

**PROGRAM**

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIRST SEASON

**Chicago Symphony Orchestra**

**Riccardo Muti** Music Director

**Pierre Boulez** Helen Regenstein Conductor Emeritus

**Yo-Yo Ma** Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

**Bank of America**   
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Thursday, November 17, 2011, at 8:00

Saturday, November 19, 2011, at 8:00

**Semyon Bychkov** conductor

**Katia Labèque** piano

**Marielle Labèque** piano

**Poulenc**

Concerto in D Minor for Two Pianos and Orchestra

Allegro ma non troppo

Larghetto

Finale: Allegro molto

KATIA LABÈQUE

MARIELLE LABÈQUE

**INTERMISSION**

**Strauss**

*Ein Heldenleben*, Op. 40

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Saturday's concert is sponsored by Tiffany & Co.

This program is partially supported by grants from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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## Francis Poulenc

Born January 7, 1899, Paris, France.

Died January 30, 1963, Paris, France.

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### Concerto in D Minor for Two Pianos and Orchestra

**W**innaretta Singer, armed with money from her father's sewing machine fortune, commissioned Francis Poulenc to write this concerto. Better known by her fancy married name, the princess Edmond de Polignac hosted one of Paris's most celebrated salons, where many of the early twentieth century's artistic giants regularly gathered. In time, she commissioned works from Stravinsky, Fauré, Ravel, Falla, Debussy (he called her Madame Machine à coudre [Madame Sewing Machine]), and two concertos from Poulenc. (The Chicago Symphony performed Poulenc's other Polignac score—the Concerto for Organ, Strings, and Timpani—in 2002.)

Poulenc was no stranger to Parisian high society. He was born into a wealthy family and grew up in the city center, near the Élysée Palace. His father ran the huge Rhône-Poulenc pharmaceutical firm (his family name was as well known as Winnaretta Singer's in business circles), and his mother came from a long line of native Parisians. He started studying the piano with his mother at the age of five, and later took lessons from Ricardo Viñes, the great pianist and friend of Debussy and Ravel. He soon began to meet the artistic celebrities of the day, including Satie, Cocteau, and Stravinsky. He missed the scandalous premiere of

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#### COMPOSED

1932

#### FIRST PERFORMANCE

September 5, 1932, Venice, Italy. Francis Poulenc, Jacques Février, pianists; Désiré Defauw conducting

#### FIRST CSO

#### PERFORMANCE

March 19, 1942, Orchestra Hall. Ethel Bartlett, Rae Robertson, pianists; Hans Lange conducting

#### MOST RECENT

#### CSO PERFORMANCE

October 30, 2001, Orchestra Hall. Guy Livingston, William Eddins, pianists; William Eddins conducting

#### INSTRUMENTATION

two solo pianos, flute and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones and tuba, side drum, military drum, snare drum, bass drum, castanets, tambourine, triangle, strings

#### APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME

19 minutes

*The Rite of Spring* in 1913 (he was just fourteen at the time), but he caught up with it the following year and was intoxicated by Stravinsky's music. In 1917, he attended the historic opening of Satie's *Parade*, with sets and costumes by Picasso. It was at the premiere of Falla's *Master Peter's Puppet Show* in the princess de Polignac's home that Poulenc met the pioneering harpsichordist Wanda Landowska in 1923. The dazzling *Concert champêtre* he wrote for Landowska four years later may have convinced the princess to commission Poulenc to write another concerto, this one for two pianos.

To prepare for the princess's assignment, Poulenc played through concertos by Mozart and Liszt and acquainted himself with Ravel's two recently completed piano concertos (both the Concerto for the Left Hand and the Concerto in G major were premiered in January 1932, just months before Poulenc began composing the two-piano concerto). He and his friend Jacques Février, with whom he would premiere his own new concerto in September, even gave an informal performance of Ravel's Concerto in G major at the home of the princess's niece by marriage, Marie-Blanche de Polignac.

**P**oulenc's two-piano concerto is a delightful confection, written with apparent ease and obvious joy over the summer of 1932. It's a work of sparkling transparency, filled with crystalline piano writing, and scored with a keen ear for

brilliance and bite with an orchestra of classical proportions. (This characteristic Poulenc trait must have pleased the princess. She later recalled that she "had the impression that, after Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, the days of big orchestras were over, and that it would be delightful to return to a small orchestra of well-chosen players and instruments.")

The first movement, written in a casual approximation of sonata form, is mostly witty bravura, colored throughout by the sound of two pianos pouring out a steady stream of notes. The ethereal, shimmering music near the end of the movement was inspired by the exotic sounds of the Balinese gamelan ensemble Poulenc heard at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris. The slow movement begins in obvious imitation of a Mozart *andante*, but quickly updates itself to the Paris of the 1930s, with its dance-hall songs and sentimentality of a kind that Mozart never knew. The finale, another *perpetuum mobile* for the two soloists, is saucy, playful, lighthearted, and always charming.

Despite his early enthusiasm for the radical, rebellious composers of Paris, Poulenc was essentially a



Winnaretta Singer

traditionalist, although one with wit and a healthy streak of irreverence. “I am not the kind of musician who makes harmonic innovations, like Igor, Ravel, or Debussy,” he later said, insisting that “there is a place for new music that is content with using other people’s chords.” Even a strict modernist such as the young Elliott Carter, writing in *Modern Music* in 1938, found the concerto convincing despite what he called its pastiche of styles, “because of its great verve, which with Poulenc’s remarkable sensitivity to harmonic and orchestral sonorities, ends by captivating the most stubborn listener.”

The concerto was premiered in Venice, where the princess maintained a magnificent house on the Grand Canal, its great halls filled with pianos. Like her Parisian salon, it regularly drew celebrities and artists and, in September 1932, Poulenc shared the Palazzo Polignac with Falla and Artur Rubinstein. The first performance of the two-piano concerto was an unforgettable success, but Poulenc would always remember the morning, when, on the spur of the moment, he and Rubinstein decided to play *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* together for a stunned and ecstatic Falla. ■

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Please turn off or silence all personal electronic devices (pagers, watches, telephones, digital assistants).



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## Richard Strauss

Born June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany.

Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch, Germany.

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### *Ein Heldenleben*, Op. 40

In 1898, after lending music of lasting brilliance to heroes taken from the pages of Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and Cervantes, and to two great legendary characters—Don Juan and Till Eulenspiegel—Richard Strauss could think of no other subject more suitable than himself. At the top of his last great tone poem he wrote “*Ein Heldenleben*” (a hero’s life, or a heroic life), leaving little doubt of the title character’s identity. As Strauss told Romain Rolland, “I do not see why I should not compose a symphony about myself; I find myself quite as interesting as Napoleon or Alexander.”

The mention of Napoleon was no coincidence, for *Ein Heldenleben* was Strauss’s response to the *Eroica*, Beethoven’s Napoleon-inspired symphony—“admittedly without a funeral march, but yet in E-flat, with lots of horns, which are always a yardstick of heroism.”

Those who knew Strauss thought him an unlikely hero. There was nothing about him—apart from his own dazzling music—to compare with the bold and fearless character who throws open the first page of this score and then holds our attention for one enormous paragraph of music—the 116 measures of nonstop orchestral exhibitionism

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#### COMPOSED

1897–December 1898

#### FIRST PERFORMANCE

March 3, 1899, Frankfurt, Germany. The composer conducting

#### FIRST CSO PERFORMANCE

March 9, 1900, Auditorium Theatre (U.S. premiere). Theodore Thomas conducting

#### MOST RECENT

#### CSO PERFORMANCE

December 6, 2008, Orchestra Hall. Bernard Haitink conducting

#### INSTRUMENTATION

three flutes and piccolo, four oboes and english horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, two piccolo trumpets and three trumpets, three trombones and two tubas, timpani, tam-tam, triangle, cymbals, snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, two harps, strings (including a prominent violin solo)

#### APPROXIMATE

#### PERFORMANCE TIME

46 minutes

#### CSO RECORDINGS

1954. Fritz Reiner conducting. RCA

1990. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Erato

2008. Bernard Haitink conducting. CSO Resound

that Strauss labels The Hero. The moment of silence that follows is broken by the squabbling of the woodwinds, introducing The Hero's Adversaries. This is Strauss's depiction of his critics, and it is rendered with such hatred (Strauss requests "snarling" oboes and "hissing" cymbals) that we would think he had never received a good review in his life. (In fact, aside from his first opera *Guntram*, Strauss probably had read more glowing reviews of his music than any major composer of the day.)

Next we meet Strauss's wife, Pauline Strauss de Ahna, an accomplished soprano who sings here with the voice of a solo violin. Richard had met Pauline de Ahna in the summer of 1887, when his uncle suggested he give lessons to the neighbors' daughter, a young woman with a generous voice and a boisterous temperament. She needed coaching and discipline; she found romance instead. Pauline was a complex woman—wildly impetuous and often fractious and stubborn—but Richard quickly realized he couldn't live without her. She gave him advice and encouragement, and she was the only critic who mattered to him. "She is the spice that keeps me going," the composer later told their children. As Strauss admitted, Pauline was a "very complicated" subject to portray, "different each minute from what she was a minute earlier." The Hero's Companion, as Strauss calls this mercurial section, is a full-length portrait, and it is not always complimentary. Certainly Pauline noticed that her

husband painted himself in a warm, flattering light, while "her" violin solo is marked, at various points: "flippant," "angry," and "nagging." But no one who knew Pauline ever took issue with Richard's appraisal, though many wondered why she put up with such treatment. (Years later, when she was portrayed in an even less complimentary way in the opera *Intermezzo*, she told the soprano Lotte Lehmann, who sang her role, "I don't give a damn.") Nevertheless, theirs was a great love match, and sumptuous love music soon overpowers her voice and encompasses the entire orchestra.

The hero's adversaries again raise their sharp voices, and he prepares to attack. The Battle Scene is noisy and thrillingly chaotic for a very long stretch, and for many years, this was one of the most notoriously difficult passages in all music; the technical advances of the ensuing decades have scarcely softened its impact. Gradually the hero is strengthened by thoughts of love and he rises above his adversaries. A broad ascent to victory is marked by the return of the opening theme, now at full cry, and the *Eroica* horns Strauss promised. (The way they dart around the big tune is particularly bold.) At the climax, the horns let loose with the great, vaulting signature tune from *Don Juan*, prompting the appearance of other themes from *Don Juan* and *Also sprach Zarathustra* before the music gradually fades.

In a quiet daydream (a gently swaying barcarole), Strauss recalls music from all his previous tone poems as well as many of his songs,

and even (or perhaps most pointedly) the failed *Guntram*. These are The Hero's Works of Peace. ("Of course I haven't taken part in any battles," Strauss wrote to his publisher years later, "but the only way I could express works of peace was through themes of my own.") The critics reappear briefly; Strauss rises up against them in one last tirade. The final section is labeled The Hero's Escape from the World and Fulfillment. The music now slips into a simple pastorale, with an english horn calling out over a quiet drum tap. The violins repeatedly hint at a new theme, which finally rises from total silence—a melody so noble and disarming that we do not recognize it as the same sequence of notes first uttered rather ineloquently by Pauline. It's one of Strauss's greatest themes, all the more moving for coming so near the end, like a grand benediction. There is one last, disruptive assault from the critics, and then the loving voice of Pauline, obviously quite undone by some of her husband's most sublime music.

*Ein Heldenleben* wasn't the last of Strauss's family portraits. Five years later, with the *Domestic* Symphony, he became the twentieth century's first great realist painter, depicting life at home with Pauline—bathing the baby, making love, quarrelling—with surgical precision and in painstaking detail. (Strauss boasted that he had reached the point where he could differentiate musically between a knife and a fork.) And with the operatic comedy *Intermezzo*, even Strauss wondered if he had gone too far,

blurring the line between public and private in ways that made audiences uncomfortable and angered his own family.

Today, of course, it's easier to view *Ein Heldenleben* as an innocent orchestral fantasy—simply to enjoy its abundant musical pleasures. Strauss's hero and his companion are still vividly real, but they aren't real-life people to us. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich wrote, "The consummate artist conjures up the image of a human being that will live on in the richness of its emotional texture when the sitter and his vanities have long been forgotten." Both Richard and Pauline Strauss have now been dead for more than half a century. Among the dozens of Strausses in the Munich phone book, there is still a Richard—the composer's grandson, born twenty-eight years after *Heldenleben* premiered. Another grandson, Christian, lives down the road from the Strauss family house in Garmisch. They are the only people who could conceivably care how their family is portrayed in *Heldenleben*. For the rest of us, this music holds the same fascination as any great portrait—for a few moments we feel we actually know these people, we enjoy the thrill of peering into another time and place, and then we return to our own lives. ■

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**Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.**