

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2015-2016 Mellon Grand Classics Season

January 29 and 31, 2016

GIANANDREA NOSEDA, CONDUCTOR
DENIS KOZHUKHIN, PIANO

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra in D minor, Opus
30

- I. Allegro ma non tanto
- II. Intermezzo: Adagio —
- III. Finale: Alla breve

Mr. Kozhukhin

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI Overture to *Guillaume Tell*

Intermission

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 2 in D major, Opus 36

- I. Adagio molto — Allegro con brio
- II. Larghetto
- III. Scherzo: Allegro
- IV. Allegro molto

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873 in Oneg (near Novgorod), Russia; died 28 March 1943 in Beverly Hills, California

Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra in D minor, Opus 30 (1909)

PREMIERE OF WORK: New York City, 28 November 1909; Carnegie Hall; New York Symphony Society Orchestra; Walter Damrosch, conductor; Sergei Rachmaninoff, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 10 January 1941; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor; Sergei Rachmaninoff, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 44 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

The worlds of technology and art sometimes brush against each other in curious ways. In 1909, it seems, Sergei Rachmaninoff wanted one of those new mechanical wonders — an automobile. And thereupon hangs the tale of his first visit to America.

The impresario Henry Wolfson of New York arranged a thirty-concert tour for the 1909-1910 season for Rachmaninoff so that he could play and conduct his own works in a number of American cities. Rachmaninoff was at first hesitant about leaving his family and home for such an extended overseas trip, but the generous financial remuneration was too tempting to resist. With a few tour details still left unsettled, Wolfson died suddenly in the spring of 1909, and the composer was much relieved that the journey would probably be cancelled. Wolfson's agency had a contract with Rachmaninoff, however, and during the summer finished the arrangements for his appearances so that the composer-pianist-conductor was obliged to leave for New York as scheduled. Trying to look on the bright side of this daunting prospect, Rachmaninoff wrote to his long-time friend Nikita Morozov, "I don't want to go. But then perhaps, after America I'll be able to buy myself that automobile.... It may not be so bad after all!" It was for the American tour that Rachmaninoff composed his Third Piano Concerto.

The Concerto consists of three large movements. The first is a modified sonata form that begins with a haunting theme, recalled in the later movements, that sets perfectly the Concerto's mood of somber intensity. The *espressivo* second theme is presented by the pianist, whose part has, by this point, abundantly demonstrated the staggering technical challenge that this piece offers to the soloist, a characteristic Rachmaninoff had disguised by the simplicity of the opening. The development section is concerned mostly with transformations of fragments from the first theme. A massive cadenza, separated into two parts by the recall of the main theme by the woodwinds, leads to the recapitulation. The earlier material is greatly abbreviated in this closing section, with just a single presentation of the opening melody and a brief, staccato version of the subsidiary theme.

The second movement, subtitled *Intermezzo*, which Dr. Otto Kinkleday described in his notes for the New York premiere as "tender and melancholy, yet not tearful," is a set of free variations with an inserted episode.

"One of the most dashing and exciting pieces of music ever composed for piano and orchestra" is how Patrick Piggot described the finale. The movement is structured in three large sections. The first part has an abundance of themes which Rachmaninoff skillfully derived from those of the opening movement. The relationship is further strengthened in the finale's second section, where both themes from the opening movement are recalled in slow tempo. The pace again quickens, and the music from the first part of the finale returns with some modifications. A brief solo cadenza leads to the coda, a dazzling final stanza with fistfuls of chords propelling the headlong rush to the dramatic closing gestures.

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Born 29 February 1792 in Pesaro, Italy; died 13 November 1868 in Paris

Overture to *Guillaume Tell* ("William Tell") (1828-1829)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Paris, 3 August 1829; Paris Opéra; François Habeneck, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 12 March 1896; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 12 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings

In 1824, Rossini moved to Paris to become director of the Théâtre Italien, and there became fully aware of the revolutionary artistic and political trends that were then gaining prominence. In music, the Romantic movement had been heralded by such works as Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz*, first seen in the French capital in 1824. In politics, republican sympathies were again festering, and stage works that portrayed the popular struggle against oppression and tyranny stirred considerable sentiment. Auber's opera *La muette de Portici* of 1828, based on the 17th-century Neapolitan revolt against Spain, not only proved to be a popular success, but also caught the spirit of the times in both its music and its subject. Rossini was too closely attuned to public fashion to ignore the changing audience tastes these pieces portended, and he began to cast about for a libretto that would keep him abreast of the latest developments in the musical theater while solidifying his position in Paris.

Schiller's play *William Tell*, based on the heroic Swiss struggle against tyranny in the 14th century, had recently created much interest when it was introduced to Paris in a French translation. Rossini decided that the drama would make a fine opera (or, at least, a saleable one), and he seems to have taken special care to incorporate the emerging Romantic style into this epic work, as evidenced by its subject matter, symphonic scope and attention to dramatic and poetic content. From the summer of 1828, when word of the project first surfaced, through the following spring, when several delays were reportedly caused by prima donna incapacity (actually, Rossini was withholding the work's premiere to press negotiations with the government over a lucrative contract for future — never realized — operas) until the premiere in August 1829, *William Tell* kept Parisian society abuzz. Once the opera finally reached the stage, it was hailed by critics and musicians, but disappointed the public, who felt that its six-hour length was more entertainment than a single evening should decently hold. (The score was greatly truncated when it was staged in later years.) Whether the new style of the opera was one Rossini did not wish to pursue, or whether he was drained by two decades of constant work, or whether he just wanted to enjoy in leisure the fortune he had amassed, *William Tell* was his last opera. During the remaining 39 years of his life, he did not compose another note for the stage.

Unlike than the vivacious single-movement forms that characterized Rossini's earlier overtures, the one for *William Tell* is essentially a miniature tone poem divided into several evocative sections. Peaceful dawn in the towering Swiss mountains is depicted by the quiet song of the cello quintet that opens the Overture. The following, furious music hurled forth by the full orchestra signifies a violent thunderstorm. The subsequent English horn theme portrays the calm after the tempest and the pastoral beauty of the Swiss countryside. The final section, originally written seven years earlier in Vienna as a quickstep march for military band, accompanies the triumphant return of the Swiss patriot troops in Act III.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born 16 December 1770 in Bonn; died 26 March 1827 in Vienna

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Opus 36 (1802)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Vienna, 5 April 1803; Theater-an-der-Wien; Ludwig van Beethoven, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 3 December 1896; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 34 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds, horns, and trumpets in pairs, timpani, and strings

In the summer of 1802, Beethoven's physician ordered him to leave Vienna and take rooms in Heiligenstadt, today a friendly suburb at the northern terminus of the city's subway system, but two centuries ago a quiet village with a view of the Danube across the river's rich flood plain. It was three years earlier, in 1799, that Beethoven first noticed a disturbing ringing and buzzing in his ears, and he sought medical attention for the problem soon after. He tried numerous cures for his malady, as well as

for his chronic colic, including oil of almonds, hot and cold baths, soaking in the Danube, pills and herbs. For a short time, he even considered the modish treatment of electric shock. On the advice of his latest doctor, Beethoven left the noisy city for the quiet countryside with the assurance that the lack of stimulation would be beneficial to his hearing and his general health.

In Heiligenstadt, Beethoven virtually lived the life of a hermit, seeing only his doctor and a young student named Ferdinand Ries. In 1802, Beethoven was still a full decade from being totally deaf. The acuity of his hearing varied from day to day (sometimes governed by his interest — or lack thereof — in the surrounding conversation), but he had largely lost his ability to hear soft sounds by that time, and loud noises caused him pain. Of one of their walks in the country, Ries reported, “I called his attention to a shepherd who was piping very agreeably in the woods on a flute made of a twig of elder. For half an hour, Beethoven could hear nothing, and though I assured him that it was the same with me (which was not the case), he became extremely quiet and morose. When he occasionally seemed to be merry, it was generally to the extreme of boisterousness; but this happens seldom.” In addition to the distress over his health, Beethoven was also wounded in 1802 by the wreck of an affair of the heart. He had proposed marriage to Giulietta Guicciardi (the thought of Beethoven as a husband threatens the moorings of one’s presence of mind!), but had been denied permission by the girl’s father for the then perfectly valid reason that the young composer was without rank, position or fortune. Faced with the extinction of a musician’s most precious faculty, fighting a constant digestive distress, and unsuccessful in love, it is little wonder that Beethoven was sorely vexed.

On October 6, 1802, following several months of wrestling with his misfortunes, Beethoven penned the most famous letter ever written by a musician — the “Heiligenstadt Testament.” Intended as a will written to his brothers (it was never sent, though he kept it in his papers to be found after his death), it is a cry of despair over his fate, perhaps a necessary and self-induced soul-cleansing in those pre-Freudian days. “O Providence — grant me at last but one day of pure joy — it is so long since real joy echoed in my heart,” he lamented. But — and this is the miracle — he not only poured his energy into self-pity, he also channeled it into music. “I shall grapple with fate; it shall never pull me down,” he resolved. The next five years were the most productive he ever knew. “I live only in my music,” Beethoven wrote, “and I have scarcely begun one thing when I start another.” Symphonies Nos. 2-5, a dozen piano sonatas, the Fourth Piano Concerto and the Triple Concerto, *Fidelio*, and many songs, chamber works and keyboard compositions were all completed between 1802 and 1806. Of all these works, the Second Symphony is the one that most belies the difficult year of its birth.

The Symphony opens with a long introduction moving with a stately tread. The sonata form begins with the arrival of the fast tempo and the appearance of the main theme, a brisk melody first entrusted to the low strings. Characteristic Beethovenian energy dominates the transition to the second theme, a martial strain paraded by the winds. The development includes two large sections, one devoted to the main theme and its quick, flashing rhythmic figure, the other exploring the possibilities of the marching theme. The recapitulation compresses the earlier material to allow a lengthy coda to conclude the movement.

The esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey thought the *Larghetto* to be “one of the most luxurious slow movements in the world”; Sir George Grove, of music dictionary fame, commented on its “elegant, indolent beauty.” So lyrical is its principal theme that, by appending some appropriate words, Isaac Watts converted it into the hymn *Kingdoms and Thrones to God Belong*. The movement is in a full sonata form, with the first violins giving out the second theme above a rocking accompaniment in the bass.

Beethoven labeled the third movement “Scherzo,” the first appearance of this term in his symphonies, though the comparable movement of the First Symphony was a true scherzo in all but name. Faster in tempo and more boisterous in spirit than the minuet traditionally found in earlier symphonies, the scherzo became an integral part not only of Beethoven’s later works, but also of those of most 19th-century composers. A rising three-note fragment runs through much of the scherzo proper, while the central trio gives prominence to the oboes and a delightful walking-bass counterpoint in the bassoons.

The finale continues the bubbling high spirits of the scherzo. Formally a hybrid of sonata and rondo, it possesses a wit and structure indebted to Haydn, but a dynamism that is Beethoven’s alone. The long coda intensifies the bursting exuberance of the music, and carries it along to the closing pages of the movement.