

Program 7

Symphonies of Wind Instruments

Igor Stravinsky (1882 -1971)

Composed in 1920.

Premiered on June 6, 1921 in London, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky.

Igor Stravinsky first met Claude Debussy following the premiere of *The Firebird* in Paris in 1910. A mutual admiration sprang up between the two, and Stravinsky dedicated his cantata *Zvezdoliki* (“*King of the Stars*”) to Debussy, and Debussy reciprocated by inscribing the *Scherzando*, the third of his three pieces for two pianos, *En Blanc et Noir*, to Stravinsky. Though they saw little of each other during the First World War, Stravinsky was greatly saddened by Debussy’s death on March 25, 1918. “I was sincerely attached to him as a man,” Stravinsky wrote in his *Autobiography*, “and I grieved not only at the loss of one whose friendship had been marked with unflinching kindness towards myself and my work, but at the passing of an artist who, in spite of health already undermined, had still been able to retain his creative powers to the full, and whose musical genius had been in no way impaired throughout the whole period of his activity.”

In June 1920, Stravinsky left Switzerland, where he had taken refuge during the war, and installed himself in the French coastal village of Carantec in Brittany. Soon after arriving, he received a request from Henri Prunières, editor of *La Revue Musicale*, to contribute a short musical piece to a special December issue of that periodical commemorating Debussy. He accepted the commission gladly, and on June 20th composed a wordless chorale in piano score, which he submitted to Prunières. The chorale, however, was pressed into further service. A full year before, in July 1919, Stravinsky had begun sketching a wind ensemble piece incorporating the mixed-meter rhythms of *The Rite of Spring* and the austere sonorities of *Les Noces*, and the Debussy chorale was conceived as the closing section of this earlier work, which became, in the composer’s words, “a grand chant, an objective cry of wind instruments, in place of the warm human tone of the strings.” The *Symphonies d’instruments à vents* (“*Symphonies of Wind Instruments*”) was drafted in piano score by July 2, 1920 and orchestrated by November 30th, when Stravinsky was living in Garches. The composition was dedicated to Debussy. The premiere, given by Koussevitzky in London on June 6, 1921 was not a success, however, and Stravinsky never published the *Symphonies* in its original version. In 1945 he returned to the piece, and revised the orchestration of the chorale for a CBS Radio broadcast for use as a brief companion piece to the *Symphony of Psalms*; he subsequently rescored the entire piece and simplified its rhythmic notation. This revised version was finished in 1947, first played at a private concert in Hollywood conducted by the composer on January 30, 1948, and published in 1952.

Stravinsky explained that “the title ‘SYMPHONY’ given to this short work must not be taken in the usual sense of the word. There are various short sections in close tempo relations, succeeding one another, and some rhythmic dialogues between separate woodwind instruments, such as flute and clarinet.” “Symphony” here does not connote the traditional Classic-Romantic form, but is rather intended to be taken in its original, 17th-century sense, indicating simply a “sounding together” of instruments. Stravinsky characterized the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* as “an austere ritual which is unfolded in terms of short litanies between different groups of homogeneous instruments.... According to my idea, the homage that I intended to pay to the memory of the great musician ought not to be inspired by his musical thought; on the contrary, I desired rather to express myself in a language which should be essentially my own.” With its brittle sonorities, acerbic harmonies and crystalline textures, the *Symphonies* is one of the earliest examples of the neo-Classical style that was to characterize in Stravinsky’s music for the following three decades. Though the formal details of the work’s organization are intricate, in broad outline it falls into two large paragraphs. The first section comprises many short, juxtaposed sections in mixed meters which contrast the sound of the full wind ensemble with duets or trios for the woodwinds. (Paul Griffiths noted that “in terms of rhythmic engineering, [this section] makes up a pocket *Rite of Spring*.”) The closing portion of the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* is the broad chorale of almost static harmonies written in Debussy’s memory. Noting the transparent sound and the mosaic-like construction of this piece, Eric Walter White commented, “The *Symphonies* is like a carpet woven out of a number of differently colored threads.”

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 19

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Composed in 1915-1917.

Premiered on October 18, 1923 in Paris, with Marcel Darrieux as soloist.

Very early in his career, Sergei Prokofiev classified his music into four distinct styles: classical or neo-classical; modern; toccata or motoric; and lyrical. It was largely in this last style that he composed his First Violin Concerto. Indeed, the composer himself cited the lovely opening theme as an example of his lyricism. Given that Prokofiev was one of the foremost disciples of modernity at the time, such a romantic notion of melody raised a few eyebrows. It was, however, Prokofiev’s penchant when he was young to compose simultaneously works in more than one of his four manners, and just when a particular faction would hold him up as a model of its specific bias, out popped a Prokofiev piece that just did not do what it was expected to do. He took the greatest delight in this kind of surprise, and one of the continuing themes running through his early works is a dedicated nose-thumbing that missed few musical camps.

Such was the case with the Violin Concerto No. 1. The modernists appeared at the premiere expecting a thorny, dissonant musical thunderbolt in Prokofiev's most raucous, avant-garde style — a work for solo violin and orchestra comparable to the tumultuous *Scythian Suite*, which had taken human sacrifice as its topic. What they heard was a tender, autumnal essay of beautiful timbre and inspired melodies. The modernists were, of course, disappointed, but even the conservatives still felt that they could not trust Prokofiev to continue producing such ingratiating music, so the 1923 premiere fizzled. The reviews were not so much critiques of the performance and the new composition as expressions of sympathy for the “unfortunate soloist,” Marcel Darrieux. It was not until Joseph Szigeti espoused the Concerto in 1935 and played it all over the world that it became accepted as one of Prokofiev's finest creations. There is in this incident an important lesson about second hearings and performances by sympathetic artists.

The gentle mood that pervades this Concerto is established immediately at the beginning by the beautiful principal theme, of which Prokofiev's biographer Israel Nestyev wrote, “It is impossible to find in any of his early works a melody so simple and clear, so soulful and warm.... [It] is typical of Prokofiev's lyricism — serene, contemplative and devoid of emotional stress or psychological complexities.” A quickening of the tempo introduces the second theme, a melody filled with flashing ornamentation and insistent rhythmic motion. After a pause, the development begins quietly with the woodwinds chanting the main theme. The second theme is soon added, and the two melodies are explored simultaneously to reach the highest point of intensity in the movement. Only the lyrical main theme returns in the recapitulation, reaching an ethereal close among the sounds of harp, winds and solo violin in the movement's final pages.

In a reversal of the traditional procedure, the fast movement in this Concerto comes second. This central scherzo, an example of Prokofiev's toccata or motoric style, is in the form of a compact rondo. The theme flies upward into the soloist's glistening high register, a signal that this movement is to be more overtly virtuosic than the preceding one. Two episodes are placed between the returns of the main theme: one is a rhythmically steady motive in walking eighth-notes; the other, an off-beat, repeated-note figure comprising a melody of small intervals. A quick punctuation brings this scherzo to an abrupt close.

The finale returns the introspective mood of the first movement. Two themes are employed here — a descending one of melodic sequences winding through the low instruments and an arched motive for the soloist. It is the grandfatherly low theme that is treated in the development. The recapitulation is ushered in not by the main theme of the finale, but rather by the principal melody of the opening movement in an elaborate trilled version for the soloist. Fragments of the arched theme appear as accompaniment in the woodwinds. The Concerto closes with a coda similar in mood, style and melody to that which concluded the first movement.

Wrote Israel Nestyev of this Concerto, “The musi-

cal ideas unfold clearly and confidently; the themes are clear-cut, simple and human. The grotesquerie is not used for its own sake, but only as a contrast to the predominating lyrical images. The principal theme, which stretches like a rainbow from the beginning of the Concerto to the final coda, glorifies the indestructibility of human happiness.”

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27 **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

Composed in 1906-1907.

Premiered on January 26, 1908 in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer.

How much Rachmaninoff's life changed in just a half dozen years! The premiere of his First Symphony in 1897 was a complete failure, a total fiasco. The Russian nationalist composer César Cui ranted, “If there is a conservatory competition in Hell, Rachmaninoff would gain first prize for this Symphony.” Rimsky-Korsakov did not find it “at all agreeable.” Young Rachmaninoff — aged 24 — was plunged into a Stygian despair. For over two years, he entertained the darkest thoughts and composed nothing. Then in 1900, he began consulting one Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a physician specializing in the treatment of alcoholism through hypnosis. Dahl's method of auto-suggestion (and probably his enlightened conversation about music) restored the composer's confidence and desire to work. Within a year, the grand Second Concerto was produced and successfully launched into the world, and Rachmaninoff was on his way to international fame. By 1905, he was one of the most important figures in Russian music.

Beside his prodigious talents as pianist and composer, Rachmaninoff was also a first-rate conductor, and when his stock began rising after the Second Concerto carried his name into important Russian circles, he was appointed opera conductor at the Moscow Imperial Grand Theater. As with his music, he found excellent success with his conducting, but he had understandable misgivings about the way it interfered with his creative ambitions. In an interview with Frederick H. Martens, he said, “When I am concertizing I cannot compose. When I feel like writing music I have to concentrate on that — I cannot touch the piano. When I am conducting I can neither compose nor play concerts. Other musicians may be more fortunate in this respect; but I have to concentrate on any one thing I am doing to such a degree that it does not seem to allow me to take up anything else.” There was much music in him that needed to be written, and he knew that a choice about the direction of his future work was imminent.

By the beginning of 1906, he had decided to sweep away the rapidly accumulating obligations of conducting, concertizing, and socializing that cluttered his life in Moscow in order to find some quiet place in which to compose. His determination may have been strengthened by the political unrest beginning to rumble under the foundations of the aristocratic Russian political system. The uprising of 1905 was among the first signs of trouble for those of his noble class (his eventual move to the United States was a direct result of the swallowing

of his family's estate and resources by the 1917 Revolution), and he probably thought it a good time to start looking for a quiet haven.

A few years before, Rachmaninoff had been overwhelmed by an inspired performance of *Die Meistersinger* he heard at the Dresden Opera. The memory of that evening and the aura of dignity and repose exuded by the city had remained with him, and Dresden, at that time in his life, seemed like a good place to be. Besides, the city was only two hours by train from Leipzig, where Arthur Nikisch, whom Rachmaninoff considered the greatest living conductor and who had shown an interest in his music, was music director. The decision to move to Dresden was made early in 1906, and by autumn the composer, his wife and their new-born daughter were installed in a small but smart house complemented by an attractive garden. They arrived quietly, and lived, as much as possible, incognito and in seclusion. When he chanced to meet a Russian acquaintance on the street one day, Rachmaninoff pleaded, "I have escaped from my friends. Please don't give me away." The atmosphere in Dresden was so conducive to composition that within a few months of his arrival he was working on the Second Symphony, the First Piano Sonata, the Op. 6 collection of Russian folk songs and the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*.

The Second Symphony was unanimously cheered when it made the rounds of the Russian concert societies in 1908, and it was an important item on Rachmaninoff's first American tour the following year. With this work, *The Isle of the Dead*, the Second and Third Concertos, and the popular Prelude in C-sharp minor, he made a profound impression on the American musical scene. He was twice offered the post of music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and twice declined. For the two decades before his death in 1943, his cross-country concert tours became an institution. Many of his compositions continue to enjoy a popularity greater in America than anywhere else in the world.

Philip Hale, writing of the renown that has attached itself to Rachmaninoff's works in general and to the Second Symphony in particular, stated, "The reasons for the popularity of the Symphony are not far to seek. The themes are eminently melodious, and some of them are of singular beauty; there is rich coloring; there are beautiful nuances in color; there is impressive sonority; there are frequent and sharp contrasts in sentiment, rhythm and expression; there is stirring vitality." Underlying these attractive external qualities is Rachmaninoff's philosophy of the emotional, communicative powers of music. He stated, "Music should express the sum total of a composer's experiences." Once asked specifically about the nature of music, he replied, "What is music? How can one define it? Music is a calm moonlit night, a rustling of summer foliage. Music is the distant peal of bells at eventide. Music is born only of the heart and

it appeals to the heart. It is love. The sister of music is poetry and the mother — sorrow!" It is easy, as has been frequently demonstrated, to ridicule such an open-hearted philosophy. However, this Second Symphony generates much warmth, joy, and true sentiment, and can move many listeners more deeply than other pieces of more rigorous intellectual accomplishment.

The majestic scale of the Symphony is established at the outset by a slow, brooding introduction. The low strings and then the violins give out a fragmentary theme which generates much of the material for the entire work. A smooth transition to a faster tempo signals the arrival of the main theme, an extended and quickened transformation of the basses' opening motive. The expressive second theme enters in the woodwinds. The development section deals with the vigorous main theme to such an extent that the beginning of the formal recapitulation is engulfed by its surge. The lovely second theme reappears as expected, again in the woodwinds. The coda resumes the energetic mood of the development to build to the fine climax which ends the movement.

The second movement is the most nimble essay to be found in Rachmaninoff's orchestral works. After two preparatory measures, the horns hurl forth the main theme, which bears more than a passing resemblance to the *Dies Irae*, the ancient chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead that haunted the composer for many years. The vital nature of the music, however, does not support any morbid interpretation. Eventually, the rhythmic bustle is suppressed and finally silenced to make way for the movement's central section, whose skipping lines embody some of Rachmaninoff's best fugal writing. Almost as if by magic, the opening scherzo returns amid a full-throated cry from the brass. Once again, this quiets and the movement ends on a note of considerable mystery.

The rapturous third movement, wrote Patrick Piggott, "is as romantic as any music in the orchestral repertory — if by romantic we mean the expression, through lyrical melody and richly chromatic harmony, of a sentiment which can only be described as love." This is music of heightened passion that resembles nothing so much as an ecstatic operatic love scene. Alternating with the joyous principal melody is an important theme from the first movement, heard prominently in the central portion and the coda of this movement.

The finale bursts forth in the whirling dance rhythm of an Italian *tarantella*. The propulsive urgency subsides to allow another of Rachmaninoff's wonderful, sweeping melodic inspirations to enter. A development of the *tarantella* motives follows, into which are embroidered thematic reminiscences from each of the three preceding movements. The several elements of the finale are gathered together in the closing pages to produce the rich and sonorous tapestry appropriate for the life-affirming conclusion of this grand and stirring composition.

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