

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2018-2019 Mellon Grand Classics Season

January 25 and 27, 2019

LONG YU, CONDUCTOR
INON BARNATAN, PIANO

QIGANG CHEN

Wu Xing (“*The Five Elements*”)
Shui (Water)
Mu (Wood)
Huo (Fire)
Tu (Earth)
Jin (Metal)

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor
for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 1
I. Vivace
II. Andante
III. Allegro vivace
Mr. Barnatan

Intermission

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
World”

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Opus 95, “From the New
I. Adagio — Allegro molto
II. Largo
III. Scherzo: Molto vivace
IV. Allegro con fuoco

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

QIGANG CHEN

Wu Xing (“*The Five Elements*”)

Qigang Chen was born in Shanghai on August 28, 1951. He composed *Wu Xing* in 1998 and 1999, and it was premiered in Paris by Didier Benetti and the Orchestra National de France on May 21, 1999. These performances mark the Pittsburgh Symphony premiere of the work. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, E-flat clarinet, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion, harp, piano, celesta and strings. Performance time: approximately 11 minutes.

“His compositions display real inventiveness, very great talent and a total assimilation of Chinese thinking to European musical concepts. He is endowed with exceptional intelligence and an excellent internal ‘ear.’ I hold him in high esteem, and wish him the greatest success, for he deserves it.” Olivier Messiaen offered this encomium shortly before his death, in 1992, about his last student, the only one he accepted after retiring from the faculty of the Paris Conservatoire in 1978 — Shanghai-born composer Qigang Chen. Chen’s entry into Western musical life was hard won. He was born in 1951 in Shanghai and raised in Beijing, where his father, a noted calligrapher and painter, was administrator of the Academy of Fine Arts. When the Cultural Revolution abruptly halted China’s educational, intellectual and artistic life in 1966, his father was sent to a labor camp and Chen’s musical studies were interrupted while he was held in confinement for the next three years to undergo “ideological re-education.” His passion for music never wavered, however, and he continued to study composition on his own. When the schools were reopened in 1977, Chen was one of just 26 of some 2,000 applicants to be accepted at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. After studying with Luo Zhonghong for the next five years, he graduated first in his class, a distinction that earned him a visa to continue his training abroad; a grant from the French government in 1983 took him to Paris to study with Messiaen. He also worked with Ivo Malec, Betsy Jolas, Claude Ballif, Claude Castérède and Franco Donatoni during the next four years, and in 1988 he was granted the *Diplome Supérieur de Composition* by the École Normale de Musique; he received a *Diplome de Musicologie* from the Sorbonne a year later. Chen became a French citizen in 1992, and he has since divided his career between France and China, where he taught at the conservatories in Shanghai and Beijing, and served as music director for the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics; in 2015 he established a composition workshop for young musicians at Gonggen College in China. Chen has received commissions from Radio France, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal and Koussevitzky Foundation, held residencies with the Strasbourg Philharmonic and the Centre Acanthes of Avignon, and received awards from the City of Paris, SACEM (the French Society of Composers and Publishers), Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Nadia and Lili Boulanger Foundation; in 2013 he was named a *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government.

Wu Xing, in Chinese philosophy, indicates the five types of *chi* (a vital force) dominating at any one time in a regenerative cycle or process. The concept can be used to help explain music (the core “pentatonic” scale of Chinese music comprises five tones), the earth’s annual cycle, the interaction of the body’s organs, the movements of the planets, the properties of medicinal drugs, the flavors of food, or even the succession of political regimes. It is most commonly associated with the five elements and their relationships: wood (spring) creates fire (summer), fire creates earth (i.e., ash, which produces the earth that stabilizes the cycle), earth creates metal (autumn), metal creates water (by trapping falling water from a source; winter), and water creates wood. Qigang Chen embodied this concept in his *Wu Xing* (“*The Five Elements*”), commissioned in 1998 by Radio France and premiered on May 21, 1999 on a broadcast from Paris by the Orchestra National de France, conducted by Didier Benetti. Each of the successive elements — water, wood, fire, earth, metal — is suggested by a concise, two-minute tone poem that creates its own distinct world of sound and expression. Chen said that he was trying “to characterize musically ... a tangible material in an abstract language, but even more to establish relationships between the materials, so that each element generates the next one and the last therefore becomes the consequence of the first.”

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 1

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born in Oneg, a district of Novgorod, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. He composed his First Piano Concerto in 1890-1891, and it was premiered in Moscow with Rachmaninoff as soloist, conductor Vasily Safonoff, and the Moscow Conservatory Orchestra on March 17, 1892. Rachmaninoff revised the concerto in 1917, after composing his Second and Third Piano Concerto, and this revision was premiered in New York City, again with Sergei Rachmaninoff as soloist, conductor Modest Altschuler, and the Russian Symphony Orchestra on January 28, 1919. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the concerto at Syria Mosque with conductor Guido Cantelli and pianist Byron Janis in March 1951, and most recently performed it with conductor Leonard Slatkin and pianist Olga Kern in October 2010. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, cymbals, triangle and strings. Performance time: approximately 28 minutes.

Rachmaninoff entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1888 to study piano with Alexander Siloti and composition with Taneyev and Arensky. He was a brilliant student. At the age of nineteen, he wrote the *Prelude in C-sharp minor*, which carried his name to music lovers around the world (and became so frequently requested that he grew to loath the piece). He graduated from the piano curriculum in 1891 with a gold medal for excellence, and finished his studies as a composer the following year, upon which occasion the faculty unanimously voted to place his name on the Conservatory's Roll of Honor. Rachmaninoff himself related one of his proudest moments as a student: "Amongst the examining professors sat Tchaikovsky. The highest mark given was a five, which could, in exceptional cases, be supplemented by a plus sign. I already knew I had been given this mark. When I finished playing my *Song Without Words*, Tchaikovsky rose and busied himself with the examination journal. It was only after a fortnight that I heard what he had been doing with it: he had added three more plus signs to my mark, one on top, one below, and one behind. This five with four plus marks — a unique occurrence in the annals of the Conservatory — was naturally much discussed, and the story made the rounds of all Moscow."

In the summer of 1890, while still a student at the Moscow Conservatory, Rachmaninoff began a grand Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor. (He had abandoned a similar attempt two years earlier.) The first movement was finished quickly, but he did not return to the piece until the following year. On July 20, 1891, he wrote to Mikhail Slonov, "On July 6th, I fully completed composing and scoring my Piano Concerto. I could have finished it much sooner, but after the first movement, I idled for a long while and began to write the following movements only on July 3rd. Composed and scored the last two movements in two and a half days. You can imagine what a job that was! I wrote from five in the morning till eight in the evening, so after finishing the work I was terribly tired. Afterwards I rested for a few days. While working I never feel fatigue (on the contrary — pleasure). With me fatigue appears only when I realize that a big labor is finished. I am pleased with the Concerto." Rachmaninoff gave the Concerto's premiere on a student concert at the Moscow Conservatory on March 17, 1892; the school's director, Vasily Safonoff, conducted. "At the rehearsals the 18-year-old Rachmaninoff showed the same stubbornly calm character that we knew from our comradesly gatherings," wrote his fellow student Mikhail Bukinik. "Safonoff, who ordinarily conducted the compositions of his students, would brutally and unceremoniously change anything he wished in those scores, cleaning them up and cutting sections to make them more playable.... But Safonoff had a hard time with Rachmaninoff. This student not only refused categorically to accept alterations, but also had the audacity to stop Safonoff (as conductor), pointing out his errors in tempo and nuance. This was obviously displeasing to Safonoff, but being intelligent, he understood the rights of the author, though a beginner, to make his own interpretation, and he tried to take the edge off any awkwardness. Besides, Rachmaninoff's talent as a composer was so obvious, and his quiet self-assurance made such an impression on all, that even the omnipotent Safonoff had to yield."

The new Concerto enjoyed little success at its premiere, though one reviewer allowed that it showed "taste, tension, youthful sincerity and obvious knowledge; already there is much promise." Rachmaninoff himself thought the work in its original version to be flawed. After creating a sensation at his London debut in 1898 as pianist, conductor and composer, he was urged to return the following season to play his

Concerto, but promised that he would write a better one for his next engagement there. Though he played the work frequently, his dissatisfaction with it remained, and, after talking about doing so for years, he finally undertook its revision in October 1917 — just as the Russian Revolution erupted in the streets around his Moscow flat. “I sat at the writing table all day without troubling about the rattle of machine guns and rifle shots,” he noted in his diary. In December, he fled to Finland with other members of the aristocracy, supported himself for a year in Scandinavia by giving concerts, and settled in the United States in 1918. The revision of the First Concerto (which was undertaken after the composition of the Second and Third Piano Concertos) was extensive, especially in its alterations to the work’s form and orchestration. The Concerto’s thematic material, however, with its sense of bursting, youthful impetuosity, was largely retained. “Rachmaninoff transformed an early immature essay into a concise, spirited work,” wrote Geoffrey Norris.

Though the opening movement follows traditional concerto form, its greatest appeal arises from the melancholy nature of its themes, a quality at which Rachmaninoff excelled from his earliest works, and the virtuosic pianism required of the soloist, most notably in the mountainous solo cadenza that occurs near the end. The brief *Andante* is rhapsodic in spirit and lyrical in style, with the piano strewing sweeping arabesques upon the subdued orchestral accompaniment. The finale is aggressive and virtuosic, with a quiet center section to provide contrast before the work’s brilliant closing pages.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Opus 95, “From the New World”

Antonín Dvořák was born in Nelahozeves, Bohemia, on September 8, 1841, and died in Prague on May 1, 1904. He composed his Ninth Symphony “From the New World” in 1892 and 1893, and it was premiered at Carnegie Hall in New York City with conductor Anton Seidl and the New York Philharmonic on December 16, 1893. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the symphony at Carnegie Music Hall with conductor Frederic Archer in November 1897, and most recently performed it at with Manfred Honeck in October 2016. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. Performance time: approximately 44 minutes.

When Antonín Dvořák, age 51, arrived in New York on September 27, 1892 to direct the new National Conservatory of Music, both he and the institution’s founder, Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, expected that he would help to foster an American school of composition. He was clear and specific in his assessment: “I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. They can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States.... There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot find a thematic source here.” The “New World” Symphony was not only Dvořák’s way of pointing toward a truly American musical idiom but also a reflection of his own feelings about the country. “I should never have written the Symphony as I have,” he said, “if I hadn’t seen America.”

The “New World” Symphony is unified by the use of a motto theme that occurs in all four movements. This bold, striding phrase, with its arching contour, is played by the horns as the main theme of the sonata-form opening movement, having been foreshadowed (also by the horns) in the slow introduction. Two other themes are used in the first movement: a sad, dance-like melody for flute and oboe that exhibits folk characteristics, and a brighter tune, with a striking resemblance to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, for the solo flute.

Many years before coming to America, Dvořák had encountered Longfellow’s epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, which he read in a Czech translation. The great tale remained in his mind, and he considered making an opera of it during his time in New York. That project came to nothing, but *Hiawatha* did have an influence on the “New World” Symphony: the second movement was inspired by the forest funeral of Minnehaha; the third, by the dance of the Indians at the feast. That the music of these movements has more in common with the old plantation songs than with the chants of native Americans is due to Dvořák’s mistaken belief that African-American and Indian music were virtually identical.

The second movement is in three-part form (A–B–A), with a haunting English horn melody (later fitted with words by William Arms Fisher to become the folksong-spiritual *Goin’ Home*) heard in the first and last sections. The recurring motto here is pronounced by the trombones just before the return of the main theme

in the closing section. The third movement is a tempestuous scherzo with two gentle, intervening trios providing contrast. The motto theme, played by the horns, dominates the coda.

The finale employs a sturdy motive introduced by the horns and trumpets after a few introductory measures in the strings. In the Symphony's closing pages, the motto theme, *Goin' Home* and the scherzo melody are all gathered up and combined with the principal subject of the finale to produce a marvelous synthesis of the entire work — a look back across the sweeping vista of Dvořák's musical tribute to America.

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