The Second World War, however, interrupted what might have been a conventional academic trajectory. He served for a year as an army medical orderly and returned to Paris in 1940, where he worked as a pianist, arranger and music teacher. In 1942, he conducted the choir of the Paris Opera. After the war Dutilleux worked for Radio France (ORTF) as head of music production from 1945 to 1963. He was named professor of composition at the École Normale de Musique de Paris in 1961 and served there until 1970 when he was appointed to the staff of the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique. He also served twice as a composer-in-residence at the Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts.

For many years, Dutilleux had a studio on Île Saint-Louis. He died in Paris in 2013 at the age of 97 and was buried in Montparnasse Cemetery. His tombstone bears the epitaph "Compositeur". He had witnessed nearly the entire arc of 20th-century modernism.

Works were commissioned from him by major conductors and musicians including George Szell, Charles Munch, Mstislav Rostropovich, the Juilliard String Quartet, Isaac Stern, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Renée Fleming, and Seiji Ozawa. He had close friendships with performers and believed that music lives fully only when interpreted by committed artists. Dutilleux destroyed many of his early works, judging them unworthy and too derivative. This self-criticism was legendary. He published only what met his exacting standards, which meant repeated revisions. He wrote only about a dozen major works. They include his Op. 1 Piano Sonata written for the pianist Geneviève Joy (whom he married in 1946), concertos for cello and violin, a string quartet, and two symphonies.

Dutilleux was between Olivier Messiaen and Pierre Boulez in age but not influenced by either composer. Although he was interested in their work, his voice was his own. His music unfolds in spirals rather than straight lines. Themes evolve instead of returning unchanged. Dutilleux called it "progressive growth", a form that develops continuously without strict repetition. He preferred metamorphosis over Classical symmetry and kept his distance from postwar European composers who embraced total serialism. He held the view that music must first satisfy the ear and imagination. In the ideological climate of postwar Europe, that statement was quite radical.

For audiences accustomed to overt drama, Dutilleux may initially seem reserved. But patience reveals extraordinary detail: an unexpected harmonic shift, a woodwind color emerging like distant light, a rhythmic pulse that reshapes perception of time. He teaches us to listen differently, to hear evolution rather than repetition. His works unfold carefully as meditations on memory, distance, and perception, not intellectual exercises. Conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen said, "[Dutilleux's] production is rather small but every note has been weighed with golden scales... It's just perfect – very haunting, very beautiful. There's some kind of sadness in his music which I find very touching and arresting." Dutilleux's catalogue is lean enough to listen to in an evening, yet rich enough to sustain a lifetime of listening.

Cello Concerto (*Tout un monde lointain*) – Dutilleux (1970)

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (antique cymbals, bass drum, bongos, cymbals, glockenspiel, gongs, marimba, snare drum, tom-toms, triangle, xylophone), harp, celesta, strings, and solo cello

In the 1960s, Dutilleux met Mstislav Rostropovich, who commissioned a cello concerto from him. The result was a meditation, not a vehicle for virtuoso display. Rostropovich premiered the work, *Tout un monde lointain... (A whole distant world...)*, in 1970. It is considered one of Dutilleux's major achievements. In a 2013 interview, Dutilleux said it was his personal favourite among his works. (The score does not state that it is a cello concerto, but it has always been considered as such.)

The title is a quotation from a Charles Baudelaire poem. And each of the five movements, which are played without breaks or pauses between, also bears a title and fragment of verse from the poet. They suggest a mood, not a programmatic narrative. Dutilleux used poetry to focus attention on distance, memory, sensuality, and shadow. The cello wanders through orchestral space in recollection, not in opposition. The five movements form an arch of energy: inward → attentive → surging → reflective → luminous.

I. Énigme (Enigma): Very free and flexible; "... And in this strange and symbolic nature"

The Concerto opens almost imperceptibly: low strings murmur and the solo cello enters in its dark register with a theme and quiet, shape-shifting recitative. The orchestra enters gradually to start a dialogue with the soloist. Various instruments join unhurriedly. The cello becomes more aggressive as it interacts with different orchestral colours. The harmonies are ambiguous, neither tonal nor dissonant. Sounds build from symmetrical intervals and subtle chromatic shifts. The movement ends with the soloist playing a high A, which is also the first note of the second movement. Listen for how the cello's line unfolds in fragments, beginning with a whispered opening; it then grows in tension with longer arcs as the orchestra's colours are placed like brushstrokes. The movement sets the psychological tone of searching and questioning.

II. Regard (Gaze): Extremely calm; "... the poison that flows from your eyes, from your green eyes, lakes in which my soul trembles and sees itself upside down"

The slow second movement sharpens focus. The music relies on the cello melody in the high register, but not in the traditional sense. Although familiar scales are hinted at, the melody is largely atonal. The cello now sings in longer phrases but still with fragility. Periodically, massive chords by the strings overwhelm the melody. The “upside-down soul” is provided by the strings in mirror imitation of the cello. The movement ends with the motif that began the work. Listen for how Dutilleux plays with contrasts: plucked strings against sustained tones, muted brass against luminous high strings. The orchestral colour is precise. This movement is the musical equivalent of a steady gaze.

III. Houles (Surges): Wide and ample; “... You contain, sea of ebony, a dazzling dream of sails, of rowers, of flames and of masts...”

The middle movement plays the role of a scherzo. Momentum gathers from pulses of rhythmic energy. It starts with a virtuosic, physically demanding cello passage, using aggressive double stops that surge upward and then recede. The orchestra joins gradually, growing more assertive as brass and percussion add weight. This movement indeed has the most “movement”, yet clarity is maintained even at its loudest. The last notes link to the next movement. Listen for the rising and falling wave patterns in strings and winds, as well as the rhythmic ostinatos (repetitions) that provide propulsion. No longer introspective; the cello’s tone remains restless.

IV. Miroirs (Mirrors): Slow and ecstatic; “... Our two hearts will be two large torches that will reflect their double lights in our two spirits, those twin mirrors...”

The fourth movement, the second slow one, is the most haunting and inward. High harmonics and gentle percussion create a slow, meditative mood. The cello plays in its upper register, producing an ethereal, almost disembodied sound. There are several layers of sound overlaid on the harp’s steady beat. The music seems to hover, weightless. Near the end, the work’s opening motif reappears. Listen for the delicate use of harmonics in both the solo and orchestra and how the mirrored motifs pass between instruments to represent reflection. The sensation is one of spatial depth, with sound placed at varying distances.

V. Hymne: Allegro; “Keep your dreams: wise men do not have as beautiful ones as fools!”

The final movement opens with a loud explosion. The cello, no longer lyrical, is agitated and driven. Subtle excerpts from previous movements are heard. The orchestra gradually envelops the soloist, travelling through several hesitant mini climaxes building toward a final one. And then it disappears suddenly as the cello plays a suspended tremolo figure. Even in this agitated movement, the harmonies are still nuanced. The ending does not feel theatrical but inevitable; the journey is complete. Listen for widening melodic intervals, thickening orchestral texture and the cello’s integration into the ensemble.

This Concerto teaches us to hear gradations of colour, to notice space between notes, and to feel time unfolding without urgency. The music invites introspection and deep listening. It reimagines what a concerto can be in the 20th century: intimate, modern, and sensual. In a world that often requires declaration, *Tout un monde lointain...* offers something rarer: reflection.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Note: The following biography first appeared in the 2024-25 season.

There was never a time when the music of Rachmaninoff was not played. 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 No. 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 completed two successful seasons as the conductor of the Imperial Opera at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. But he considered himself first and foremost a composer and felt that the performance schedule detracted from his composition time. He was also in constant demand as a performer of his own works at home and abroad. His *Piano Concerto No. 2* made him a celebrity, and by 1905 the recognition and acclaim were even more than the sociable Rachmaninoff could handle. He needed to escape. In 1906 he resigned from his Bolshoi post and took his wife and infant daughter to Dresden, where he could work unknown and uninterrupted as a full-time composer. The move also meant an escape from the political tumult that was leading the Russian Empire to revolution. The family remained in Dresden for three years, spending summers at Rachmaninoff's in-law's estate of Ivanovka. It was during this time that Rachmaninoff wrote not only his Second Symphony but also the tone poem *Isle of the Dead*.

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, which 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. Tailored to his own spectacularly talented hands, his piano music was difficult. It 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.2, in E minor, Op. 27 – Rachmaninoff (1906-07)

Orchestration: 3 flutes (3rd = piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd = English horn), 3 clarinets (3rd = bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, and snare drum), and strings

The VSO will perform Rachmaninoff’s Symphony No. 2 during their April 2026 European Tour. It is a perfect choice to display the talent of the musicians of our world-class orchestra.

Rachmaninoff began work on his Second Symphony in Dresden in 1906. He was not altogether convinced that he was a gifted symphonist. But, with renewed confidence from the triumph of his Second Piano Concerto, he returned to the symphonic form to write what would turn out to be a smashing success.

Perhaps because of the lingering shadow of failure from the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897, he kept his new work secret, even from close friends in Russia. After word leaked out in a German paper, he confessed in a letter from Dresden in February 1907, “I have composed a symphony. It’s true! It’s only ready in rough. I finished it a month ago and immediately

put it aside. It was a severe worry to me and I am not going to think about it anymore. But I am mystified how the newspapers got onto it!" He resumed work on it, and after months of revisions he returned to Russia where he finished the orchestration. Rachmaninoff conducted two immensely successful premieres in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The triumphs restored Rachmaninoff's sense of self-worth as a symphonist.

Because of the Symphony's formidable length, many revisions were made which shortened the piece from nearly an hour to as little as 35 minutes. Before 1970, the piece was usually performed in one of its revised, shorter, versions. Since then, orchestras perform the complete version almost exclusively. The score is dedicated to Sergei Taneyev, a Russian composer, teacher, theorist, author, and pupil of Tchaikovsky. The Symphony remains one of Rachmaninoff's most popular and best-known compositions.

Some symphonies arrive with a clenched fist. Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony begins with a breath. The first movement—**Largo – Allegro moderato**—opens with the low strings in a minor key, presenting the essential theme which dominates the Symphony and appears in every movement. The seven-note "motto" came from a fragment of an abandoned work from Rachmaninoff's student days. Sometimes an introduction is just a preface, but here it provides the seeds that will grow throughout the Symphony. Clarinets and bassoons produce a thicker texture. The violins begin a series of elaborations that lead to an impassioned climax. Then follows an English horn (*cor anglais*) solo that takes the movement into the Allegro. When it arrives, the first theme surges upward, driven by syncopation and rhythm. The second theme, introduced by the strings, is one of Rachmaninoff's signature melodies: wide-ranging, tender, and harmonically rich. Herbert Glass comments that, "... it achieves the ultimate soulful Russian melancholy that has become synonymous with quintessential 'love music.'" Listen for how this theme unfolds gradually, supported by flowing inner lines.

The development section is stormy and moves through various keys. It intensifies by accumulating motifs, one atop another. Brass enter to build tension, but do not upset the smooth character of the movement. When themes return in the recapitulation, they feel broadened. The building of a climax, which has been underway through the development, reaches its peak. The coda resumes the style and tempo of the development, gathering weight and ending with minor-key gravity. The movement culminates in two *fortissimo* outbursts. Listen for the low-string sonority of the opening, the arc of the second theme, countermelodies beneath the main line, and the sense of breadth, not haste, in climactic passages.

The second movement—**Allegro molto**—is a scherzo, or perhaps it just resembles a scherzo. It has the typical form, and the Symphony's brightest moments, but the word scherzo seems too playful given the movement's restless energy. After being announced by four unison horns, the main theme begins with biting string figures and abrupt dynamic contrasts. It then alternates with lush, march-like passages. The brass and winds keep a tight rhythmic profile. Midway, a fugue-like section emerges that shows off Rachmaninoff's ability to write counterpoint, a skill learned during his studies with Sergei Taneyev, to whom this symphony is dedicated. You may detect fragments of the medieval *Dies Irae* plainchant, a motif Rachmaninoff would use in his large-scale works throughout his career. Listen for a reference to it in the horns. A return to the opening energy ends with the brass restating the *Dies Irae*, and a coda that dies away into *pianississimo* (very, very soft), perhaps

in preparation for the upcoming gorgeous Adagio. Listen for the precise rhythm in the strings, the layered counterpoint in the fugue passage, and sudden shifts from agitation to lyrical interlude.

If the Symphony has a heart, the third movement—**Adagio**—is likely it. The movement begins with a memorable opening theme played by the first violins. It will later be restated both as a melody and as an accompanying figure. The opening theme is really an introduction to the main melody of the movement, a lengthy clarinet solo that is one of the most beloved, romantic and appealing melodies Rachmaninoff ever wrote. It is a typical Rachmaninoff creation, circling around single notes, accompanied by rich harmony.

A complementary theme is quickly presented, along with material from the first two movements, but continually returns to the main theme. The secret lies in its pacing; the theme grows naturally in long breaths, rising and then gently settling, without ever forcing a climax. When it finally surges, the effect is overwhelming. The lightly scored middle section is based on the “motto” theme from the first movement introduction. The oboe and English horn complement the violins. A long crescendo leads to an impassioned climax based on the opening’s romantic theme. The intensity subsides, and the central clarinet melody is restated by the first violins, with fragments of the opening theme in the accompaniment. After another romantic climax, the movement ends tranquilly, dying away slowly in the strings. Listen for the clarinet’s opening solo which is phrased like human speech: the interweaving of multiple melodic strands, and the retreat at the movement’s end as if the light has dimmed but is not extinguished.

The finale—**Allegro vivace**—bursts forth with rhythmic vitality that breaks the romantic mood. The fanfare-like main theme is full of rapid dancing triplets, followed by a brief march and a lyrical second theme. The violins and violas in unison octaves introduce another soaring melody. Subtly interwoven are references to the earlier movements, including a quotation from the Adagio movement. Steven Ledbetter calls the development section “one of Rachmaninoff’s greatest masterstrokes.” He explains how instruments, one at a time, begins to play a descending scale, “... overlapping and making an extraordinary noise, as if someone were ringing the changes on all the bells of Moscow at once.” The recapitulation starts with just the first theme and then builds up to a triumphant restatement of the second theme. The Symphony concludes with a whirlwind coda that provides a wonderful conclusion. The transition from the opening movement in E minor to the blazing close in E major is not superficial. The tonal journey has been prepared by the Symphony’s cumulative energy and mirrors its psychological arc. Listen for the rhythmic buoyancy of the opening, the reappearance of the now transformed earlier motifs, brass chorales supporting a building climax, and the final affirmation in a major key.

Rachmaninoff achieves something rare: a Symphony that feels both personal and architectural. Its melodies are unforgettable, yet they rest on disciplined construction. Above all, the Symphony welcomes us into a world of sustained lyric thought.

Postscript: In 2008, Alexander Warenberg’s arrangement of the Second Symphony as a three-movement concerto for piano and orchestra was released. It was titled *Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 5*. It uses about forty percent of the source material plus some original scoring, with modifications including a new second movement and a revised finale. My query: Why mess with perfection?