Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2018-2019 Mellon Grand Classics Season

January 11, 12 and 13, 2019

MARKUS STENZ, CONDUCTOR
BEHZOD ABDURAIMOV, PIANO

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (arr. Matthews)	*La cathédrale engloutie*
SERGEI RACHMANINOFF	Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18

I. Moderato
II. Adagio sostenuto
III. Allegro scherzando

Mr. Abduraimov

Intermission

FERRUCCIO BUSONI	*Berceuse élégiaque*, Poem for Orchestra, Opus 42
ALEXANDER SCRIABIN	*The Poem of Ecstasy* (Symphony No. 4), Opus 54

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

La cathédrale engloutie, Arranged for Orchestra by Colin Matthews

Claude Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-Laye (near Paris) on August 2, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918. He composed *La cathédrale engloutie* ("The Sunken Cathedral") in 1910, which is part of the first book of his Préludes for Piano, and it was premiered by Debussy at the Société Musicale Indépendente in Paris on May 25, 1910. The arrangement heard this weekend was premiered in Manchester by the Hallé Orchestra with conductor Sir Mark Elder on May 6, 2007. These performances mark the Pittsburgh Symphony premiere of the work. The score calls for two piccolos, two flutes, alto flute, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, contra bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, celesta and strings. Performance time: approximately 6 minutes.

"The sound of the sea, the curve of the horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird enregister complex impressions within us," Debussy told an interviewer when he was at work on his *Préludes*. "Then suddenly, without any deliberate consent on our part, one of those memories issues forth to express itself in the language of music." Debussy distilled in these words the essence of musical Impressionism — the embodiment of a specific but evanescent experience in tone. With only a few exceptions (most notably the String Quartet of 1893 and the *Études* and three sonatas from the end of his life), his compositions are referential in both their titles and their contents, deriving inspiration and subjects from poetry, art and nature (or nature, at least, as filtered through Monet's opulently chromatic palette). Though their generic appellation, which recalls the music of both Chopin and Bach, suggests abstraction rather than tone painting, Debussy's 24 *Préludes* for piano are quintessential examples of his ability to evoke moods, memories and images that are, at once, too specific and too vague for mere words. "The Impressionists' objective was that music should appear directly to the senses without obtruding upon the intellect," wrote Christopher Palmer in his book on *Impressionism in Music*. "Debussy's *Préludes* develop this technique of seizing upon the salient details of a scene and fusing them deftly into a quick overall impression to a rare degree of perfection." Book I of the *Préludes* was composed in 1909-1910 and Book II, the last of Debussy's piano works except for his *Études* (1915), between 1910 and 1913. Each contains twelve of his most atmospheric paintings in tone.

La cathédrale engloutie ("*The Sunken Cathedral*"), the tenth of the twelve numbers comprising the First Book of *Préludes*, was composed early in 1910 and published by Durand in May. The composer himself premiered it at a concert in Paris of the Société Musicale Indépendente on May 25th. The piece was inspired by an ancient Breton legend of a submerged cathedral at Ys that rises briefly above the waves on clear mornings, bells tolling and priests chanting. (Lalo's opera *Le Roi d'Ys* is based on the same tale.) Debussy evoked this miraculous phenomenon by suggesting the parallel harmonies of Medieval organum and the smooth melodic leadings of Gregorian chant in this miniature tone poem.

The present arrangement of *The Sunken Cathedral* is by Colin Matthews, one of England's most accomplished and prolific composers, who studied at Nottingham University and the University of Sussex, taught at Sussex, worked as an assistant to Benjamin Britten, served as director of the Holst Foundation, Britten Estate and Performing Rights Society, and held residencies with the London Symphony Orchestra and Hallé Orchestra of Manchester; he was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by Queen Elizabeth II in 2011. *The Sunken Cathedral* is among the orchestrations of both books of Debussy's *Préludes* Matthews did for the Hallé Orchestra between 2001 and 2007.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born in Oneg (near Novgorod), Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. He composed his Second Piano Concerto in 1900 and 1901, and it was premiered in Moscow by Moscow Philharmonic Society Orchestra with conductor Alexander Siloti and Rachmaninoff as soloist on October 14, 1901. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the concerto at Syria Mosque with conductor Antonio Modarelli and soloist Walter Gieseking in March 1934, and most recently performed it with conductor Rafael Payare and soloist Kirill Gerstein in January 2018. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. Performance time: approximately 34 minutes.

When he was old and as mellow as he would ever get, Rachmaninoff wrote these words about his early years: “Although I had to fight for recognition, as most younger men must, although I have experienced all the troubles and sorrow which precede success, and although I know how important it is for an artist to be spared such troubles, I realize, when I look back on my early life, that it was enjoyable, in spite of all its vexations and bitterness.” The greatest “bitterness” of Rachmaninoff’s career was the total failure of his Symphony No. 1 at its premiere in 1897, a traumatic disappointment which thrust him into such a mental depression that he suffered a complete nervous collapse.

An aunt of Rachmaninoff, Varvara Satina, had recently been successfully treated for an emotional disturbance by Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a Moscow physician who was familiar with the latest psychiatric discoveries in France and Vienna, and it was arranged that Rachmaninoff should visit him. Years later, in his memoirs, the composer recalled the malady and the treatment: “[Following the performance of the First Symphony] something within me snapped. A paralyzing apathy possessed me. I did nothing at all and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent on a couch sighing over my ruined life. My only occupation consisted in giving a few piano lessons to keep myself alive.” For more than a year, Rachmaninoff’s condition persisted. He began his daily visits to Dr. Dahl in January 1900. “My relatives had informed Dr. Dahl that he must by all means cure me of my apathetic condition and bring about such results that I would again be able to compose. Dahl had inquired what kind of composition was desired of me, and he was informed ‘a concerto for pianoforte.’ In consequence, I heard repeated, day after day, the same hypnotic formula, as I lay half somnolent in an armchair in Dr. Dahl’s consulting room: ‘You will start to compose a concerto — You will work with the greatest of ease — The composition will be of excellent quality.’ Always it was the same, without interruption.... Although it may seem impossible to believe,” Rachmaninoff continued, “this treatment really helped me. I started to compose again at the beginning of the summer.” In gratitude, he dedicated the new Concerto to Dr. Dahl.

The C minor Concerto begins with eight bell-tone chords from the solo piano that herald the surging main theme, announced by the strings. A climax is achieved before a sudden drop in intensity makes way for the arching second theme, initiated by the soloist. The development, concerned largely with the first theme, is propelled by a martial rhythm that continues with undiminished energy into the recapitulation. The second theme returns in the horn before the martial mood is re-established to close the movement. The *Adagio* is a long-limbed nocturne with a running commentary of sweeping figurations from the piano. The finale resumes the marching rhythmic motion of the first movement with its introduction and bold main theme. Standing in bold relief to this vigorous music is the lyrical second theme, one of the best-loved melodies in the entire orchestral literature, a grand inspiration in the ripest Romantic tradition. These two themes, the martial and the romantic, alternate for the remainder of the movement. The coda rises through a finely crafted line of mounting tension to bring this work to an electrifying close.

FERRUCCIO BUSONI

Berceuse élégiaque, Poem for Orchestra, Opus 42

Ferruccio Busoni was born in Empoli, Italy, on April 1, 1866, and died in Berlin on July 27, 1924. He composed *Berceuse élégiaque* in 1909, and it was premiered at Carnegie Hall in New York City with Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic on February 2, 1911. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the work at Syria Mosque with Guido Cantelli in March 1951, and most recently performed it with Oliver Knussen in April 2002. The score calls for three flutes, oboe, two clarinets,

bass clarinet, four horns, gong, celesta, harp and strings. Performance time: approximately 10 minutes.

Ferruccio Busoni lost both his father and his mother in 1909, and he created for each of his parents a deeply felt, but very different, musical memorial. Immediately after the death of his father, Ferdinando, on May 12th, Busoni wrote the *Fantasia after J.S. Bach* for piano, which embedded passages borrowed from three of Bach's organ works in original music whose style was respectful of the old Baroque traditions. The *Berceuse élégiaque* he composed upon the death of Anna Busoni, on October 3rd, was, however, one of his most forward-looking creations. The *Berceuse* grew out of a brief piano piece Busoni had composed shortly after his father's death, a work of small-interval themes, solemnly rocking rhythms, subtly woven counterpoint and tonally ambiguous harmony that reflected the composer's grief of those months. The subtitle of the *Berceuse élégiaque — Des Mannes Wiegenlied am Sarge seiner Mutter*: "*The Man's Cradle Song at His Mother's Coffin*" (*berceuse* is French for "cradle song" or "lullaby") — was apparently derived from the poetic drama *Aladdin* (1805) that the Danish author Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger (1779-1850) had based on one of the most famous tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*. In Oehlenschläger's play (for which Carl Nielsen provided extensive incidental music in 1919), Aladdin is driven to near-madness by the death of his mother (Oehlenschläger's mother died while he was working on the drama), and he sits by her grave, trying to comfort both living and dead as he imagines rocking her in a cradle: *Sleep my baby, sleep in peace, do not let yourself be woken*.

For this song of sorrow, Busoni devised an unusual scoring of three flutes, oboe, two clarinets, bass clarinet, four horns, gong, celesta, harp and a small body of strings, and claimed that "in this piece … I succeeded for the first time in creating an individual sound and in dissolving form into feeling." Busoni was able to arrange readings of the *Berceuse élégiaque* by Henry Wood and the Queen's Hall Orchestra in London in November 1909 and Oskar Fried and the Berlin Philharmonic the following year, but its modernity and intense introspection were met with astonishment and bemusement. "Its polytonality, its collisions of major and minor triads, its strange enervated harmony, its symphony of sighs appeared altogether novel," explained the eminent German musicologist Hugo Liechtentritt. The public premiere was finally given by the New York Philharmonic on February 21, 1911 as part of the last concert Gustav Mahler ever conducted.

Though the *Berceuse élégiaque* gained wide acceptance only slowly, several noted musicians have been fascinated by it: the respected German pianist and teacher Egon Petri transcribed it for two pianos in 1911; Arnold Schoenberg called it a "downright moving piece, deeply felt" when he heard it in Berlin in 1912, and ten years later asked Erwin Stein to make a version of it for nine instruments for their Society for the Private Performance of Music in Vienna (the transcription is still often wrongly attributed to Schoenberg); and in 1979, American composer John Adams arranged it for chamber orchestra because, he said, "its continuing obscurity is perplexing to me." The *Berceuse élégiaque*, with its timeless poignancy, its floating textures, its grief-compressed themes, its luminous but muted sonorities, is a threnody for a new era, a 20th-century analog to the funeral march from Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony, and is perhaps, as Antony Beaumont suggested in his biography of the composer, "Busoni's most perfect work."

ALEXANDER SCRIABIN

The Poem of Ecstasy (Symphony No. 4), Opus 54

Alexander Scriabin was born in Moscow on January 6, 1872, and died there on April 27, 1915. He composed *The Poem of Ecstasy* between 1905 and 1908, and it was premiered in New York City with Modest Altschuler and the Russian Symphony Orchestra on December 10, 1908. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the work at Syria Mosque under the baton of William Steinberg in December 1970, and most recently performed it with Andrey Boreyko in November 2005. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, organ, two harps and strings. Performance time: approximately 23 minutes.

The music for *The Poem of Ecstasy* grew from Scriabin's literary poem of the same name. He had published this poem of several hundred short lines in May 1906 and sent copies to his friends; he once

admitted that his greatest satisfaction came from regaling an assembly with these obscure verses. When the musical work was completed, however, he discouraged printing the poetic text in the score. “Conductors who want to perform *The Poem of Ecstasy*,” he wrote, “can always be apprised that it has such a thing, but in general I would prefer for them to approach it as pure music.” This seems a curious pronouncement for a composer who was not only meticulous in giving his work a vivid philosophical setting, but also provided specific labels for each of its themes. He may have realized that the words were little more than a quizzical appendage to such a grandiloquent piece of music.

Modest Altschuler, Scriabin’s friend, confidant and the conductor of the premiere, remarked that *The Poem of Ecstasy* “sought to express something of the emotional side of [Scriabin’s] philosophy.” He described the three facets of this philosophy that emerge in the music: a) the composer’s soul in “an orgy of love;” b) “the realization of a fantastic dream;” and c) the composer’s apprehension of “the glory of his own art.” For his part, Scriabin said that various of the themes represent “human striving after the ideal,” “the awakening of the soul, gradually realizing itself (the Ego theme),” “the Will to rise up,” and “the soaring flight of the spirit.” This is a challenging burden for simple musical tones to carry, and perhaps it is for this reason that Scriabin advised hearing the work as “pure music.” Approaching the work as “pure music” also relieves the listener of receiving *The Poem of Ecstasy* as a philosophical tract rather than as simply a grandiose musical composition.

The style of *The Poem of Ecstasy* is opulently post-Romantic. Its harmony is rich and glowing, its orchestral complement colossal, its melody expressive and densely chromatic. Though it is still tonal, some of Scriabin’s new chordal combinations stretch traditional harmonic functions to great lengths. The seething emotional turmoil of the music was cultivated in the hothouse of Wagnerian Romanticism gone wild. Yet, this is music of sharp and individual character, of brilliant originality that is unique in the realm of the art. Though *The Poem of Ecstasy* is cast in the old sonata structure, it is better heard not as a formal exercise but rather as a musical distillation of the most intense physical and spiritual feelings — a sort of concert-hall catharsis. The grand, sweeping arches of rising tension, which grow from expectant tenderness to climactic release, parallel aspects of our lives. This music creates an ardent excitement and visceral stimulation that even the most jaded gainsayer would find hard to deny.

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