

Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Verdi: *Nabucco Overture*. The earliest of Verdi's operas to earn a place in the repertory, *Nabucco* is based on the Biblical King Nebuchadnezzar. Its stirring overture features themes from the opera, notably "Va pensiero," which became an unofficial Italian anthem.

Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 2. This was Rachmaninoff's breakthrough work, catapulting him to international success as composer and pianist. His concerto is filled with melodies so memorable, they have appeared in films and popular songs since the 1930s. Passion and sumptuous harmonies enrich all three movements.

Elgar: *Enigma Variations*. The secret of Elgar's subtitle for these musical portraits of his friends remains controversial, but there is no dispute about the splendor of this quintessentially British work. The "Nimrod" variation is often performed as a memorial, but the larger message of these variations is life affirming and confident.

VERDI: *Nabucco* Overture

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Born: October 10, 1813, in Le Roncole, near Busseto, Parma, Italy

Died: January 27, 1901, in Milan, Italy

Composed: 1840–42

World Premiere: March 9, 1842, at Milan's Teatro alla Scala

NJSO Premiere: 1965–66 season; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 8 minutes

The country we call Italy did not take shape as a political entity until the late 19th century. For centuries before that, the Italian peninsula consisted of a patchwork of independent kingdoms, city-states and small duchies, plus the Papal States. The Alps provided natural protection to the area's northern borders; however, Italian territory found itself still subject to military invasion from France to the west and Austria to the northeast. For much of the 19th century, Venice and Lombardy belonged to the Habsburg Empire, and branches of the French Bourbon dynasty ruled Naples and Sicily.

Partly as a result of the French Revolution, Italian nationalism and the desire for unification grew. The movement, known as the Risorgimento ("Resurgence"), gathered momentum in the 1830s and 40s. Liberal republican sentiments gained currency along with the idea of resurrecting the idealized grandeur of Italy's rich history. In a signal coincidence of art and history, Verdi's first great operatic success, *Nabucco*, played an important role in Italy's nationalist movement. Hebrew slaves sing "Va, pensiero," a chorus in the third act. Patriotic Italians read between the lines, translating the situation to the oppression of their Austrian rulers. Although Italian unification was not effected until 1870, Verdi's beloved chorus became an unofficial national anthem and remains popular to this day.

The opera's plot is based on the Old Testament tale of Nebuchadnezzar and the tyranny of Jerusalem. Verdi and his librettist, Temistocle Solera, played on the political sympathies of the Milanese audience. The premiere was greeted by tumultuous cheers and applause, as Verdi secured and held his listeners' attention from the sonorous brass chorale that launches the slow introduction.

His overture draws primarily on choral themes from the opera, and its most lyrical moment features an extended quotation from the “Va, pensiero” chorus, here introduced by woodwinds and pizzicato strings. The balance of the overture consists of rousing march rhythms that build to a stirring and victorious climax.

Instrumentation: flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons and trumpets in pairs; piccolo; four horns; three trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion and strings.

RACHMANINOFF: 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

Composed: Primarily in 1900–01

World Premiere: November 9, 1901, in Moscow. Alexander Siloti conducted; Rachmaninoff was the soloist.

NJSO Premiere: 1936–37 season. Rene Pollain conducted; Rudolph Ganz was the soloist.

Duration: 33 minutes

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 loudly, 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, hitherto 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 dominance over the orchestra, yet paradoxically indicating codependence. Rachmaninoff 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. In reality, it is a late Romantic concerto in the virtuoso tradition. 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 the concerto's themes have appeared in film soundtracks and popular songs since the 1930s, most famously "All By Myself" by Eric Carmen.

The Second Piano Concerto was a breakthrough work. It marked Rachmaninoff's emergence from a deep depression that had gripped him for three years, following the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony. Its success boosted Rachmaninoff's international reputation as a master of the concerto, affirming his genius to a broad public.

HYPNOSIS ON HOLIDAY

Early in 1900, Rachmaninoff traveled to Yalta in the Southern Crimea. He had been sent there by his family, who was concerned by his prolonged disinterest in composition following the failure of his First Symphony in 1897. A mild climate made Yalta a preferred destination for well-heeled

artists eager to escape the bitter Russian winter. The resort was frequented by Russia's cultural elite and boasted a particularly strong coterie of theatrical types. Residents included the 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 Yalta trip included treatment from 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 their discussions 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. After six months away from home, Rachmaninoff had begun to pine for his family; he also 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 Piano Concerto.

When the composer returned to Russia in August 1900, the concerto's 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 Dr. Nikolai Dahl.

Instrumentation: woodwinds and trumpets in pairs, four horns, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings and solo piano.

ELGAR: Variations on an Original Theme (“Enigma”), Op. 36

SIR EDWARD ELGAR

Born: June 2, 1857, in Broadheath, near Worcester, England

Died: February 23, 1934, in Worcester, England

Composed: 1898–99

World Premiere: June 19, 1899, at London’s St. James Hall; Hans Richter conducted

NJSO Premiere: 1957–58 season; Samuel Antek conducted.

Duration: 29 minutes

During the 19th century, German and Austrian musicians referred disparagingly to England as “das Land ohne Musik”—the land without music. Elgar was a pivotal figure in the 20th-century renaissance in English composition. His *Enigma Variations* made him a national celebrity.

This remarkable score bears the inscription “Dedicated to my friends pictured within.” Over the first page, the word “Enigma” appears. Each of the 14 variations is titled either with a monogram or a nickname referring members of Elgar’s circle. Thus, “C.A.E.” of the first variation is his wife, Caroline Alice Elgar; Variation II’s “H.D.S.-P.” is Hew David Steuart-Powell, the pianist in Elgar’s trio (along with “B.G.N.,” Basil Nevinson, the cellist and subject of Variation XII) and so forth. Many of his Worcestershire friends thereby achieved a measure of immortality.

Elgar clearly delighted in expressing their personalities through music. Writing to his friend August Johannes Jaeger in October 1898: “Since I’ve been back I have sketched a set of Variations on an original theme; the Variations have amused me because I’ve labelled ’em with the nicknames of my particular friends—you are Nimrod. [“Jaeger” means hunter in German—Elgar’s reference is to Nimrod, the mighty hunter in the Bible.] That is to say I’ve written the Variations each one to represent the mood of the ‘party.’”

Jaeger was Elgar’s advocate at the London music publishing house of Novello, and he did much to promote Elgar’s music and encourage his friend. Elgar returned the support by making Jaeger’s the central variation of the set, the pivotal slow movement with the greatest emotional impact.

“Nimrod” is said to have been inspired by an evening walk during which Jaeger waxed poetic about Beethoven’s slow movements. Surely it is no accident that Elgar placed this variation in E-flat major, Beethoven’s heroic key. Many listeners perceive a strong similarity between the “Nimrod” variation and the famous slow movement to Beethoven’s “Pathétique” Sonata, Op. 13.

What is the ‘enigma’?

Elgar never revealed the meaning of his subtitle, writing: “The enigma I will not explain—its ‘dark saying’ must be left unguessed, and I warn you that the apparent connection between the variations and the theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme ‘goes,’ but is not played.”

This cryptic clue has led to countless theories about the hidden, unstated theme, with guesses ranging from “God Save the King” and “Auld Lang Syne” to “Ta ra ra boom-de-ay,” “Home Sweet Home” and Martin Luther’s chorale “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” No definitive solution has been universally accepted, and the secret of the enigma remains one of music’s tantalizing mysteries.

That stated, this musical portrait gallery is a treasure trove of brilliant character sketches, belying Elgar’s insistence that *Enigma* was absolute music, independent of those who had inspired it. William Meath Baker, the “W.M.B.” of Variation IV, is said to have been a decisive, athletic man who went about life with great physical flourishes punctuating his activities; his variation is appropriately resolute. Isabel Fitton, the “Ysobel” of Variation VI, was a viola student of Elgar’s; her lyrical, gentle variation features a viola solo and allegedly satirizes technical problems in her string playing that she never overcame.

Contemporaries described Arthur Troyte Griffith (“Troyte,” Variation VII) as an argumentative type. Elgar paints him with vigorous timpani, then brasses in animated dialogue with rapid violin triplets; this is a true virtuoso variation, enough to convince us that Troyte was a formidable opponent in debate!

“Dorabella” (Variation X) was Elgar’s pet name for Dora Penny, the youngest member of his circle included in the *Enigma Variations*. Her variation has the airy delicacy of ballet music. Sprightly, chirping

fillips of woodwinds and strings in “Dorabella” invite choreography; it comes as no surprise that Frederick Ashton created a ballet from Elgar’s piece in 1968.

Technically, what makes the *Enigma Variations* so marvelous is a combination of splendid orchestration, careful gauging of key changes and brilliant transitions from one variation to the next. Spiritually, what binds it is the overriding affection Elgar had for his friends. Variation XIV, “E.D.U.” (Alice’s pet name for her husband was “Edu”), binds the set together in exuberant conclusion, as if to say “Lucky me, that my life is enriched by these wonderful people.” Whether heard as an independent piece of music or in the context of Elgar’s musical portrait gallery, *Enigma Variations* is one of the masterpieces of the repertoire, and Elgar’s finest composition.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, organ ad lib. and strings.