

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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RUSSIAN TALES

Roger Sessions' *The Black Maskers Suite* appears as part of the NJSO's New Jersey Roots Project. "When I was appointed Music Director, of course I wanted to learn about New Jersey," he says. "I soon discovered the great composition school at Princeton, where Sessions was an important figure. It is exciting to conduct his music for the first time. His role in American composition is underestimated."

But what does Sessions have to do with Russian Tales? There's no mystery to the Russian connection of this weekend's Rachmaninoff concerto or Prokofiev symphony. In fact, Sessions fits right in. Lacombe explains: "*The Black Maskers* is based on a Russian play. That is why I thought to combine it with Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev." He also points out that Rachmaninoff had a residence at one time near Red Bank. Thus New Jersey Roots and Russian Tales intertwine.

The Black Maskers Suite

Roger Sessions

Born December 28, 1896 in Brooklyn, New York

Died March 26, 1985 in Princeton, New Jersey

From Massachusetts to Ohio to New Jersey: a composer's odyssey

Roger Sessions was 24 when he met composer Ernest Bloch in 1919. Despite having a pedigree that included degrees from Harvard (he graduated at 18) and Yale, and several years teaching at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, Sessions was drawn immediately to Bloch as mentor and role model. When the older man was appointed to the faculty of the Cleveland

Institute of Music in 1921, Sessions followed, serving as Bloch's assistant until 1925.

Less than one year into that appointment, the senior class of Smith College commissioned Sessions to write incidental music for a production of Leonid Nikolaevich Andreyev's 1908 drama, *The Black Maskers*. The project developed into Sessions's first major orchestral composition. Sessions went on to become a leading teacher of composition for nearly half a century, counting such luminaries as Milton Babbitt, Edward T. Cone, Ross Lee Finney, Donald Martino and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich among his students. He held faculty appointments at Princeton, Berkeley and Juilliard.

Sessions adopted serial techniques in 1953 and continued composing until the early 1980s, producing nine symphonies, two operas and many other important works. *The Black Maskers* remains his best-known composition, which is ironic, for it is not representative of his catalogue. This suite is a rare example of early Franco-Russian influence in his music—specifically that of Stravinsky and Bloch.

Dramatist who dwelled on the dark side

The playwright Andreyev was a leading exponent of symbolist and expressionist drama in Czarist Russia. Despair and a bleak outlook permeate his work; like most of his plays, *The Black Maskers* deals with spiritual confusion and the sickness of the human soul.

The plot revolves around Duke Lorenzo, who wrestles with a split personality and fights a psychological duel with his *Doppelgänger*. The play is fraught with hallucination and distorted reality. It has a literary analogue in the bizarre works of Edgar Allan Poe. Sessions referred to *The Black Maskers* score as his *Firebird* or *Verklärte Nacht*, describing its music as “an expression of certain moods felt behind the incidents of the play.”

About the music

The opening *Dance* is a diabolical waltz that mixes sardonic laughter with imagined cries of terror. The evil forces of the unknown are even more evident in the second movement, *Scene*,

which depicts the menacing shadows of black-masked figures as they take over a celebration. A central interlude incorporates Duke Lorenzo's song, here as a duet for alto flute and solo viola. *Dirge* foreshadows the Duke's death, and the finale depicts a fire that consumes the castle and releases him from his torment. Sessions wrote, "As his castle is overwhelmed by the conflagration, Lorenzo finds redemption in the symbolic purity of the flames." The parallel to Brunnhilde's immolation in *Götterdämmerung* is a tacit salute to Sessions's early devotion to Wagner.

In its original version, Sessions wrote eight episodes for small orchestra. When he compiled the suite in 1927, he enlarged the ensemble to include three flutes (all doubling piccolo and one doubling alto flute), three oboes (third doubling English horn), two B-flat clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion—cymbals, field drum, side drum, tam tam, triangle, xylophone, tambourine, Chinese tambourine—piano, optional organ and strings. Timing: approximately 22 minutes.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born April 1, 1873 in Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia

Died March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills, California

Unforgettable opening

The opening of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto is one of the marvels of the literature. With no orchestral preparation, the pianist plays a series of quiet chords in F minor, alternating with a low F in the most sepulchral region of the keyboard. Seven times we hear the chord, each time with a slightly different harmony and another response from that low F. Each time the exchange takes place, the volume increases slightly. The eighth time, now quite loud, the pianist thunders another big chord, then three portentous notes leading to a decisive landing on C. It is the first time Rachmaninoff has tipped his hand that his concerto is in C minor, the advertised key. His opening ploy has been a red herring, teasing us, building suspense, putting us on the

edge of our seats, waiting for a door to slam, a shoe to drop—or a rocket to blast off.

Takeoff, as it happens, is immediate. The piano is off and running in a swirling of arpeggios. The orchestra, which has been silent, plunges in with the passionate first theme, and the tapestry of Rachmaninoff's music comes into focus. His remarkable opening is one of the most dramatic and original in the concerted literature. That simple eight-bar piano introduction throws down a gauntlet, declaring the soloist's supremacy above the orchestra, yet paradoxically indicating his codependence. He requires the orchestra to anchor the home tonality and the principal theme, thereby providing the framework for the pianist's activity.

The relationship between piano and orchestra in this concerto is unusual. Throughout the work, Rachmaninoff entrusts most of the melodies to the large ensemble, while the piano takes a decorative, textural role. Keyboard provides lush embroidery for the dense fabric of the music. No transparent muslin or sturdy denim here—Rachmaninoff's luxuriant materials are velvet, satin brocade, silk *moiré* and ermine trimming.

Straddling two centuries

By the skin of its teeth, the concerto is a 20th-century work. Rachmaninoff composed the second and third movements in 1900, adding the first movement in 1901. For practical purposes, however, this is a late Romantic concerto in the tradition of the 19th-century virtuoso. What distinguishes it from dozens of less-stellar late-Romantic concerti is the glorious piano writing and Rachmaninoff's increased skill in handling orchestral resources. He also strikes a fine balance between Russian gloom and rhapsodic ecstasy. It is little wonder that so many popular songs of the 1930s and 1940s were based on this concerto's themes.

This concerto was a breakthrough work for Rachmaninoff on two levels. The first was a break from the past. The concerto marked his emergence from a deep depression that had gripped him for three years, following the disastrous premiere of his Symphony No. 1. The second level looked to the future: this work boosted Rachmaninoff's international reputation as a master of the

concerto. It affirmed his genius to a broad public.

Rachmaninoff scored the concerto for woodwinds and trumpets in pairs, four horns, three trombones, tuba, timpani, solo piano and strings. Timing: approximately 32 minutes.

HYPNOSIS ON HOLIDAY

Early in 1900, Rachmaninoff traveled to Yalta in the Southern Crimea. His family, concerned by his prolonged disinterest in composition, had sent him there. The area provided a respite from the severe Russian winter and was a preferred destination for well-heeled artists. It was frequented by Russia's cultural elite and boasted a particularly strong coterie of theatrical types. Residents in the resort community included director Konstantin Stanislavsky, playwright Anton Chekhov, Romantic realist author Maxim Gorky and composer Vasily Kalinnikov. Rachmaninoff's traveling companion was the Russian operatic bass Feodor Chaliapin.

The trip included treatment from Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a specialist in behavioral hypnosis who was also an enthusiastic amateur cellist with a broad knowledge of music. He had previously treated one of Rachmaninoff's aunts, with great success. Rachmaninoff liked Dahl, enjoyed his discussions with him and responded well to their sessions. (He later acknowledged to friends that a promise he had made to London's Philharmonic Society for a new concerto also spurred him to recovery.)

Another change of scenery occurred when Chaliapin was invited to sing in Arrigo Boito's opera *Mefistofele* at Milan's Teatro alla Scala. The bass invited Rachmaninoff to accompany him to Italy. Chaliapin had rented a house for June and July on the Ligurian coast north of Genoa. Rachmaninoff had begun to pine for his family after six months' separation, and he missed Russian culture keenly. Nevertheless, he had broken through depression and writer's block. At the villa in Varazze, near San Remo, he resumed composing and began the Second Concerto.

When he returned to Russia in August 1900, the second and third movements were complete. He

performed them in December at a charity concert, adding the first movement in spring 1901. He played the new concerto in its entirety in November 1901; his friend Alexander Siloti conducted. The performance was a triumph, and the concerto has been a mainstay of the literature ever since. When it was published, Rachmaninoff included a dedication to Dahl.

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Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major, Op. 100

Sergei Prokofiev

Born April 23, 1891 in Sontzovka, Ukraine, Russia

Died March 5, 1953 in Moscow, Russia

During a Soviet radio broadcast of an all-Prokofiev program on November 4, 1945—barely two months after the end of the Second World War—Sergei Prokofiev said:

I wrote my Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1944 and I consider my work on this symphony very significant both because of the musical material put into it and because I returned to the symphonic form after a 16-year interval. The Fifth Symphony completes, as it were, a long period of my works. I conceived it as a symphony of the greatness of the human spirit.

Along with the Classical Symphony and *Peter and the Wolf*, the Fifth Symphony has proved one of Prokofiev's most popular works. It is his only mature symphony to have caught the popular imagination.

Prokofiev is perhaps best known for his ballet scores (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella*), and pianists admire his magnificent contribution to the solo keyboard literature. But he was an experienced orchestral composer, producing seven symphonies that span virtually his entire creative life; the earliest, the Classical Symphony, Op. 25 (1916–17), was preceded by two juvenile symphonies and a number of other orchestral compositions. Nos. 2, 3, and 4 all date from the mid- to late 1920s. Then ensued the 16-year hiatus mentioned in the radio quotation above.

Soviet music and Prokofiev's patriotism

His final three symphonies are all considered Soviet works because they were written after he had returned to his homeland permanently. During the Stalin years, Soviet music was under varying degrees of state supervision. For some composers, governmental restrictions proved stifling; others flourished artistically while suffering politically. Prokofiev's late works, those from 1946 to 1953, were uneven—but the quality of his music during the war years was superb.

Despite the economic and circumstantial hardships of wartime, Prokofiev was highly productive from 1939 to 1945. He was at the peak of his composing powers, and he was still in good health. Among the major works he completed during the war were the opera *War and Peace*, ballet *Cinderella*, a string quartet, two piano sonatas, a flute sonata, five film scores and the Fifth Symphony. The latter represents the most epic side of his musical personality. It is the first overtly patriotic work not associated with theatre, film, voice or some other programmatic medium. In the Fifth Symphony, Prokofiev's admiration for the Russian people speaks for itself through music alone.

Influences: predecessors and contemporaries

At 45 minutes, the Fifth has the largest scale of Prokofiev's seven symphonies. In it, the late romantic tradition of Borodin (rather than Tchaikovsky), and to some extent Bruckner, merges with that of his Soviet contemporary Shostakovich, whose influence is particularly audible in the emotional third movement. It is a highly melodic work, with a broad emotional spectrum that ranges from exuberant gamesmanship to heartfelt agony.

Despite the palpable "Russian-ness" of the music, Prokofiev eschews folk themes. He favors slower tempi, contributing to an aura of veiled tragedy that suffuses the symphony. The exceptions are the jaunty second-movement *scherzo*, with its grotesque and fantastic elements, and the characteristic finale that begs to be choreographed. His bitter wit is most evident in these two movements, but the enduring message of this work is found in the intense drama of the first and third movements. He considered the Fifth Symphony his finest composition.

The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, timpani, bass drum, military drum, cymbals, harp, piano and strings. Timing: approximately 46 minutes.