

Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2
Program Notes
February 17 - 19, 2012

In 1884, Carl Nielsen left his native village on the Danish island of Funen, and enrolled at the Copenhagen Conservatory, where he majored in violin and also studied composition, theory, piano and, with Niels Gade, music history. He completed the Conservatory's curriculum in 1886, but continued studying theory at the school while supporting himself as a free-lance violinist in Copenhagen by performing in chamber concerts and with the orchestra at Tivoli Gardens. He turned seriously to composition during that time — two pieces for string orchestra were given at Tivoli in 1887, and a string quartet was played by a local chamber music society the following year. His first major success came with the premiere of the *Little Suite* for Strings by the Tivoli Orchestra on September 8, 1888, which was published the following year as his Op. 1.

On September 1, 1889, Nielsen joined the second violin section of the Royal Chapel Orchestra, a post he held for the next sixteen years while continuing to foster his reputation as a leading figure in Danish music. He received a leave of absence during the 1890-1891 season to study Wagnerian music drama in Germany under a government grant, and made a swing through Paris in the spring to immerse himself in the artistic treasures of that city. Paris worked its charms on him, and so did a young Danish sculptress, Anne Marie Brodersen, who was studying there that year — they were married only a month after they first met, and honeymooned in Italy to indulge their shared interest in art. When they returned to Copenhagen in the summer of 1891, Nielsen was inspired to undertake his first symphony (he dedicated the score to Anne Marie); he completed the work the following year.

Nielsen's reputation grew with his works of the ensuing decade, most notably the Second Symphony and the opera *Saul and David*, but he was still financially unable to quit his job with the Chapel Orchestra to devote himself fully to composition. It was therefore with considerable excitement that he signed a contract with the prestigious publishing firm of Wilhelm Hansen early in 1903 that would provide him with a regular income and the chance, two years later, to leave behind his performing chores. Fortune smiled again that year on the Niensens, when Anne Marie was awarded the Ancker Fellowship. The couple celebrated their flourishing careers with a stay in Greece, where they took rooms overlooking the Aegean Sea and Carl found a studio at the Odeion Conservatory in Athens. His immersion in the ancient Greek culture and the beneficent climate inspired him to begin a concert overture depicting the sun's traversal of the heavens. "It's blistering hot here now," he wrote to a friend at home. "Helios burns the whole day, and I write away at my new solar system; a long introduction with sunrise and morning song is finished, and I've begun the *allegro*." Nielsen finished his *Helios Overture* before returning to Copenhagen that summer, and participated among the second violins at the premiere, given by the Royal Chapel Orchestra under the direction of Johan Svendsen on October 8, 1903. Though the work met with mixed responses when it was new, it soon established itself in the Danish concert repertory, and has become a regular part of that country's New Year's celebrations.

Nielsen headed the *Helios Overture* with the following legend: "Silence and darkness — then the sun

climbs in joyous paeon of praise — wanders its golden path — sinks tranquilly into the sea.” The work opens with a spacious slow introduction that rises from an anticipatory hum in the deep bass and soft rising calls in the horns to encompass the full orchestra to depict the dawn. Trumpet fanfares lead to the main body of the composition, a quick-tempo, sonata-form construction with a heroic main theme pronounced by the violins and a lyrical subsidiary melody initiated by the cellos. The center of the *Overture* is occupied by a spirited *fugato*. The main theme returns in a grand setting before a passage of atmospheric, slow-moving chords suggests the twilight. The work ends with a brief, quiet reference to the music of the introduction to indicate the descent of night.

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By the time he was 34, when he finished his First Symphony, Jean Sibelius was already a feted national hero. He came to maturity when his native Finland was searching for its national cultural and political identity after centuries of domination by Sweden and Russia, and his music gave vent to the aspirations of his countrymen at the time when the Czar’s representatives forbade inflammatory, patriotic words. To invest his works with a powerful nationalistic message, he turned for inspiration to the epic compilation of Finnish legends, the *Kalevala*. A series of stirring works based on those old stories preceded the First Symphony — *En Saga* and *Kullervo* (1892), the *Karelia Suite* (1893), and the *Four Legends*, which include the haunting *Swan of Tuonela* (1893-1895). *Finlandia* was born in the same year — 1899 — as the E minor Symphony. As early as 1897, Sibelius was granted an annual sustenance stipend from the Finnish Senate as recognition of his contribution to the life of the nation so that he would be free to continue his creative work.

The First Symphony shows the influence both of Sibelius’ study of German music in Berlin and of the Russian dominance of Finland’s artistic life. Coming, as it does, in the last year of the Romantic century, the Symphony looks back for its formal precedents to the orchestral works of the great masters of the German tradition, specifically Beethoven and Brahms. In melodic material, instrumentation and certain points of style, however, it turns further east, to the music of Borodin and, especially, Tchaikovsky, whose Sixth Symphony had been composed only six years before and performed in Helsinki in 1894 and 1897. Sibelius even told his wife, Aino, of Tchaikovsky that “there is much in that man that I recognize in myself.” Against this Russo-German background, Sibelius placed his own strong musical personality in establishing himself as a symphonist with a work given to broad emotions and dramatic gestures in an expansive, Romantic mood.

The first movement is introduced by a bardic clarinet solo played above a timpani pedal point. (It is with such orchestral touches that Sibelius admitted trying to evoke the topography of his homeland, in this case, the solitary reddish granite blocks jutting from the sea along Finland’s Baltic coast.) The sonata form proper is begun with the entry of the strings proclaiming the main theme, a typically Sibelian melody begun with a sustained note intensifying to a quick rhythmic flourish. A richly lyrical theme for violins and cellos follows. The second theme, related to the main theme in shape and rhythm, is given by the woodwinds. The development section utilizes the thematic material heard in the exposition, to which are added the stern brass chords so characteristic of Sibelius’ orchestral technique. The recapitulation includes most of the material from the exposition given in a heightened setting.

The *Andante*, warm and lyrical, opens with a nostalgic melody for violins and cellos. The central section is led by the horn choir playing a serene theme above the undulating accompaniment of the harp and strings. The long closing section elaborates the opening theme. The *Scherzo*, in traditional three-part form (A–B–A), comprises brassy, energetic outer sections surrounding a slow, sustained, contrasting trio. The finale begins with the solo clarinet melody that opened the Symphony. Though the movement is marked “Quasi una Fantasia,” it follows sonata form, with an expressive second theme for strings in slower tempo. The functions of development and recapitulation are fused.

Of Sibelius’ first two symphonies, Milton Cross wrote, “[They] do not have subtlety of expression. They are Russian in their over-indulgence in dramatic statements, Slavic in their haunting, poignant melodies of peasant energy. They wear the heart on the sleeve. But what they lack in subtlety, they make up in dramatic effect. They have an overwhelming emotional impact.”

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When he was old and as mellow as he would ever get, Sergei Rachmaninoff wrote these words about his early years: “Although I had to fight for recognition, as most younger men must, although I have experienced all the troubles and sorrow which precede success, and although I know how important it is for an artist to be spared such troubles, I realize, when I look back on my early life, that it was enjoyable, in spite of all its vexations and bitterness.” The greatest “bitterness” of Rachmaninoff’s career was brought about by his Symphony No. 1, a work that had such a disastrous premiere he forbade any other performances of the piece while he was alive. The total failure of the Symphony at its premiere in 1897 was a traumatic disappointment to him, one that thrust him into such a mental depression that he suffered a complete nervous collapse.

Such a hyper-emotional attitude was not unusual at the turn of the 20th century for the Russian aristocracy of which Rachmaninoff was a member. Melancholia was virtually a way of upper-class life at the time, as the Russian critic and composer Leonid Sabaneiev described: “The famous Moscow restaurants, the no-less famous Gypsy choruses, the atmosphere of continuing dissipation in which perhaps there was no merriment at all, but on the contrary, the most genuine, bitter and impenetrable pessimism — this was the milieu. Music there was a terrible narcosis, a sort of intoxication and oblivion, a going-off into irrational places.... It was not form or harmoniousness or Apollonic vision that was demanded of music, but passion, feeling, languor, heartache. Such was Tchaikovsky’s music, and such also the music of Rachmaninoff developed into.” After the failure of his First Symphony, Rachmaninoff was mired in exactly such an emotional abyss as Sabaneiev described, and he showed little inclination of ever climbing out. His family, alarmed at the prospect of the brilliant young musician wasting his prodigious talents, expended their own capabilities to help him, and then sought out professional psychiatric counsel.

An aunt of Rachmaninoff, Varvara Satina, had recently been successfully treated for an emotional disturbance by a certain Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a Moscow physician who was familiar with the latest psychiatric discoveries in France and Vienna, and it was arranged that Rachmaninoff should visit him. Years later, in his memoirs, the composer recalled the malady and the treatment: “[Following the

performance of the First Symphony,] something within me snapped. All my self-confidence broke down. A paralyzing apathy possessed me. I did nothing at all and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent on a couch sighing over my ruined life. My only occupation consisted in giving a few piano lessons to keep myself alive.” For more than a year, Rachmaninoff’s condition persisted. He began his daily visits to Dr. Dahl in January 1900. “My relatives had informed Dr. Dahl that he must by all means cure me of my apathetic condition and bring about such results that I would again be able to compose. Dahl had inquired what kind of composition was desired of me, and he was informed ‘a concerto for pianoforte,’ which I had given up in despair of ever writing. In consequence, I heard repeated, day after day, the same hypnotic formula, as I lay half somnolent in an armchair in Dr. Dahl’s consulting room: ‘You will start to compose a concerto — You will work with the greatest of ease — The composition will be of excellent quality.’ Always it was the same, without interruption.” Almost like a movie script from the Hollywood where Rachmaninoff eventually settled, the good doctor’s unusual cure worked. “Although it may seem impossible to believe,” Rachmaninoff continued, “this treatment really helped me. I started to compose again at the beginning of the summer.” In gratitude, he dedicated the new Concerto to Dr. Dahl.

Rachmaninoff wrote the second and third movements of his rehabilitative Concerto in the summer and early autumn of 1900 in Italy, Novgorod and Moscow; this incomplete version was heard at a charity concert in Moscow on October 14th, with the composer at the keyboard and Alexander Siloti conducting. The opening movement was composed by the following spring, and the premiere of the finished work was given on October 14, 1901 with the same two principals and the orchestra of the Moscow Philharmonic Society. The C minor Concerto was the first orchestral work to carry the name of Rachmaninoff into the world’s concert halls. (His ubiquitous C-sharp minor Prelude of 1892 had been a piano-bench and recital favorite for a decade.) Other advances in Rachmaninoff’s life soon followed — many successful musical compositions, an appointment as the opera conductor of the Moscow Grand Theater, and a triumphant career as a concert pianist. There always remained buried away in his innermost thoughts, however, those ghosts of self-doubt and insecurity that Nicholas Dahl could never have totally exorcised from the dour composer’s psychological constitution.

The C minor Concerto begins with eight bell-tone chords from the solo piano that herald the surging main theme, which is announced by the strings. A climax is achieved before a sudden drop in intensity makes way for the arching second theme, initiated by the soloist. The development section, concerned largely with the first theme, is propelled by a martial rhythm that continues with undiminished energy into the recapitulation. The second theme returns in the horn before the martial mood is re-established to close the movement.

The *Adagio*, a long-limbed nocturne with a running commentary of sweeping figurations from the piano, contains some beautiful concerted instrumental writing. The finale resumes the marching rhythmic motion of the first movement with its introduction and bold main theme. Standing in bold relief to this vigorous music is the lyrical second theme, one of the best-loved melodies in the entire orchestral literature, a grand inspiration in the ripest Romantic tradition. (Years ago, this melody was lifted from the Concerto by the tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley and fitted with sufficiently maudlin phrases to become the popular hit *Full Moon and Empty Arms*.) These two themes, the martial and the romantic, alternate for the

remainder of the movement. The coda rises through a finely crafted line of mounting tension to bring this work to an electrifying close.

Rachmaninoff once wrote, “I try to make music speak simply and directly that which is in my heart at the time I am composing. If there is love there, or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these moods become part of my music, and it becomes either beautiful or bitter or sad or religious.” The heart of a true Romantic beat beneath the stern exterior of this man; his music is a direct link to the great traditions of the 19th-century masters.

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