Program

Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Riccardo Muti Zell Music Director
Yo-Yo Ma Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

Thursday, March 24, 2016, at 8:00
Friday, March 25, 2016, at 1:30
Saturday, March 26, 2016, at 8:00

Yuri Temirkanov Conductor
Denis Matsuev Piano

Rachmaninov
Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30
Allegro ma non tanto
Intermezzo
Finale

DENIS MATSUEV

INTERMESSION

Brahms
Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73
Allegro non troppo
Adagio non troppo
Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino)
Allegro con spirito

Friday’s performance honors the memory of Elizabeth Hoffman and her generous endowment gift.

This program is partially supported by grants from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts.
Sergei Rachmaninov
Born April 1, 1873, Semyonovo, Russia.
Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California.

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30

Although Rachmaninov’s music is sometimes confused with the treacly romanticism of the Hollywood soundtracks it once inspired, Rachmaninov himself was a serious and aristocratic artist. He was one of the greatest pianists in history—an astonishing virtuoso in the heroic tradition of Liszt—but there was nothing flashy about his stage manner. Rachmaninov was surprisingly somber and remote for a crowd-pleasing superstar. He rarely smiled or courted the audience, and even his close-cropped haircut, of a kind that is ubiquitous today but was highly suspect at the time (like that of a convict, as the Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin said), suggested a stern presence. (Chaliapin also scolded him for his curt, peremptory bows.) Much later, Stravinsky called him “a six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl.”

Rachmaninov would have become famous had he done nothing but concertize. But his true aspiration was to become a composer. At the Moscow Conservatory, his teacher Nikolai Zverev encouraged him to stick to the piano instead of writing music, but Rachmaninov tried his hand at composing some piano pieces and an orchestral scherzo, and he even started an opera, Esmeralda. Unable to choose between composition and performance, Rachmaninov ultimately decided to pursue both, eventually becoming a fine conductor as well. In 1889, the year he and Zverev parted ways, he sketched and abandoned a piano concerto, but the one he began the following year is his first major work—the one that became his op. 1. This is the score that made his name as a composer, and it was completed in a rush of passion and elation, with Rachmaninov working from five in the morning until eight in the evening and scoring the last two movements in just two-and-a-half days. It would be ten years, however, before Rachmaninov would finish his Second Piano Concerto, which quickly became his greatest hit and his calling card. He played it with the Chicago Symphony when he made his debut in Orchestra Hall on December 3, 1909—the first of his eight appearances with the Orchestra.

Although Chicago didn’t get to hear it, by then Rachmaninov had written a third piano concerto, tailor-made for his first North American tour in late 1909.
Rachmaninov introduced the work in New York on November 28, with Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony. He played it there again in January, with Gustav Mahler conducting the New York Philharmonic (only weeks after Mahler’s own First Symphony, in its American premiere, was a flop). Rachmaninov was bowled over by Mahler’s meticulous rehearsal method—“the accompaniment,” Rachmaninov recalled, “which is rather complicated, had been practiced to the point of perfection”—by his attention to detail, and by his refusal to stop working until he was satisfied (rehearsal ran an hour overtime). The New York Times thought Rachmaninov’s playing occasion ally lacked brilliance, but that “the orchestral accompaniment was outstanding.” The New York Herald, somewhat half-heartedly, called the work one of the “most interesting piano concertos of recent years,” but noted that “its great length and extreme difficulties bar it from performances by any but pianists of exceptional technical powers”—an assessment that still holds today. (Rachmaninov played the concerto when he appeared with the Chicago Symphony for the second time, in January 1920.)

Although in 1909 Rachmaninov was known as one of the great piano virtuosos, he began his new concerto not with solo fireworks, but with something of almost Mozartean clarity and understatement—a discreet accompaniment to which the piano adds a quiet, simple melody in bare octaves. It’s as plain and haunting as chant, and although Rachmaninov told musicologist Joseph Yasser that the theme came to him “ready-made,” Yasser wasn’t surprised when he later discovered a strikingly similar Russian liturgical melody. Rachmaninov said that he thought of the piano theme as a kind of song, and he took pains to find an accompaniment “that would not muffle this singing.” (He was understandably delighted with the care Mahler lavished on the orchestral part.) As the movement progresses, both melody and accompaniment are explored and developed at length, as is a lyrical second theme. The climax of the movement is the magnificent solo cadenza, as long and as tough as any in the repertoire, which takes the place of a formal recapitulation. (The piano writing is so symphonic, complex, and multifaceted that we barely notice that the orchestra has temporarily dropped out.)

In the middle-movement intermezzo—a curiously “light” title for music so big and involved—the piano’s entrance is both unmistakable and disruptive, for it takes control with its first phrase and leads the music in new directions (eventually settling in D-flat, an unexpected destination for a concerto in D minor). A “new” waltz theme, introduced by the clarinet and bassoon, over fancy piano filigree, is a cleverly disguised version—almost note for note—of the concerto’s monastic opening melody.

The finale, which begins fully formed while the intermezzo is still finishing up, is the kind of virtuosic tour de force Rachmaninov’s fans expected in 1909 and courageous pianists still love delivering today. It’s also richly inventive, with a fantastic, playful scherzando (in E-flat!) as a mid-movement diversion. The ending, predictably, is designed to test the limits of virtuosity and bring down the house.

Throughout Rachmaninov’s life, it was fashionable—if not in fact honorable in progressive music circles—to disparage his music. Rachmaninov had always worried that by splitting his time among playing the piano, conducting, and composing, he had spread himself too thin. “I have chased three hares,” he once said. “Can I be certain that I have captured one?” For many years, Rachmaninov’s stature as a pianist was undisputed. But by the time of his death in 1943 (he appeared with the Chicago Symphony for the last time just six weeks before he died), he had been written off as an old-fashioned composer—hopelessly sentimental, out of touch, and irrelevant. As Virgil Thomson told the young playwright Edward Albee in 1948, “It is really extraordinary, after all, that a composer so famous should have enjoyed so little the esteem of his fellow composers.” The sacrosanct Grove Dictionary of Music
Sergei Rachmaninov made his first appearances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on December 3 and 4, 1909, conducting his Isle of the Dead and performing as soloist in his Second Piano Concerto with Frederick Stock conducting. For more than thirty years, he regularly appeared in Chicago, both as recitalist and with the Orchestra, performing as soloist in his four concertos and the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini and conducting his Third Symphony and choral symphony The Bells.

Rachmaninov’s final appearances with the Orchestra were on February 11 and 12, 1943, in Beethoven’s First Piano Concerto and his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, under the baton of associate conductor Hans Lange. “Sergei Rachmaninov evoked a series of ovations when he appeared with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at Orchestra Hall last night,” wrote Claudia Cassidy in the Chicago Tribune. “His entrance won standing tribute from orchestra and capacity audience, his Beethoven stirred a storm of grateful applause, and his own Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini ended the concert in a kind of avalanche of cumulative excitement.”

Composers in Chicago

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Orchestra Hall Is Crammed In Tribute to Rachmaninoff

Russian Pianist-Composer Gives Superb Performance of Rhapsody on Paganini

Chicago Sun, February 12, 1943

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.
Within months after the long-awaited premiere of his First Symphony, Brahms produced another one. The two were as different as night and day—logically enough, since the first had taken two decades of struggle and soul-searching and the second was written over a summer holiday. If it truly was Beethoven’s symphonic achievement that stood in Brahms’s way for all those years, nothing seems to have stopped the flow of this new symphony in D major. Brahms had put his fears and worries behind him.

This music was composed at the picture-postcard village of Pörtschach, on the Wörthersee, where Brahms had rented two tiny rooms for his summer holiday (and where he would write his violin concerto the next summer). The rooms apparently were ideal for composition, even though the hallway was so narrow that Brahms’s piano couldn’t be moved up the stairs. “It is delightful here,” Brahms wrote to Fritz Simrock, his publisher, soon after arriving, and the new symphony bears witness to his apparent delight. Later that summer, when Brahms’s friend Theodore Billroth, an amateur musician, played through the score for the first time, he wrote to the composer at once: “It is all rippling streams, blue sky, sunshine, and cool green shadows. How beautiful it must be at Pörtschach.” Eventually listeners began to call this Brahms’s Pastoral Symphony, again raising the comparison with Beethoven. But if Brahms’s Second Symphony has a true companion, it is the violin concerto he would write the following summer in Pörtschach—cut from the same D major cloth and reflecting the mood and even some of the thematic material of the symphony.

When Brahms sent the first movement of his new symphony off to Clara Schumann, she

Pörtschach on the Wörthersee (Lake Wörth)
predicted that this music would fare better with the public than the tough and stormy First, and she was right. The first performance, on December 30, 1877, in Vienna under Hans Richter, was a triumph, and the third movement had to be repeated. When Brahms conducted the second performance, in Leipzig just after the beginning of the new year, the audience was again enthusiastic. But Brahms’s real moment of glory came late in the summer of 1878, when his new symphony was a great success in his native Hamburg, where he had twice failed to win a coveted musical post. Still, it would be another decade before the Honorary Freedom of Hamburg—the city’s highest honor—was given to him, and Brahms remained ambivalent about his birthplace for the rest of his life. In the meantime, the D major symphony found receptive listeners nearly everywhere it was played. (Theodore Thomas, who would later found the Chicago Symphony, introduced the work to the United States on October 3, 1878, at a concert in New York City.)

From the opening bars of the Allegro non troppo—with their bucolic horn calls and woodwind chords—we prepare for the radiant sunlight and pure skies that Billroth promised. And, with one soaring phrase from the first violins, Brahms’s great pastoral scene unfolds before us. Although another of Billroth’s letters to the composer suggests that “a happy, cheerful mood permeates the whole work,” Brahms knows that even a sunny day contains moments of darkness and doubt—moments when pastoral serenity threatens to turn tragic. It’s that underlying tension—even drama—that gives this music its remarkable character. A few details stand out: two particularly bracing passages for the three trombones in the development section, and much later, just before the coda, a wavering horn call that emerges, serene and magical. This is followed, as if it were the most logical thing in the world, by a jolly bit of dance-hall waltzing before the music flickers and dies.

Eduard Hanslick, one of Brahms’s champions, thought the Adagio “more conspicuous for the development of the themes than for the worth of the themes themselves.” Hanslick wasn’t the first critic to be wrong—this movement has very little to do with development as we know it—although it’s unlike him to be so far off the mark when dealing with music by Brahms. Hanslick did notice that the third movement has the relaxed character of a serenade. It is, for all its initial grace and charm, a serenade of some complexity, with two frolicsome presto passages (smartly disguising the main theme) and a wealth of shifting accents.

The finale is jubilant and electrifying; the clouds seem to disappear after the hushed opening bars, and the music blazes forward, almost unchecked, to the very end. For all Brahms’s concern about measuring up to Beethoven, he seldom mentioned his admiration for Haydn and his ineffable high spirits, but that’s who Brahms most resembles here. There is, of course, the great orchestral roar of triumph that always suggests Beethoven. But many moments are pure Brahms, like the ecstatic clarinet solo that rises above the bustle only minutes into the movement, or the warm and striding theme in the strings that immediately follows. The extraordinary brilliance of the final bars—as unbridled an outburst as any in Brahms—was not lost on his great admirer Antonín Dvořák when he wrote his Carnival Overture.

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