Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Major, Op.44

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky
Born May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Viatka district, Russia
Died November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Approximate duration 37 minutes

First performances by the Wichita Symphony

How Many Concertos?

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 2? Is there a misprint? He just wrote one, right? Wrong. Tchaikovsky actually composed three piano concerti. The popularity of the First has virtually eclipsed the other two.

Tchaikovsky wrote his First Concerto in 1875 for the pianist Nikolai Rubinstein, but withdrew his dedication when Rubinstein criticized the piece. Only after the German pianist Hans von Bülow enjoyed great success with the First Concerto did Rubinstein amend his opinion. He became a great champion of the B-flat minor work.

Mollified, Tchaikovsky wished to compose another concerto for his friend. The years since the earlier concerto had been tumultuous in his personal life, but rewarding professionally. When he began sketching the Second Concerto in 1879, he had no outstanding commissions, no pressing deadlines. He simply felt the need to compose. His letters indicate boredom and a desire to stay busy. Perhaps that accounts for the Second Concerto's considerable length.

Cutting and Pasting

Tchaikovsky reported to his patroness, Mme. von Meck that Nikolai Rubinstein thought the piano part overly episodic, and that it didn't stand out from the orchestra enough. Unfortunately Rubinstein died before the intended première. Tchaikovsky's student Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev learned the piece, and Anton Rubinstein (Nikolai's brother) conducted the Moscow premiere in May 1882. The verdict was "too long." Some six years later, Tchaikovsky excised lengthy passages from the first two movements. In subsequent performances, the conductor Alexander Ziloti made other extensive cuts; that version was published four years after Tchaikovsky's death. Ms. Paremski plays the original, full-length version.

Advances in Tchaikovsky's Piano Writing

There are striking differences between the First and Second Concertos. Where the first has an overabundance of melodies, the second has few big themes. It is more music of gesture and motive. Yet if the characteristic heart-on-the-sleeve tune is not in evidence, Tchaikovsky's control of the orchestra and skillful handling of symphonic material reflect an impressive advance over the First Concerto. Further, the Second Concerto shows more signs than the First of having been written specifically for keyboard. The opening movement in particular is a virtuoso showcase. Listeners who enjoy the theatre of a vigorous, physical performance as much

as the music itself will be on the edge of their seats. This is interactive concerto-writing, whereby the soloist's sheer muscular effort seems to drain us.

Chamber Music Interpolated into a Concerto

The slow movement is unusual in that the orchestra presents all the themes, rather than the soloist. Also, it features *obbligato* parts for the concertmaster and principal cellist. The solo strings endow the movement with the operatic weight it needs for emotional integrity and focus. The result is quite transporting, as lyrical and intimate as anything Tchaikovsky wrote.

Tchaikovsky's finale is as compressed as the first movement is expansive. The structure combines sonata and rondo. Spiritually, this *Allegro con fuoco* is related to the Cossack dance that concludes the First Concerto. Here, however, all the melodies are original. It is all over rather quickly. In comparison to the leisurely expanse of the first two movements, it thus runs the risk of appearing disproportionately brief. Nevertheless this finale has punch, bravura, and undeniable sparkle.

Tchaikovsky scored the Second Concerto for woodwinds in pairs, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, solo piano and strings.

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

Sergei Rachmaninoff
Born April 1, 1873 in Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia
Died March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills

Approximate duration 35 minutes

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony March 6/7, 1993

During the summer of 1940, following an exhausting concert season, Sergei Rachmaninoff took refuge on the then-bucolic north shore town of Huntington, Long Island. He hoped to compose some music and regain his failing health. Though he survived until spring 1943, the work he composed that summer proved to be his last complete score. And a magnificent swan song it was. Rachmaninoff was deservedly proud of the new piece, writing excitedly on 21 August to his friend, Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Eugene Ormandy:

> Last week I finished a new symphonic piece, which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra. It is called `Fantastic Dances.' I shall now begin the orchestration. Unfortunately my concert tour begins on October 14. I have a great deal of practice to do and I don't know whether I shall be able to finish the orchestration before November.
>
> I should be very glad if, upon your return, you would drop over to our place. I should like to play the piece for you.

Ormandy responded promptly, accepting the composer's invitation for the following week. By then, Rachmaninoff had changed the title to "Symphonic Dances."

While we know that Rachmaninoff flirted with the idea of presenting his new piece as a ballet -- choreographer Mikhail Fokine heard the piano version even before Ormandy did -- it is essentially a symphonic work that celebrates the lush orchestral palette for which Rachmaninoff is celebrated. At the same time, vigorous dance rhythms permeate its fabric in all three movements, providing forward momentum and catching us up in a whirl of mysterious, compelling sound.

The string parts to the Symphonic Dances are notoriously difficult and a major challenge to the finest orchestra. There is a good reason: Rachmaninoff enlisted the assistance of the eminent violinist and composer Fritz Kreisler in editing the string parts, including all the bowings. Whereas the strings do not dominate the sound, their presence is a constant factor throughout the Symphonic Dances.

The first movement is dominated by a descending triad motive from which the balance of the musical material unfolds. Rachmaninoff takes superb advantage of his orchestral resources, continually surprising us with a panoply of percussion, woodwind and brass accents amidst the ongoing sweep of the strings. His unique stroke in this movement is the luscious solo awarded to alto saxophone in the more leisurely middle section. Precedent for using saxophone as a significant orchestral soloist lay in Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* Suites, Ravel's *Boléro* and his orchestration of Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Rachmaninoff's countryman Alexander Glazunov composed both a solo concerto for saxophone and a saxophone quartet. Still, the timbre is unusual: peculiarly close to the human voice and vividly set with clarinet and oboe sharing a light accompaniment.

The central waltz opens with muted trumpets in an eerie reminder of the composer's Russian roots. Pizzicato strings establish the ghostly waltz rhythm; a free violin solo lends a folksy, half-gypsy facet to the music. Rachmaninoff focuses on individual instrumental colors, whose chromatic lines often seem like veiled threats undulating beneath the smooth exterior of the waltz. The brasses of the opening measures return periodically, as if to herald the sinister spirits that seem to underlie this disquieting dance. Metric vacillation from 6/8 and 3/8 to 9/8 and back again add to the haunting character.

Much has been made of Rachmaninoff's recurrent use of the medieval *Dies irae* chant in his music. The best known example is the Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini, but there are several other occurrences among the composer's works. Its presence in the finale to the Symphonic Dances has been called Rachmaninoff's last and definitive statement. An English horn solo also makes use of Russian Orthodox chant. The two ideas bind together with the composer's original material to build to a dynamic close.

The magnificence of Rachmaninoff's achievement in this thrilling work is the melding of balletic impulse and symphonic grandeur. Vastly more sophisticated than the heart-on-sleeve romanticism of the early piano concerti, the Symphonic Dances are a superb example of his mature orchestral style.

Rachmaninoff scored his Symphonic Dances for a large and colorful orchestra comprising piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, tubular bells, xylophone, tam-tam, glockenspiel, piano, harp and strings.