

## **Blockbuster All-Orchestral Season Finale**

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

#### **Mendelssohn: Selections from *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

How quiet can an orchestra get? Listen to the opening of this magical overture and decide for yourself. Many of us read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in high school. In Mendelssohn's music, revisiting it is fun! That wedding march is just in time for this marrying time of year.

#### **Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 2**

Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony is expansive, leisurely and unapologetically romantic. Ignoring contemporary currents, Rachmaninoff looked to Tchaikovsky for his inspiration. This symphony attests to his skill in handling a large orchestra—and his gift for the big tune. You will leave the hall tonight with the ravishing slow-movement theme lingering in your ears (think Eric Carmen).

#### **MENDELSSOHN: Selections from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21**

##### **FELIX MENDELSSOHN**

**Born:** February 3, 1809, in Hamburg, Germany

**Died:** November 4, 1847, in Leipzig, Germany

**Composed:** 1826 (overture) and 1843 (incidental music)

**World Premiere:** October 14, 1843, in Potsdam

**NJSO Premiere:** 1959–60 season. Mathys Abas conducted.

**Duration:** 32 minutes

The genesis of Mendelssohn's beloved incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a tale almost as appealing as Shakespeare's play. On a balmy August night in 1826, the Mendelssohn family was entertaining Johann Franz Encke, an astronomer who directed the Berlin Observatory. Young Felix excused himself after dinner for a walk in the garden, to gaze at the stars that had been the primary topic of conversation at the dinner table. His attention was diverted by the gossamer activity of the summer night. Floral fragrances wafted through the air, gently prodded by evening breezes. Four such zephyrs are said to have been the origins of the four woodwind chords that open and close the overture. The feather-light string figuration taken up by both violin sections is Mendelssohn's musical impression of fireflies flickering about the nocturnal atmosphere. Years later, he told the English composer William Sterndale Bennett, "That night I encountered Shakespeare in the garden!"

Mendelssohn had read Shakespeare in German translation and revered him as "the most perfect poet who ever lived." His original intent was to express the spirit of Shakespeare's immortal comedy in a single concert movement. He was only 17 when he composed his flawless overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The rest of his incidental music did not follow until 1843. Then, at the ripe old age of 34, he was commissioned by the King of Prussia to compose incidental music for a staged performance of the play in Berlin. Mendelssohn composed a considerable amount of new music for that production, incorporating both solo voices and chorus. In some of the instrumental excerpts we hear, he expanded the existing overture's themes. The miracle of his incidental music is that it captures the magic of both Shakespeare's play and the earlier overture, despite the years that had elapsed since the earlier composition.

The overture is a fine example of sonata form, completely consistent with Mendelssohn's lifelong penchant for the ideals of the 18th century. So effortlessly did he control the formal apparatus, however, that we are more conscious of various Shakespearean subplots unfolding than we are of first and second themes, development and recapitulation. Schumann considered that, with this work, Mendelssohn had invented a new genre: the programmatic concert-overture. Yet its success derives from atmospheric rather than specifically narrative means.

Mendelssohn's incomparably light touch is absolutely perfect for this music. A lifelong master of the scherzo, he incorporated all the best characteristics of his style into the glorious overture. We have the mysterious, elfin, faerie world of Titania, Oberon and their minions Puck, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed. The boisterous good nature of Bottom, Flute, Snout and their cohorts also finds its place in the score, including the braying of the ass. Nor does Mendelssohn ignore the ultimately noble sentiments of the Athenian nobles, Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius and Helena. Magic and humor shine forth, happily joined in this miraculous opener.

The Intermezzo was intended to be played during a scene change. Musically, it attests to the composer's mastery of the orchestra. Alternating groups of instruments set forth the agitated texture: strings *tremolo* beneath a nervous melody in the violins, contrasting with woodwinds and horn. Presently, Mendelssohn introduces a bold countermelody in cellos and bassoons. The movement concludes with a switch to a country-bumpkin dance in A major, featuring a bassoon duet against a dominant pedal in the low strings. Eventually clarinets join in, and we move toward a joyous finale.

The melodious Nocturne, a simple tripartite form (A-B-A), is set as a glorious trio for principal horn and two bassoons. Mendelssohn's Scherzo—a genre at which he excelled—recaptures the gossamer magic of the overture. Delicate, humorous and fairy-like, it features dramatic crescendos that rouse its quiet moments. A fabulous flute solo crowns the movement, which, like the overture, is in sonata form, in this case an economical one.

Mendelssohn's Wedding March opens with a celebratory trumpet fanfare. The music is so familiar that we hardly notice how unusual its initial melodic statement is. It was very bold at its time. The audience stood at the premiere, remaining on their feet for the balance of the play. As Mendelssohn's biographer Heinrich Eduard Jacob observed, "It was as though they were the wedding guests invited by the Duke of Athens in person."

*Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; bass tuba; timpani and strings.*

## **RACHMANINOFF: Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 27**

### **SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

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

**Died:** March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

**Composed:** October 1906–April 1907

**World Premiere:** January 26, 1908, in St. Petersburg. The composer conducted.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1954–55 season. Samuel Antek conducted.

**Duration:** 45 minutes

Rachmaninoff is deservedly celebrated for his splendid contribution to the piano literature, both solo works—notably two sets each of Preludes and Etudes-tableaux—and concerted ones. His Second Piano Concerto and *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* for piano and orchestra remain perennial favorites. Somewhat lesser known are Rachmaninoff's strictly orchestral compositions, which include two undisputed masterpieces: the late *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45, (1940) and the symphony we hear at these performances.

The Second Symphony was an easy sell for Rachmaninoff, and one that he badly needed to assuage damaged self-confidence. Excepting an unfinished youthful symphony, his first effort in the genre was a Symphony in D minor from 1895. Its failure was so disastrous that Rachmaninoff hardly composed for three years following, and it was nearly 12 years before he saw fit to complete another symphony. Fortunately, the success of the Second Piano Concerto and a number of smaller works did much to restore his faith in his own talent.

He began work on the Second Symphony in October 1906 while living in Dresden, where he and his family had moved in the aftermath of the failed Russian revolution of 1905. The piece gave him problems. He labored over the first movement alone for nearly three months. He spoke little of the work; most of his friends believed him to be immersed in a new opera. Somewhat frustrated by symphonic form, Rachmaninoff set the manuscript aside after completing the draft in April 1907.

Back in Russia during the summer, he turned to orchestration but remained very tight-lipped about having completed the score, confiding to friends in letters that he was displeased with it. He managed to work through his dissatisfaction, and he returned to St. Petersburg to conduct the premiere early in 1908. A Moscow premiere followed in mid-February. The symphony was a great success in both cities, and the Russian academy hastened to formally recognize Rachmaninoff's achievement by awarding him the Glinka Prize for his new work in December 1908.

The music is lush and relaxed. This is an expansive symphony in the late Romantic vein: heartfelt, emotional and long. More than one writer has compared it to Schubert's Ninth, "Great," Symphony. It shares with that work an embarrassment of melodic riches, including at least one Rachmaninoff theme that has found its way into the popular canon via Eric Carmen's 1976 hit "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again." (Carmen lifted his theme from Rachmaninoff's slow movement). Raw emotional power in this work points to mature Rachmaninoff; at the same time, it links him more strongly to his predecessor Tchaikovsky than probably any other composition.

While each of the four movements has its share of the broad lines, arching melodies and sometimes ecstatic expression that characterize this work, the brilliant Scherzo merits special mention. At approximately nine minutes it is certainly the shortest of the four, but the composer has compressed a wealth of ideas in that brief span. The orchestration is impeccable (listen for the sparkle of the glockenspiel), and Rachmaninoff's command of counterpoint in the central fugato is impressive. Also noteworthy is the exuberant opening of the finale, which matches the opening to Strauss's *Don Juan* in its evocation of newly-popped champagne bubbling over.

*Instrumentation: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, side drum, glockenspiel and strings.*