



GABRIELA
MARTINEZ
PLAYS
RACHMANINOFF

Gabriela Martinez
Piano

SUNDAY
FEBRUARY 18, 2024
3:00 PM

**CENTURY II
CONCERT HALL**

PROGRAM NOTES

NOKUTHULA ENDO NGWENYAMA

Born June 16, 1976 in Los Angeles, California

Primal Message for Strings (11')

This afternoon is the first performance of *Primal Message* by the Wichita Symphony.

Nokothula Ngwenyama (No-goo-TOO-lah En-gwen-YAH-ma) is a daughter of Zimbabwean and Japanese parents. She began studying piano at age four and, soon after, gravitated to the violin before being attracted to the rich sounds of the viola. She studied at the Colburn School for the Performing Arts in Los Angeles and the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. She established herself as a violist by winning the Primrose International Viola Competition at age sixteen in 1993. She followed that by winning the Young Concert Artists International auditions a year later. A Fulbright Scholarship took her to Paris, and she subsequently earned a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard University.

Under the aegis of Young Concert Artists, her performing career took off with recitals at the Kennedy Center, the White House, the 92nd Street "Y," and internationally in Japan's Suntory Hall and the Louvre in Paris. She made orchestral appearances with the Atlanta, Baltimore, National Symphony Orchestras, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, among others.

Her catalog of composed music on her website indicates that she began writing in earnest around 2014, fulfilling an interest and desire that marked her early musical studies. Many of her works reflect her background as a string player with the viola frequently the solo instrument. She has composed works for the Takás String Quartet, the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio, and the Primrose International Viola Competition.

Primal Message began life as a Viola Quintet in 2018. Ngwenyama reworked the piece for string orchestra and harp during the pandemic and created a version that added percussion. The string version from 2020 is what we hear at this concert.

From an article appearing in Oregon Arts Watch in 2018, we learn that *Primal Message* is "based on the idea of communicating the things we learn to communicate with each other: our intelligence, our emotions, our goodness." The music reflects on the Arecibo Message broadcast into space from the Arecibo Telescope in Puerto Rico in 1974 towards the globular cluster Messier 13, 25,000 light years away. A 2017 *New York Times Magazine* article by Steven Johnson titled *Greetings E.T. (Please Don't Murder Us)* was also a source of inspiration.

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Ngwenyama became fascinated by the relationships of prime numbers as the structural basis for her work and by what we could communicate about our emotional intelligence. To these ends, she imagined a musical message sent 25,000 light years away.

Your ears will unlikely detect the intervallic relationships of prime numbers as you listen. However, you will notice the emotional content that packs a wallop with its sumptuous texture and hints of folksong reminiscent of the British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. The music begins with soft, ethereal harmonies that establish a

Primal Message for Strings

continued

background for an initial solo cello. The cello solo progresses to a full-bodied string texture as the music becomes passionate. A solo violin takes a prominent turn accompanied by murmuring arpeggios. About eight minutes in, the music subsides into a soft, repetitive pizzicato in the violins as if we mark the passage of time in infinite space. After a final surge of emotional content, the music dissolves into silence as the primal message travels into the infinity of space 25,000 light-years away.

You may listen to Primal Message in this January 2021 performance by the Northwest Sinfonietta of Tacoma, Washington, conducted by David Lockington.

https://youtu.be/ZjYUH_kEu6U?si=y|powaKF7jLdKpAN

PAUL HINDEMITH

Born November 16, 1895 in Hanau, Germany (near Frankfurt)

Died December 29, 1963 in Frankfurt, Germany

Symphony “Mathis der Maler” (Mathis the Painter) (1934) (about 27')

1. Concert of Angels (9')
2. The Entombment (4')
3. The Temptation of St. Anthony (14')

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on December 2 and 3, 2001, with Andrew Sewell conducting.

One hundred years ago, Paul Hindemith was one of the leading German composers of the Weimar Republic, that brief period (1919 – 1933) between the end of World War One and the Nazi takeover of Germany. He was a product of the milieu, a fan of silent movies and cabaret. His friendships included composers like Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, and Kurt Weill.

The 1920s were a time of great artistic freedom and experimentation. Many musical styles existed side-by-side. Jazz and musical theater were becoming established. Richard Strauss and Sergei Rachmaninoff, who chose to remain rooted in late-19th-century Romanticism, represented the old guard. Stravinsky turned towards a neo-classical style, drawing upon influences of the 18th century but innovating with pungent harmonies and disjointed rhythms. Arnold Schoenberg and his acolytes, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, were expanding upon German expressionism and turning it into their trademark 12-tone style. Hindemith merged German traditions, particularly Baroque sources, with the expressionist style of the early 20th century to develop his distinctive musical language.

During the progressive decade, composers often tried to outdo one another to see who would be the next big *enfant terrible*. In 1920, Hindemith introduced a fire siren in *Kammermusik (Chamber Music) #1*. In his 1928 opera, *News of the Day*, Hindemith outdid many by featuring a “nude” soprano immersed in a bubble bath while warbling about the joys of having warm, running water.

By the 1930s, Hindemith felt the time was right to compose “serious” music again, but with the accession of the Nazis in 1933, quickly ran afoul of the new regime. Joseph Goebbels publicly denounced Hindemith in 1934. In 1936, the government banned Hindemith’s music. In 1938, it included the music as examples in the infamous Entartete Musik (Degenerate Music) exhibition in Dusseldorf. Hindemith, whose wife had Jewish ancestry, saw the writing on the wall and took his family to Switzerland. They eventually made their way to America, where he took up a faculty position at Yale University during the war and became an American citizen in 1946.

In addition to being an influential composer, conductor, and teacher, Hindemith was an outstanding violist who composed many works for that instrument, an excellent clarinetist, and a decent pianist. He wrote an important book on music theory and the craft of musicianship.

In 1933, the conductor Wilhelm Furtwangler approached Hindemith to commission a musical work honoring the German painter Matthias Grünewald (ca. 1470 – 1528). Between November 1933 and March 1934,

Symphony “Mathis der Maler” (Mathis the Painter) (1934) (about 27') continued

Hindemith composed *Mathis der Maler* (Mathis the Painter). There was a political element behind the choice to honor Grünewald, a contemporary of better-known artists like Albert Dürer and Albrecht Altdorfer. Grünewald was rediscovered in the 1920s and viewed as an antiauthoritarian figure who supported a peasant uprising to end serfdom. He became a painter recognized by art historians for combining Gothic imagination with Renaissance techniques in the treatment of religious subjects. Few of his works survive, but the most important was the altarpiece for the Antonite monastery at Isenheim in Alsace, the region along the French and German border that periodically changed hands during wars.

Since the altarpiece inspired Hindemith’s work, it is helpful to digress into an explanation. Most of us are probably familiar with the typical altarpiece of art consisting of a central painting and two side – or wing - pictures on either side of the central work. Grünewald’s Isenheim masterpiece is a polyptych (Pol-IP-tik) with multiple wings that open up to different scenes, with a final third central view showing wood-carved sculptures of saints by Nikolaus of Hagenau that glow radiantly with gold paint.

The first view of the altarpiece is a realistic painting of the crucifixion in which the elongated figure of Christ anticipates the expressive Baroque paintings of El Greco. Portraits of St. Anthony and St. Sebastian are on either side. When opened, other scenes depict a nativity scene where a seraphic band of musicians serenades the Virgin Mary and Child, a luminous resurrection scene, and a depiction of St. Anthony in the desert beset by demons. Across the bottom of the altarpiece, in the area known as the predella, is a depiction of the burial of Christ.

The detail and beauty of the altarpiece, one of the finest of its time, leads historians to consider Grünewald’s masterpiece as one of the icons of Western civilization. While it is not imperative that you, the listener, understand the details of the artwork, seeing it will help convey the emotional response the Hindemith creates in his music. A good introduction with views of the artworks is on Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altarpiece.

First Movement: Concert of Angels

The music begins with three soft, luminous G major chords played by the strings. A brief, ascending scale in the woodwinds follows each chord, drawing our gaze toward the altar. The three chords and scales symbolize the Holy Trinity.

Following this introductory passage, the trombones enter, intoning a German folk song, “Three Angels Were Singing a Sweet Song.” The horns enter and repeat the melody, and then a third time by the trumpets with additional coloring from the woodwinds and glockenspiel. Together, the sequence evokes a sense of awe. The repetition of the folksong recalls the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and his treatment of chorales (hymns) as a unifying device.

Symphony "Mathis der Maler" (Mathis the Painter) (1934) (about 27') continued

After this majestic opening, the music breaks out into an allegro of a cheerful nature. The references to the Trinity continue in the repeated chords heard in the brass that underly the busier textures of the strings and winds. Fragments of the folksong pop in and out of the musical texture in a kind of motivic play. The linear movement of the music with much embellishment recalls the legacy of German contrapuntal music and Bach.

At the height of this contrapuntal development, the "Three Angels" returns in full harmonious and orchestral glory. The movement concludes with three chords dominated by the brass.

Second Movement: The Entombment

The second movement of *Mathis* is the briefest, lasting about four minutes. The music opens with hesitant, keening gestures in the flute. The music communicates both a sense of awe and grief. Thickening orchestral textures convey the momentous weight of the body and the moment. The music builds to a solemn climax and releases to a profoundly peaceful ending.

Third Movement: The Temptation of St. Anthony

A twisted, unison, and tormented orchestral recitative punctuated by brass chords begins the movement. The fast theme enters with dotted rhythm accompaniment, thrusting the music forward in a headlong, galloping motion. In Grünewald's painting, he depicts St. Anthony assailed and tortured by fantastic, misshapen creatures. The music is frightening; consequently, this is the most dissonant section of the symphony. Listen for the repeated four-note descending motive referencing the Biblical text, "Wir plagen dich" (We plague you).

Interestingly, the Monastery of St. Anthony at Isenheim, where the altar existed, was an Antonine monastery noted in its day for treating skin diseases like smallpox and measles. Hindemith, who was beginning to suffer from the plague of Nazi accusations, probably felt a personal connection to this scene.

A slow interlude in the strings interrupts this demonic scherzo and provides a moment of respite. The fast music returns with the "We Plague You" motive and intense rhythmic activity. After several minutes of this disturbed and delirious music, Hindemith begins to anchor this flurry over a repeated phrase heard first in the clarinets and then the horns. Above the fray of scurrying strings, an old Gregorian chant, "Zion, Praise the Savior," emerges in the high woodwinds.

St. Anthony's plea culminates in a glorious, brass "Alleluia," bringing *Mathis der Maler* to its visionary and exalting conclusion.

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Mathis der Maler premiered on March 14, 1934, in a Berlin performance conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler. Hindemith expanded the music into an opera of the same name. By its completion in 1936, the government had banned Hindemith's music, so the opera's premiere occurred in Switzerland in 1938. The opera depicts an artist who retreats, spiritually wounded, from the turbulent world of contemporary politics into the timeless world

Symphony “Mathis der Maler” (Mathis the Painter) (1934) (about 27') continued

of art. Hindemith incorporates the symphonic *Mathis der Maler* into the operatic score. For Hindemith, *Mathis der Maler* is an allegory for his spiritual retreat into the protective shell of music to escape a world buffeted by change, Naziism, and the impending doom of war.

Even if we no longer hear Hindemith’s music with the same frequency it once enjoyed, *Mathis der Maler* remains one of the symphonic masterpieces of the 1930s.

Hindemith orchestrated his score for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, a tuba, timpani, three percussionists, and strings. The percussionists perform various instruments, including glockenspiel, castanets, triangle, cymbals, snare drum, and bass drum. Listen to how Hindemith utilizes the sounds of winds, brass, and strings in distinctive choirs.

Mathis der Maler is a work that rewards repeated hearings, both immediately and over a lifetime. In this YouTube recording, Herbert Blomstedt leads the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra at the 2010 BBC Proms, passing his lifetime of knowledge and musicianship to a new generation.

<https://youtu.be/znXWfmfPh8E?si=gwRyzvotwrvs6j4p>

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born April 1, 1873 in Novgorod, Russia

Died March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills, CA

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

1. Moderato (11'30")
2. Adagio Sostenuto (13')
3. Allegro scherzando (12')

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on February 15, 2019 with Lise de la Salle, pianist, and Daniel Hege conducting. *It was part of a weekend when we heard all four Rachmaninoff Piano Concertos and the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini.*

"You will compose a piano concerto. It will be a great piano concerto. You will write this piano concerto with great ease." It may seem silly to think that a hypnotic suggestion would actually produce a piano concerto, let alone a great one. But it seems to have done the trick with Rachmaninoff for his 2nd Piano Concerto. His hypnotist was Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a pioneer in autosuggestion and to whom the concerto was dedicated. To understand the need for this approach, one must backtrack a few years in Rachmaninoff's life.

Emerging from music conservatory as a young man, Rachmaninoff showed every sign of success as a composer, conductor, and pianist. He was the Moscow Conservatory's pride and joy, graduating in 1892 with the Great Gold Medal for his opera *Aleko*. Early triumphs indicated that he might be the heir to Tchaikovsky in Russian music. In 1895 Rachmaninoff's First Symphony was premiered. It was a disaster. The rehearsals were poorly prepared, and the conductor, Alexander Glazunov, was inebriated at the performance. The composer Cesar Cui wrote of the piece, "If there were a Conservatory in Hell, Rachmaninoff would gain the first prize for his symphony." These circumstances plunged Rachmaninoff into a deep depression that he struggled with for nearly five years. Although he continued his work as a conductor and pianist, his creativity for composing had run dry. Friends did their best to rally him, but Dr. Dahl's hypnosis seemed to make the critical difference.

Rachmaninoff composed the 2nd and 3rd movements of the concerto during the summer of 1900 and performed these movements on December 15, 1900. The success and ease at which composition was returning encouraged him to finish the first movement, and the entire concerto premiered on November 9, 1901.

Understanding Rachmaninoff's concerto is inseparable from understanding the man as a pianist. Regarded by many as the greatest pianist of the first half of the 20th century, Rachmaninoff's reputation as a pianist before 1917 was based exclusively as a performer of his original compositions. Not until he left Russia for good after the communist takeover in 1917 was he forced to earn a living as a pianist performing recitals. His performances were legendary. As summarized by Harold Schonberg, it was "playing buttressed by one of the colossal techniques in pianistic history."

The music critic Henry Taylor Parker (1867 – 1934) dubbed Rachmaninoff the "Puritan of Pianists," perhaps a Bostonian's recognition that Rachmaninoff's musical style was a throwback to the late 19th century. Other critics noted Rachmaninoff's pianism for its patrician elegance and penetrating insight into the structure of a musical work. While other pianists might have played with excessive exaggeration, and Hollywood composers later

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

continued

sought to emulate his compositional style to the point of creating *kitsch*, Rachmaninoff was always a pianist of great control. His enormous hands allowed him to grasp massive chords and the sonority distinguished his playing. Critics described him as a cerebral player who never allowed a blurred line or sloppy pedaling but relied on his superb technique to create the clarity of individual lines.

Listening to the Second Piano Concerto, one gains a sense of the pianistic marvel that Rachmaninoff was. There are “tons” of notes and few moments of rest for the soloist. There is complex filigree wrapped around melodic lines to a degree that becomes characteristic of Rachmaninoff’s style. Few people would mistake it for the work of another composer. For all its complexity and activity, there are also moments of simplicity, such as in the opening of the second movement, where the piano part weaves a beautiful duet with flute and clarinet solos.

The **first movement** begins mysteriously with the pianist playing soft, deep, rich chords, like distant tolling bells, before breaking into sweeping arpeggios that accompany the first theme, chant-like, dark, and moody, introduced by the orchestra. Eventually, the pianist takes up the theme, ending with rhythmic chords in the piano and orchestra.

The mood shifts with the emergence of a beautiful contrasting theme in the piano. It’s one of Rachmaninoff’s characteristic “romantic” tunes with an ascending and falling arch and a prototype of music popularized by Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s. The development section commences with an orchestral interlude restating the opening theme, but now with a rhythmic, march-like accompaniment. The tempo becomes faster with the piano’s entrance. With increasing speed, the pianist tackles the virtuosic passages that culminate in pounding chords in both hands. A flourish up and down the keyboard leads into the recapitulation. Rachmaninoff transforms the opening theme as the pianist and orchestra combine in a majestic statement. There is little let-up for the pianist for the rest of the movement, which ends with three resolute chords.

The **second movement** is one of Rachmaninoff’s perfect structures, beginning and ending with a sustained melody and gentle accompaniment. The use of the flute and then clarinet in duet with the piano is memorable. At one point, the piano takes on the melody with the simplest of textures as both hands play in unison. A more animated middle section leads to a brief piano cadenza that returns us to the restatement of the opening.

The **third movement**, marked *Allegro scherzando* (fast and playfully), starts softly and builds quickly to a fortissimo and an eruption from the pianist covering the entire keyboard. The pianist’s fast fingerwork and high energy characterize this opening theme. Once it has run its course, the solo piano introduces a new chordal texture accompanied by sweeping arpeggios in the left hand. The music slows and becomes quiet, and then the orchestra re-enters with what may be one of the most famous themes in classical music. The piano has its turn with the theme. There’s a slow, almost sneaky transition returning to the *scherzando* opening, now fully developed with brilliant chords and fast fingerwork by the pianist. The romantic tune returns in a new key, followed by more flashy pianism that accelerates with increasing difficulties.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

continued

Rachmaninoff's compositions and performances strove towards what he described as "the point." According to his friend Marietta Shaginyan, "This moment must arrive with the sound and sparkle of a ribbon snapped at the end of a race – it must seem a liberation from the last material obstacle, the last barrier between truth and its expression." Who would argue that in this concerto it is not at that glorious moment when the "big tune" returns for the final time in the third movement when we hear it with the full lushness of the strings and the rhythmic thrust of accompanying chords in the piano.

Following this apotheosis of the "big tune," it's a dash to the ending. Rachmaninoff finishes the piece with his name in its characteristic rhythmic signature.

The concerto is scored for a piano soloist, double winds, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, and strings. It has become one of the most beloved of all piano concertos. Its fame was cemented for at least one generation when Buddy Kaye and Ted Mossman used the finale's second theme for a hit song, "Full Moon and Empty Arms," made famous by Perry Como, Frank Sinatra, and others. Later, Eric Carmen scored a hit in 1976 when he adapted the tune from the second movement for his "All By Myself (Don't wanna be all by myself)."

Rachmaninoff recorded his piano concertos with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Leopold Stokowski.

As you listen to Rachmaninoff's Concerto, reflect on the fact that you are sitting close to the spot where Rachmaninoff himself performed in Wichita. Brad Snelling, a Goddard native, son of the late piano teacher Joyce Snelling Grubbs, and now a librarian at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota, recently sent me clippings of articles from the *Wichita Eagle* reviewing Rachmaninoff's Wichita recitals on January 30, 1933, and January 15, 1940, at the New Arcadia Theater, a 1,900-seat venue and part of the Expo/Forum building on South Water Street where Century II now sits. Large crowds, including many of Wichita's music students, filled the Hall to see and hear the famous pianist described by an *Eagle* writer as "a strange figure, tall, slender, long-armed and long-legged." At his first recital, Rachmaninoff regaled the audience with virtuosic showpieces by Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, and his original compositions. He finished with five encores before greeting the audience and signing autographs onstage. The recital was declared "one of the really striking musical events in Wichita's history."

The *Eagle* reviewer, identified by the initials F. P., wrote of the 1940 recital, "The outstanding impression which Rachmaninoff leaves on even the most casual concertgoer is one of utter economy and ease of movement. So effortless, yet masterful, in every motion of the maestro at the keyboard, the perfect result seems almost unbelievable."

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18

continued

Most veteran concertgoers will be familiar with Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. If you're a newcomer to the Symphony or wish to review the piece, here's a YouTube link to a performance by Yuja Wang with Valery Gergiev conducting the Mariinsky Theater Orchestra. And yes, if you look closely, that is a toothpick Gergiev conducts with instead of the usual baton!

<https://youtu.be/znXWfmfPh8E?si=gwRyzvotwrvs6j4p>

And for those who want to travel down Memory Lane, here's a recording of Frank Sinatra singing "Full Moon and Empty Arms" (1945) by Buddy Kaye and Ted Mossman, which they arranged from the "big tune" in the third movement.

<https://youtu.be/znXWfmfPh8E?si=gwRyzvotwrvs6j4p>

Check out Eric Carmen's "All By Myself" (1976), based on the main theme of the second movement. It still appears occasionally on local radio stations playing hits of the 70s.

<https://youtu.be/znXWfmfPh8E?si=gwRyzvotwrvs6j4p>

What would Rachmaninoff have thought?