

# Program Notes

This evening's program pairs 20<sup>th</sup> century works by composers born in Czarist Russia – and there the similarities end. **Sergei Rachmaninoff** (1873-1943) came from a well-to-do family; he had the dual advantages of money and privilege. He established himself in the 1890s as a pianist, conductor, and composer, and traveled extensively. After the Bolshevik Revolution, he never returned to Russia.

By contrast, **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906-1975) was a full generation younger than Rachmaninoff, and thus only a pre-teen when revolution toppled the Romanov dynasty. Consequently, he came of age and spent his entire career in the shadow of Communist Soviet rule. Politics and music are inseparable in discussions of his legacy. Indeed, the work we hear this evening is a case in point. The Fifth Symphony was his path to reinstating himself in Stalin's good graces after falling out of favor.

"Rach Three," as Rachmaninoff's **Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30** has come to be known, is utterly apolitical. Rachmaninoff composed it for performance on his first American tour. The concerto got a big shot in the arm in 1996 with the release of Australian director Scott Hicks's film *Shine*. Geoffrey Rush won an academy award for best actor in his portrayal of the emotionally disturbed pianist David Helfgott. The soundtrack featured the Third Concerto prominently, making it that year's best known piece of classical music.

Rachmaninoff himself was the quintessential post-romantic. Musically, he kept one foot firmly planted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and never embraced the modernist techniques of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Audiences respond to his rapturous, dramatic music. This concerto demonstrates the finest qualities in his writing: unabashed romanticism, dazzling virtuosity, and brilliant orchestral and pianistic colors.

Only 25 years separates the Third Concerto from **Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47**. Yet even the non-musician will perceive immediately that this

symphony comes from an altogether different world. Shostakovich speaks a language practically devoid of romanticism. Sometimes he is sardonic, but he can also be profound, meltingly lyrical, and personal. In his Fifth Symphony, Shostakovich probes the very heart of the human condition.

---

## PIANO CONCERTO NO. 3 IN D MINOR, OP. 30

Sergei Rachmaninoff

*Born 1 April, 1873 in Oneg, Novgorod district, Russia*

*Died 28 March, 1943 in Beverly Hills, California*

*The work grows in impressiveness upon acquaintance and will doubtless take rank among the most interesting piano concertos of recent years, although its great length and extreme difficulties bar it from performance by any but pianists of exceptional powers.*

– The New York Herald, 17 January 1910

Amen.

For more than a century since that review of Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto appeared in print, pianists who aspire to perform it have endeavored to master those 'exceptional powers.' They are responding to popular demand. Listeners love this piece.

Indeed, when a work is so familiar, so central to the repertoire, it is difficult to grasp how fresh and exciting it must have sounded to Rachmaninoff's first audiences. He introduced the concerto in late November 1909, performing with the New York Symphony under the baton of Walter Damrosch. In New York, a brand new piece by a famous European composer-pianist was a major event. For the January performance that *The New York Herald* reviewed, the celebrity factor was even greater. This time, not only was Rachmaninoff the soloist, but Gustav Mahler was on the podium.

## Summer vacation: a working holiday

As it happens, the premiere was a big event for the composer, too. He had weighed the prospect of an American tour for some time. Rachmaninoff had reservations about such a long and taxing journey; however, his solo pieces and Second Concerto enjoyed immense popularity in the United States, and therefore such a trip would be highly lucrative. As plans for the tour coalesced, it became apparent that he would require a new piece for piano and orchestra to showcase on the American concerts. He worked on the new concerto during summer 1909 while on holiday at Ivanovka, a country estate belonging to his wife's family, completing the manuscript on 23 September. Three weeks later he was *en route* to the United States, with manuscript and parts in his luggage. There was no time to engrave printed music.

## How to top a known winner?

The challenge that Rachmaninoff faced was to match the quality and appeal of his Second Piano Concerto in original and compelling music. He knew that the new work would be compared to the earlier one. His solution was to take a different approach in thematic treatment. In the Second Concerto, after the dramatic solo piano chords of the opening, the orchestra declaims the first theme *forte*, while the piano surges in tandem with Schumannesque arpeggios.

Rachmaninoff altered his tactic for the Third Concerto. The soloist states the theme straightaway in open octaves, preceded only by two bars of a subdued orchestral accompaniment. The dynamic level is quiet and the texture spare. Rachmaninoff's melody is deceptively simple, moving primarily in stepwise motion or in small intervals. The theme is also unusually long, which makes it linger in our ears. Motives from it will recur throughout the entire concerto, providing subtle thematic unity.

When the orchestra takes up the theme, the soloist embarks on a series of exploratory variations, leading to a second theme that has all the warmth and lyricism we associate with Rachmaninoff. He develops this material with a profusion of brilliant writing for piano. While the keyboard technique is indebted to Liszt, Rachmaninoff's style is distinctive. He demands quick shifts of hand position, rapid

repeated notes, the ability to play with delicacy and lightness as well as with power – and plenty of enormous chords. In places, the piano practically explodes with activity.

## Gemini cadenzas

After the furore subsides, Rachmaninoff proceeds to his solo cadenza. He actually composed two cadenzas for this concerto. Only their closing measures are the same. The first is shorter – possibly he wrote it in order to accommodate the time restrictions of 78 rpm records – and emphasizes complex passage work. The second, a massive 75 bars, requires both strength and stamina for extensive chordal playing. Both cadenzas are wonderful musically and pianistically. Some pianists believe that the briefer version expresses a more succinct and musically sensitive aspect of Rachmaninoff's keyboard personality. Others prefer the thunderous drama of the 75-bar version. For this performance, Ching-Yun Hu has chosen the long version.

The slow movement, which Rachmaninoff called *Intermezzo*, consists of a theme and four variations. Oboe introduces the melody; the orchestra establishes an elegiac atmosphere. The piano joins in with extravagant harmonic wanderings. The music feels improvisatory, yet at every turn there are hints and fragments of that opening theme from the first movement. Occasional outbursts from the piano precipitate mood changes and enhance the narrative flow. It proceeds without pause to the finale, a dance-like, energetic movement in the Russian tradition – and a bravura *tour de force*.

From the standpoint of compositional technique, the Third Concerto represents an enormous leap forward for Rachmaninoff. The flow and continuity are superb. He writes with more immediacy and variety to his rhythms. The cyclic references among the three movements allow his ideas to blossom. Orchestral moments are rich and abundant. The virtuoso display aspect of the solo part has eclipsed Rachmaninoff's symphonic approach to concerto form. His writing for winds and brass is far more imaginative than in the earlier concertos.

The power and bravura of the piano part rarely fail to prompt audiences to their feet at the conclusion of this concerto. Its splendor

## Program Notes

and genius lie just as much in the delicate, whimsical moments and the infinite variety of Rachmaninoff's decorative passages.

The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, solo piano, and strings.

---

## SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN D MINOR, OP. 47

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born 25 September, 1906 in St. Petersburg  
Died 9 August, 1975 in Moscow

### Political disaster, professional crisis

Shostakovich composed his Fifth Symphony on the heels of a major musical and political setback. In late January 1936, Joseph Stalin and a delegation of Soviet officials attended a performance of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. Offended by the opera's subject matter and musical vocabulary, they left prior to the last act. Two days after the performance, an unsigned editorial appeared in *Pravda*, the government newspaper, with a scathing condemnation of Shostakovich and his degenerate opera. The castigating article was headlined "Muddle Instead of Music."

Official disapproval had a cataclysmic effect on the 29-year-old composer's career and on his mental state. His friends later hinted that he had considered suicide during this humiliating and dangerous political time. Only the birth of his first child in May 1936, combined with his focus on the completion of a Fourth Symphony, appear to have kept him emotionally and psychologically balanced.

The following year, 1937, was the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution. For that occasion, Shostakovich composed his Fifth Symphony. The new work put him back in official good graces. With this symphony, Shostakovich responded successfully to Stalin's political directive for music with a mission. He composed a specifically Soviet symphony. This was the piece that won governmental approval, becoming Shostakovich's passport to official

"rehabilitation." The Fifth Symphony also boosted Shostakovich's reputation outside the Soviet Union. And yet, in spite of its surface compliance with the party line, it is still a work of passion and heartfelt emotion.

### Personal statement or political agenda?

The degree to which the Fifth Symphony remained personal to Shostakovich emerges in his later writings. In particular, Solomon Volkov's *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, first published in 1979, includes the following remarkable passage:

I discovered to my astonishment that the man who considers himself its greatest interpreter [the Russian conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky] does not understand my music. He says that I wanted to write exultant finales for my Fifth and Seventh Symphonies but I couldn't manage it. It never occurred to this man that I never thought about any exultant finales, for what exultation could there be? I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in Boris Godunov. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, "Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing," and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, "Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing."

What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that. [The author Alexander Alexandrovich Fadeyev heard it, and he wrote in his diary, for his personal use, that the finale of the Fifth is irreparable tragedy. He must have felt it with his Russian alcoholic soul.

Shostakovich's trenchant and bitter remarks imply a layer of irony in the finale that encourages thoughtful listening. Even those who know the Fifth Symphony well are likely to hear it with fresh ears in the context of these comments. It is only fair to note that Volkov's *Testimony* is highly controversial and that scholars and musicians have challenged its authenticity. In her landmark 2000 biography,

the American scholar Laurel E. Fay noted, specifically with respect to the last movement:

The 'finale problem' in Shostakovich's symphonic works was an issue that would crop up again, notably in connection with his Tenth Symphony. In the light of comments attributed to the aging, embittered composer in *Testimony*, the suggestion has gained wide currency that Shostakovich may have deliberately set himself up to fail in crowning the Fifth Symphony with a genuinely jubilant finale, intending instead to convey the sense of rejoicing under duress.

It is food for thought. Nevertheless, as Fay observes, the musical substance of Shostakovich's symphony ultimately contributed to its acceptance and acclaim by musicians and audiences worldwide, regardless of any overt or implicit political agenda.

### Middle-period masterwork: window to the future

While the outer movements have become the Fifth Symphony's best known segments, the inner two better reflect Shostakovich's emerging style. The scherzo, a quasi-Schubertian country dance tinged with Mahlerian satire, shows the dry, sardonic side of Shostakovich's personality to perfection. And the slow movement, a showcase for the string section, embodies the tragedy and poetry inherent in the human condition. The Fifth Symphony is usually regarded as the window into Shostakovich's middle period, but it has such consummate maturity that it foreshadows the masterpieces that would follow during and after the Second World War.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, piccolo clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, two harps, bells, xylophone, celesta, piano, and strings.

### Two great Fifth Symphonies: comparing Beethoven and Shostakovich

Shostakovich was the greatest symphonist the 20th century produced. His contribution is important not only because he left 15 examples (more than any other symphonist of his stature), but also because they are musically so substantive. There are striking parallels to Beethoven – the quintessential symphonist – in Shostakovich's career. Among the most startling is the role that a Fifth Symphony played in each of their output. Shortly before his Fifth Symphony's premiere in 1937, Shostakovich wrote:

The theme of my symphony is the development of the individual. I saw man with all his sufferings as the central idea of the work, which is lyrical in mood from start to finish; the finale resolves the tragedy and tension of the earlier movements on a joyous, optimistic note.

Listeners who know the Beethoven Fifth will immediately sense a kinship. Beethoven's symphony deals with the struggle against Fate, in which man emerges triumphant in the finale. Another factor the works have in common is a concise musical motto that recurs in almost every movement. In Beethoven it is the famous "fate knocking at the door" that opens the symphony; in Shostakovich it is an anapest (short-short-long) rhythm.

Laurie Shulman © 2011  
First North American Serial Rights Only