Riccardo Muti Conductor
Kirill Gerstein Piano
Chicago Symphony Chorus
Duain Wolfe Director

Prokofiev
Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25 (Classical)
Allegro con brio
Larghetto
Gavotte: Non troppo allegro
Finale: Molto vivace

Scriabin
Prometheus, The Poem of Fire, Op. 60

INTERMISSION

Beethoven
Coriolan Overture, Op. 62

Beethoven
Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93
Allegro vivace con brio
Allegretto scherzando
Tempo di menuetto
Allegro vivace

This evening’s performance is generously sponsored by Margot and Josef Lakonishok.

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Hector Berlioz was unusual among great composers because he couldn’t play the piano and therefore didn’t compose at the keyboard. Igor Stravinsky, on the other hand, said that every single note he wrote was first tested at the piano. During Stravinsky’s lifetime, music began to explore sonic worlds that the piano couldn’t begin to suggest, and composers increasingly turned to the instrument only for occasional reference, like an old, out-of-print book.

Sergei Prokofiev composed this Classical Symphony to try his ability in writing away from the keyboard. Like most composers who also are virtuoso pianists, Prokofiev regularly worked at the piano. When he decided to spend the summer of 1917 in a small village near Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg), removed from the advances of war, he intentionally rented a place with no piano, suspecting that “themetic material composed without a piano was often better.”

The surprising decision to write a symphony in the style of Haydn was, perhaps, suggested by the simple fact that Prokofiev didn’t regularly play the piano works by Haydn or Mozart—their music was, therefore, in his head, not in his fingers. And the classical style, with its lucid textures, textbook forms, and straightforward harmonic procedures, made it easier to work without his familiar crutch.

Prokofiev had studied Haydn’s music with Nikolai Tcherepnin, and he felt there was still something left to be done in the style:

It seemed to me that if Haydn had lived to our day he would have retained his own style of writing while absorbing something of the new. That was the kind of symphony I wanted to write. And when I saw that it was beginning to jell, I called it Classical Symphony—first because it was simpler, and second just for fun, “to tease the geese,” and with the secret hope that eventually the symphony would become a classic.

Prokofiev begins with familiar materials. In fact, the opening bars—scored for pairs of winds, trumpets, and horns, with timpani and strings; launched firmly in D major; and marked allegro—could almost be from Haydn’s own pen. But in measure seven, the violins begin to play five notes to the beat. And when, two bars later, a repetition of the opening phrase slips down into C major, we are unmistakably jolted from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. From that point on, Prokofiev continues to throw in harmonic twists and extra beats where we least expect them.
The Larghetto is a perfectly lovely slow movement, with its melody born in the stratosphere, where many of Prokofiev's (and none of Haydn's) themes dwell. The pointedly brief third movement is pure Prokofiev (for one thing, Haydn wrote minuets, not gavottes), with its entire middle section grounded over one unchanging harmony. Haydn surely would have loved Prokofiev's finale, with its high spirits and good humor. (The way the recapitulation arrives out of the blue is one of Haydn's oldest tricks.)

Prokofiev's first symphony was considerably successful, and, as time proved, he had created a classic. A month after the first performance of the Classical Symphony, Prokofiev was granted permission to come to the United States. He made his first appearance in this country in November 1918, playing a solo recital in New York City. The following month he came to Chicago to play his First Piano Concerto with Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony and to lead the Orchestra in the first American performances of his Scythian Suite (which Riccardo Muti and the Orchestra played here in October). His success encouraged the directors of the Chicago Opera to offer to produce his new Love for Three Oranges, which he had begun on the boat while crossing the Atlantic. Two weeks before the world premiere of the opera, in December 1921 at the Auditorium Theatre, Prokofiev returned to Orchestra Hall to conduct the Chicago Symphony's first performances of his Classical Symphony.

Sergei Prokofiev appeared with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra numerous times between 1918 and 1937, both as piano soloist and guest conductor. He was soloist in the U.S. premiere of his First Piano Concerto in 1918 as well as the world premiere of his Third Piano Concerto in 1921, and he also appeared in his Second and Fifth concertos. As conductor, Prokofiev led the Orchestra in the U.S. premieres of his Scythian Suite (1918), Divertimento (1930), and the first suite from the ballet Romeo and Juliet (1937). He also conducted his First Symphony (Classical), and suites from his ballets Le pas d’acier and Chout and his opera The Gambler.

Frank Villella is the director of the Rosenthal Archives. For more information regarding the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s anniversary season, please visit cso.org/125moments.

Composers in Chicago

CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

THIS WEEK

SERGE PROKOFIEFF

COMPOSER-CONDUCTOR
and PIANO SOLOIST

Serge Prokofieff is the latest of Russian composers to draw the eye of the musical world. He was born in Southern Russia, and although but twenty-seven, he presents one of the most remarkable figures in contemporary music. He was awarded the Rubinstein Prize at the Imperial Academy of Music in Petrograd, and diplomas for composition, conducting and piano playing. Five or six years ago he found himself somewhat suddenly the subject of considerable discussion in Russia, and his extremely original musical ideas became the talk of Petrograd’s studios, and occupied considerable space in the newspapers.

Program biography for Sergei Prokofiev’s debut appearances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in December 1918
From his youth, when he interpreted the significance of his birth on Christmas Day as a sign that he should do great things, Scriabin believed he would play a decisive role in the history of music. But his early death at the age of forty-three cut short his career just as he was venturing into pioneer territory with works such as Prometheus and the unfinished Mysterium. Like many composers of a less revolutionary bent, Scriabin started his musical life as a pianist and his composing career writing only piano pieces. In 1884, he began to study piano with Nicolai Zverev, who had already accepted Sergei Rachmaninov as a pupil. The two students became good friends—Scriabin was older by just one year—though they were sometimes later portrayed as rivals once their musical ambitions ventured in different directions. At the time they met, both Scriabin and Rachmaninov were beginning to compose piano pieces for themselves to play. In 1888, Scriabin entered the Moscow Conservatory, where he excelled equally as a pianist and composer. When he graduated in 1892, he was awarded the second gold medal in composition (Rachmaninov took first place, for his opera Aleko).

After Scriabin left the conservatory, he began a career as a concert pianist. While his recital programs often included music by Schumann and Liszt, two composers who also started out as pianists, Scriabin’s particular favorite was Chopin. That influence is reflected not only in his repertoire, but in the titles and nature of the music he wrote at the time—sets of preludes, impromptus, etudes, and even Polish mazurkas. To study the first nineteen opus numbers in Scriabin’s catalog, all pieces for piano solo, one would never predict the important orchestral music that would quickly follow.

The move away from writing solo piano music was a tough and decisive step for all the pianist-composers of the nineteenth century, but Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms were already mature artists with individual and recognizable styles when they stopped composing exclusively for the piano. But when Scriabin wrote a piano concerto in 1896—the first of his works to call for orchestra—he had not yet discovered the voice that would ultimately make his music unique. The Chopinesque concerto scarcely hints at the direction Scriabin’s career would take. Then, three years later, he began his first symphony, and a new world of complex sounds and philosophical ideas open up before him. He was now on the path to becoming, as the novelist Boris Pasternak later said of him, “more than just a composer.” Within a year after
he completed his first symphony, he eagerly began and quickly finished a second, as if he had found his true calling at last. But the traditional form of the symphony would only briefly satisfy Scriabin’s musical ambitions. All three of the works he called symphony were composed within a five-year period, and, already with the third, finished in 1904, Scriabin felt the need for a descriptive subtitle, *The Divine Poem*, recognizing that his ideas were beginning to outgrow the symphonic model. He did not even bother to label the two grand orchestral pieces he wrote afterward, *The Poem of Ecstasy*, completed in 1908, and *Prometheus*, which he began that same year, as symphonies. Both of those works are single-movement tone poems, if any conventional title can do justice to their extraordinary form and substance, although *Prometheus*, with its significant and virtuosic solo piano part, is partly indebted to the model of the piano concerto as well.

Around the turn of the century, Scriabin fell under the spell of philosophical and mystical ideas which dominated his thoughts for the rest of his life and completely changed the music he wrote. Scriabin’s mature style is adventurous (he and Schoenberg both abandoned tonality by 1910), idiosyncratic, and visionary. In his very last works, including *Prometheus* and the projected *Mysterium*, he seems to be venturing into the great unknown, where music and color are closely linked, and where “art must unite with philosophy and religion in an indivisible whole to form a new gospel . . .”

After completing his Fifth Piano Sonata in 1907—one of his last pieces to carry a key signature—Scriabin broke with tonality. *Prometheus*, the one-movement work for orchestra and solo piano he began the following year, is written according to a new system based on a single harmony, the so-called mystic chord. (It is sometimes also referred to as the Prometheus chord, since it initially appeared prominently in this work; Scriabin first used it fleetingly in his Fifth Piano Sonata, but the chord is all-pervasive in *Prometheus.*) This one chord is the pitch source for all melodic and harmonic material in the piece. Scriabin remarked, “The melody is dissolved harmony; the harmony is a vertically compressed melody.” This gives *Prometheus* an unusually tight construction. “There is not a wasted note,” Scriabin said. “Not a wedge where a mosquito could get in and bite!” It is this very uniformity of *Prometheus*’s harmonic language that makes the final, unexpected F-sharp major triad so unexpected—like a sound from another world. After 1908, Scriabin was single-minded in his devotion to the implications of the mystic chord—it provides the foundation for all of his final compositions, including *Prometheus* and the last five of his ten piano sonatas. Scriabin in effect had created a new system of tonal organization to replace traditional harmony.

While composing *Prometheus*, Scriabin grew ever more fascinated with synesthesia—especially the link between color and music, which was very much in the air at the time. In 1909, while Scriabin was working on *Prometheus*, the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky wrote a play titled *The Yellow Sound*, which was published in *The Blue Rider* in 1912, alongside an analysis of Scriabin’s work. (Kandinsky translated the article himself, although, fearing he did not understand all the
musical terminology, he asked Schoenberg to look it over.) In 1910, Schoenberg began *Die glückliche Hand*, a music drama that calls for an intricate play of colored lighting synchronized with the action.

Scriabin was introduced to the idea of a correspondence between music and color as early as 1902 by Rimsky-Korsakov. The two composers shared many opinions on the subject, including their dismay with Wagner’s Magic Fire Music from *The Ring*. “He uses the wrong tonality,” Scriabin said, “and repeats the music in different keys!” (They both thought it should be in G.) Scriabin eventually developed his own music-color wheel—he and Rimsky ultimately agreed only on the identity of yellow and D—and conceived *Prometheus* with a part for an imaginary instrument, a color keyboard which would shower the stage in colors, changing as often as every measure. Alexander Mozer, a professor of electrical engineering in Moscow, built a color organ to suit Scriabin’s specifications, but it was not used until 1915, after the composer’s death, and then with highly unsatisfactory results. *Prometheus* also calls for a wordless chorus in the final measures, singing a sequence of color-coordinated vowels. But even without Scriabin’s projected colors, the work was immediately recognized as provocative and visionary. When the Chicago Symphony gave the U.S. premiere in 1915, the fact that the piece was hissed by the respectable Friday afternoon audience only proved, according to one critic, “the dynamic vitality of the composer.”

In classical mythology, Prometheus is the titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, providing them with the sacred flame of wisdom. For his defiance, Prometheus was chained to a rock, where an eagle plucked out his liver. Scriabin was strongly attracted to this great rebellious figure whose fire made man’s vision possible and equal to that of the gods, and it inspired some of his finest and most impassioned music.

Scriabin’s final years after *Prometheus* were consumed with drafting *Mysterium*, a vast and visionary work intended for performance in an Indian temple and synthesizing all the arts and senses—sound, color, scent, singing, and dancing all joined in the ultimate expression of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerke*, the complete artwork. He finished the text for part one, and at his death left copious musical sketches that include the use of chords containing all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. Scriabin wanted no audience, only participants, in *Mysterium*, and he envisioned that a performance could transform humanity and provide “the celebration of a collective joy.”
Richard Wagner was right to point out that Beethoven might as well have written this overture for Shakespeare’s tragedy *Coriolanus* as for the play by Heinrich von Collin. Unlike Wagner and most concertgoers today, Beethoven knew both plays. He admired and loved Shakespeare enormously. But Collin was a friend of his, and his *Coriolan* had enjoyed considerable popularity in the years immediately following its first performance in 1802. Beethoven was inspired, either by friendship or theater, to put something of the story into music.

Beethoven didn’t write his overture for a theatrical performance; he was writing for an audience that probably knew Collin’s play but was not attending an actual production. The first performance was given at one of two concerts at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz, where it was overshadowed by the premieres of the more genial Fourth Symphony and the Fourth Piano Concerto. The overture and the play were united just once in Beethoven’s lifetime, in April 1807, at the Burgtheater in Vienna, apparently without success.

The *Coriolan* Overture is terse and strongly knit; it is as compact as anything Beethoven had written at the time. Beethoven finds enormous power in C minor, his favorite minor key. (Sketches for his Fifth Symphony, in the same key, were already well advanced at the time.) As in his *Leonore* Overture no. 3, finished the year before, he understood how to manipulate the outlines of sonata form to accommodate human drama. (Here, only the second theme appears in the recapitulation.)

Wagner described Beethoven’s overture as a musical counterpart to the turning point in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. Many listeners have heard, in its tightly worded argument, the conflict between Coriolanus, the exiled leader who marches against his own people, and his mother Volumnia, who pleads for mercy until her son finally yields. The main themes readily lend themselves to this reading—the first fierce and determined, the second earnest and imploring. In the play, Coriolanus commits suicide; Beethoven’s music disintegrates at the end. Beethoven surely identified with Coriolanus’s lonely pride, for it marked every day of his own life. And, although his tough public image and brilliantly triumphant music argue otherwise, we now know that he, too, fought recurring suicidal tendencies.

**COMPOSED**

1807

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

March 1807; Vienna, Austria

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**

February 12 & 13, 1892, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting

July 4, 1936, Ravinia Festival. Ernest Ansermet conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**

July 14, 1979, Ravinia Festival. James Levine conducting

May 10, 11, 12 & 15, 2007, Orchestra Hall. Bernard Haitink conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**

two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**

8 minutes

**CSO RECORDINGS**

1958. Fritz Reiner conducting. CSO *(From the Archives, vol. 17: Beethoven)*

1959. Fritz Reiner conducting. RCA

In a life characterized by difficulties—with people, work, romance, and more—1812 may well have been the most difficult year Beethoven ever had. In any case, the toll was great: in October, shortly after he finished his Eighth Symphony, Beethoven sank into a serious depression, finding creativity a tiresome effort. Over the next two years, he wrote only the two cello sonatas, op. 102 and a handful of occasional pieces.

The main problem of 1812 involved an unknown woman, who has come to be known as the “Immortal Beloved.” Conjecture about her identity is one of the favorite games of Beethoven scholarship. (In his watershed Beethoven biography, Maynard Solomon suggests Amalie Brentano, who is the most plausible.) The evidence is slight—essentially little more than the astonishing letter Beethoven wrote on July 6 and 7, which was discovered among his papers after his death. It’s Beethoven’s only letter to a woman that uses the informal German du, and, in its impassioned, unsparing tone, it tells us much about the composer, if nothing at all about the woman in question. This wasn’t the last time Beethoven would find misery and longing where he sought romance and domestic harmony, but it’s the most painful case we have record of, and it certainly helped to convince him that he would remain alone—and lonely—for life. The diary he began in late 1812 finds him despondent at the failure of his relationships and more determined than ever in his single-minded dedication to music. It also admits thoughts of suicide.

Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony quickly followed his Seventh, and, particularly in light of its predecessors, it was misunderstood from the start. When Beethoven was reminded that the Eighth was less successful than his Seventh, he is said to have replied: “That’s because it is so much better.” Contemporary audiences are seldom the best judges of new music, but Beethoven’s latest symphony must have seemed a letdown at the time, for, after symphonies of unexpected power and unprecedented length, with movements that include thunder and lightning and that lead directly from one to another, the Eighth is a throwback to an easier time. The novelty of this symphony, however, is that it manages to do new and unusual things without ever waving the flag of controversy.

The first movement, for example, is of modest dimensions, with a compact first theme—its first two quick phrases like a textbook definition of

**Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93**

**COMPOSED**
1811–12

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**
February 17, 1814; Vienna, Austria

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**
March 25 & 26, 1892, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting
July 5, 1936, Ravinia Festival. Rudolph Ganz conducting

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**
August 2, 2002, Ravinia Festival. Christoph Eschenbach conducting
June 2 & 3, 2010, Orchestra Hall. Bernard Haitink conducting

**INSTRUMENTATION**
two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**
27 minutes

**CSO RECORDINGS**
1958. Fritz Reiner conducting. CSO (From the Archives, vol. 11: The Reiner Era II)
1961. Pierre Monteux conducting. VAI (video)
1966. Kirill Kondrashin conducting. CSO (From the Archives, vol. 17: Beethoven)
1966. Leopold Stokowski conducting. CSO (From the Archives, vol. 5: Guests in the House)
antecedent–consequent (question-and-answer) structure. The next subject comes upon us without warning—unless two quiet measures of expectant chords have tipped us off. The whole moves like lightning, and when we hit the recapitulation—amid thundering *ff* timpani, with a new singing theme high above the original tune, we can hardly believe we’re already home. But just when Beethoven seems about to wrap things up, he launches into a giant epilogue that proves, in no uncertain terms, just how far we’ve come from the predictable, four-square proportions of the works by Haydn and Mozart.

For early nineteenth-century audiences who were just getting used to Beethoven’s spacious slow movements, the second movement of the Eighth was a puzzle, for it’s neither slow nor long. It is also, through no fault of its own, nothing like the second movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, which had been an instant and tremendous hit. The incredible nineteenth-century practice of inserting that beloved slow movement into the Eighth Symphony says more about the tastes of earlier generations than about any supposed deficiencies in Beethoven’s Allegretto. The scherzo that follows isn’t a scherzo at all, but a leisurely, old-world minuet, giving us all the room and relaxation we missed in the Allegretto. As always, there’s method in Beethoven’s madness, though it was often only the madness that got noticed.

In the context of the composer’s personal sorrows of 1812, it’s either astonishing or perfectly predictable—depending on your outlook on human nature—that the finale is one of the funniest pieces of music Beethoven ever wrote. The tone is jovial from the start—a light, ram-bunctious theme—and the first real joke comes at the very end of that theme, when Beethoven tosses out a loud unison *C*-sharp—an odd exclamation point for an *F* major sentence. Many moments of wit follow: tiny whispers that answer bold declarations; gaping pauses when you can’t help but question what will happen next; places where Beethoven seems to enjoy tugging on the rug beneath our feet. But he saves his best punch line for last, and he has been working up to it all along. When that inappropriate *C*-sharp returns one last time—as it was destined to do, given the incontestable logic of Beethoven’s wildest schemes—it’s no longer a stumbling block in an *F* major world, but a gateway to the unlikely key of *F*-sharp minor. It takes some doing to pull us back to terra firma: the trumpets begin by defiantly hammering away on *F*-natural, and Beethoven spends the last pages endlessly turning somersaults through *F* major, until memories of any other sounds are banished for good.

Phillip Huscher has been the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1987.