

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2017-2018 Mellon Grand Classics Season

October 6 and 8, 2017

CHRISTOPH KÖNIG, CONDUCTOR
YULIANNA AVDEEVA, PIANO

MODESTE MUSSORGSKY Scherzo in B-flat major

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN Concerto No. 2 in F minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 21

- I. Maestoso
- II. Larghetto
- III. Allegro vivace

Ms. Avdeeva

Intermission

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Opus 27

- I. Largo — Allegro moderato
- II. Allegro molto
- III. Adagio
- IV. Allegro vivace

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Scherzo in B-flat major (1858)

Modest Mussorgsky was born in Karevo, Pskov District, Russia on March 21, 1839, and died in St. Petersburg on March 28, 1881. He composed his Scherzo in B-flat major in 1858, originally for piano and later orchestrated, and it was premiered in St. Petersburg with Anton Rubinstein and the Orchestra of the Russian Music Society on January 23, 1860. The work went unpublished until after his death, when friend Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov edited the work. These performances mark the Pittsburgh Symphony premiere of the work. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds, horns and trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

Performance timing: approximately 5 minutes

Mussorgsky grew up in a family of prosperous rural aristocrats 300 miles south of St. Petersburg, absorbing Russian folktales and melodies from his nurse and starting piano lessons with his mother when he was six. He was playing small pieces within a year and had progressed sufficiently by age nine to perform a concerto in public by John Field (1782-1837), the celebrated Dublin-born pianist, composer and teacher who made most of his career in Russia. In 1849, Mussorgsky was sent to St. Petersburg for his secondary education, and there advanced quickly in his piano studies with the respected Polish virtuoso and pedagogue Anton Herke. In 1852, following a tradition for both his family and his social class, Mussorgsky enrolled at the Cadet School of the Guards, where he gained a reputation for his interest in history and German philosophy as well as his ability, recalled a friend, "to thump out dances on the piano to please his fellow cadets." Soon after he started at the school, he convinced his father to underwrite the publication of his first composition, the *Ensign Polka*.

Upon his graduation in 1856, Mussorgsky was commissioned as an officer in the elite Preobrazhensky Regiment, founded by Peter the Great and traditionally led by the Tsar himself, but pursued musical rather than military interests in St. Petersburg, befriending such notable figures as Dargomyzhsky, Cui, Stasov and, most influentially, the demanding Mili Balakirev, of whom he became a composition student. Mussorgsky undertook a few pieces under Balakirev's guidance — some songs and piano pieces, incidental for Ozerov's play *Oedipus in Athens*, a choral number — but completed almost none of them before suffering some sort of nervous or spiritual collapse in the summer of 1858 ("mysticism mixed with cynical thoughts about the Deity," he wrote to Balakirev, but it was more likely an early manifestation of the chronic alcoholism that afflicted his entire life and helped to end it prematurely at the age of 42). He resigned his commission in the Regiment, recuperated at home for several weeks, and then returned to St. Petersburg to resume his lessons with Balakirev. His life thereafter was devoted to music.

Among the first pieces Mussorgsky wrote that autumn were two Scherzos for piano, one in C-sharp minor, the other in B-flat major, a musical species favored by Balakirev as a training exercise. (Mozart used the minuet for a similar purpose with his students.) He orchestrated the Scherzo in B-flat major under Balakirev's guidance and talked the influential pianist, conductor and teacher Anton Rubinstein into including it on his concert of January 23, 1860 with the Orchestra of the Russian Music Society, the pioneering organization he had founded with his brother Nikolai just a year earlier. It was the first public performance of a work by Mussorgsky; he was nineteen. The orchestral score of the Scherzo in B-flat major remained unpublished and was among the large legacy that Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov edited for performance and publication after Mussorgsky's death. The changes he made to the work are unknown, but his lack of hesitancy in altering his friend's works is attested by his extensive overhauls to *Boris Godunov* and *A Night on Bald Mountain*.

The outer portions of the Scherzo in B-flat follow the fleet, nimble Mendelssohnian model but invest it with a certain Slavic sonority and melodic character. A gentle, lyrical central episode led by the high woodwinds provides formal and expressive balance.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Concerto No. 2 in F minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 21 (1829)

Frédéric Chopin was born in Zelazowa-Wola (near Warsaw), Poland on February 22, 1810, and died in Paris on October 17, 1849. He was just 19 when he composed his Second Piano Concerto in 1829, and he premiered it as the soloist at the National Theater in Warsaw on March 17, 1830. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the concerto at Carnegie Music Hall with conductor Victor Herbert and soloist Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler on January 24, 1902, and most recently performed it with Manfred Honeck and Lang Lang at the 2008 Gala. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.

Performance time: approximately 33 minutes

Frédéric Chopin was nineteen and in love when he wrote this Concerto in 1829. The Concerto he handled with maturity and assurance — the love affair, he did not. When Chopin finished his studies at the Warsaw Conservatory that summer, he was already an accomplished pianist and composer. As a graduation present, his father sent him to Vienna, where he gave two successful concerts and found a publisher for his Variations for Piano and Orchestra on Mozart's *La ci darem la mano* (Op. 2). It was sometime during those summer months that he began the F minor Concerto. Though he enjoyed his visit to the imperial city, his thoughts were often back in Warsaw, centered on a comely young singer, one Constantia Gladowska. In his biography of the composer, Casimir Wierzyński passed on some information about this apparently delightful lady: "She had been studying voice at the Conservatory for four years and was considered one of the school's best pupils. She was also said to be one of the prettiest. Her regular, full face, framed in blond hair, was an epitome of youth, health and vigor, and her beauty was conspicuous in the Conservatory chorus, for all that it boasted of numbers of beautiful women. The young lady, conscious of her charms, was distinguished by ambition and diligence in her studies. She dreamed of becoming an opera singer...." Constantia was certainly a worthy object for Chopin's affections, though she had no way to know of his interest — it took him a full year to utter a word to her.

Chopin first saw Constantia when she sang at a Conservatory concert on April 21, 1829. For the first time in his life, he fell in love. He followed Constantia to her performances, and caught glimpses of her when she appeared at the theater or in church, but never approached her. He kept his churning passion secret even from his friends. She was on his mind constantly, and the emotional rush of young love played a seminal role in the creation of his two piano concertos. On October 6th, Chopin, recently returned from Vienna, composed a waltz (Op. 70, No. 3) with the image of Constantia vivid in his mind. That evening, he was no longer able to contain his feelings, and wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski, "I have — perhaps to my own misfortune — already found my ideal, whom I worship faithfully and sincerely. Six months have elapsed, and I haven't yet exchanged a syllable with her of whom I dream every night — she who was in my mind when I composed the *Adagio* of my Concerto." Chopin's love manifested itself in giddily immature ways. He raved about Constantia's virtues to his friends. He invited one Mrs. Beyer to dinner simply because her given name was the same as that of his beloved. He reported "tingling with pleasure" whenever he saw a handkerchief embroidered with her name. He broke off one of his letters abruptly with the syllable "Con — , " explaining, "No, I cannot complete her name, my hand is too unworthy."

After yet another half year of such maudlin goings-on, Chopin finally met — actually talked with — Constantia in April 1830. She was pleasant to him and they became friends, but he was never convinced that she fully returned his ardent love. She took part in his farewell concert in Warsaw on October 11th, and he kept up a correspondence with her for a while through an intermediary. (He felt it improper to write directly to a young woman without her parents' permission.) Her marriage to a Warsaw merchant in 1832 caused him intense but impermanent grief, which soon evaporated in the glittering social whirl of Paris, his new home.

Chopin based his concertos on the Romantic piano style of Hummel, Kalkbrenner, Field and Ries rather than on the weightier abstract forms of Beethoven. The orchestra in these virtuoso works is, truly, accompaniment, and is virtually excluded from the musical argument once the pianist enters. The center of attention is the soloist, and it says much about the quality of Chopin's writing for the piano that his concertos continue to be heard while literally shelves-full of their contemporary creations have not been displayed for almost two centuries. In the opening movement of the Second Concerto, most of the orchestra's participation occurs in the introduction, in which are presented the main theme (a rather dolorous tune with dotted rhythms played immediately by violins) and the second theme, a brighter strain given by woodwinds led by the oboe. The piano enters and, with the exception of orchestral interludes surrounding the development section and the concluding coda, dominates the remainder of the movement.

Liszt thought the second movement “of a perfection almost ideal; its expression, now radiant with light, now full of tender pathos.” Robert Schumann — writer, publisher, editor as well as composer — mused, “What are ten editorial crowns compared to one such *Adagio* as that of the Second Concerto!” Composed under the spell of his first love, this movement was a special favorite of Chopin himself. A description of the movement’s form — three-part (A–B–A) with wide-ranging harmonic excursions in the center section — is too clinical to convey the moonlit poetry and quiet intensity of this beautiful music. In both its technique and its tender emotionalism, it breathes the rarefied air of Chopin’s greatest works.

Chopin’s biographer Frederick Niecks noted the finale’s “feminine softness and rounded contours, its graceful, gyrating, dance-like motions, its sprightliness and frolicsome ness.” The theme was inspired by the *mazurka*, the Polish national dance that also served Chopin as the basis for more than fifty stylized compositions for solo piano. The movement brims with dazzling virtuosity. Its structure comprises a series of episodes rounded off by the return of the beguiling main theme and a cheerful coda in F major heralded by a call from the solo horn.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Opus 27 (1906-1907)

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born in Oneg, Russia (near Novgorod) on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California on March 28, 1943. He composed his Second Symphony in 1906 and 1907, and it was premiered in St. Petersburg with Rachmaninoff on the podium on January 26, 1908. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the symphony at Syria Mosque with Vladimir Bakaleinikoff on January 22, 1943, and most recently performed it with Yan Pascal Tortelier on November 3, 2013. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

Performance time: approximately 60 minutes

Early in 1906, Rachmaninoff decided to sweep away the rapidly accumulating obligations of conducting, concertizing and socializing that cluttered his life in Moscow in order to find some quiet place in which to devote himself to composition. His determination may have been strengthened by the political unrest beginning to rumble under the foundations of the aristocratic Russian political system. The uprising of 1905 was among the first signs of trouble for those of his noble class (his eventual move to the United States was a direct result of the swallowing of his family’s estate and resources by the 1917 Revolution), and he probably thought it a good time to start looking for a quiet haven.

A few years before, Rachmaninoff had been overwhelmed by an inspired performance of *Die Meistersinger* he heard at the Dresden Opera. The memory of that evening and the aura of dignity and repose exuded by the city had remained with him, and Dresden, at that time in his life, seemed like a good place to be. The atmosphere in Dresden was so conducive to composition that within a few months of his arrival he was working on the Second Symphony, First Piano Sonata, Op. 6 Russian folk songs and the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*. The Second Symphony was unanimously cheered when it was premiered under the composer’s direction in St. Petersburg on January 26, 1908.

The majestic scale of the Symphony is established at the outset by a slow, brooding introduction. A smooth transition to a faster tempo signals the arrival of the main theme, an extended and quickened transformation of the basses’ opening motive. The expressive second theme enters in the woodwinds. The development deals with the vigorous main theme to such an extent that the beginning of the formal recapitulation is engulfed by its surging sweep. The second movement is the most nimble essay to be found in Rachmaninoff’s orchestral works. After two preparatory measures, the horns hurl forth the main theme, which bears more than a passing resemblance to the *Dies Irae* (“Day of Wrath”), the ancient chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead that haunted the composer for many years. The vital nature of the music, however, does not support any morbid interpretation. Eventually, the rhythmic bustle is suppressed and finally silenced to make way for the movement’s central section, whose skipping lines embody some of Rachmaninoff’s best fugal writing.

The rapturous *Adagio* is music of heightened passion that resembles nothing so much as an ecstatic operatic love scene. Alternating with the joyous principal melody is an important theme from the first movement, heard prominently in the central portion and the coda of this movement. The finale bursts forth in the whirling dance rhythm of an Italian *tarantella*. The propulsive urgency subsides to allow

another of Rachmaninoff's wonderful, sweeping melodic inspirations to enter. A development of the *tarantella* motives follows, into which are embroidered thematic reminiscences from each of the three preceding movements. The several elements of the finale are gathered together in the closing pages.