

## **Yefim Bronfman Plays Rachmaninoff**

### **ONE-MINUTE NOTES**

#### **Jessie Montgomery: *Banner***

Our national anthem is the basis for this free rhapsody. Montgomery composed it in observance of *The Star-Spangled Banner's* bicentennial. A violinist herself, she wrote for virtuoso string ensemble. Listen for bits and snippets of the familiar tune, in varying tempos. Jazz, ragtime, bluegrass and square dance styles all make an appearance.

#### **Aaron Copland: *Appalachian Spring Suite* (1945)**

*Appalachian Spring* is Copland's best loved work, capturing both the American pioneer spirit and a sense of national pride that was morale-building during the dark years of World War II. The music immortalized the Shaker hymn "Tis a Gift to be Simple." The ballet scenario and its music communicate the simplicity and honesty of America's early settlers.

#### **Sergei Rachmaninoff: *Piano Concerto No. 3***

Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto is a major war horse of the repertoire. A pulsating orchestra opens this concerto, supporting the piano's stark, straightforward theme in octaves. Rachmaninoff spins wonders from this deceptively simple melody! Blood and thunder, passion and pathos course through the outer movements. The Intermezzo provides welcome respite, setting the stage for the firestorm of the finale.

#### **Jessie Montgomery: *Banner***

##### **Jessie Montgomery**

**Born:** December 8, 1981, in New York, New York

**Composed:** 2014

**World Premiere:** October 14, 2014, in Detroit by the Sphinx Virtuosi.

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** These performances are the New Jersey Symphony premiere.

**Duration:** 8 minutes

**Instrumentation:** Solo string quartet and string orchestra.

*Music is my connection to the world. It guides me to understand my place in relation to others and challenges me to make clear the things I do not understand. I imagine that music is a meeting place at which all people can converse about their unique differences and common stories.*

–Jessie Montgomery

So reads a statement on Jessie Montgomery’s website. A violinist and educator as well as a composer, she grew up in a musical household on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Her parents worked in music and theater and were active in neighborhood arts initiatives. Montgomery earned her undergraduate degree from The Juilliard School in violin performance, and she subsequently completed a master’s in film composition and multimedia at NYU. She is currently a graduate fellow in music composition at Princeton. In May 2021, she began an appointment as Mead Composer in Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Montgomery composed *Banner* in 2014 on commission from the Sphinx Virtuosi, a self-conducted string orchestra comprising 18 Black and Latinx musicians. The commission was in observance of the 200th anniversary of our national anthem. Montgomery’s composer’s note explains further.

*Banner* is a rhapsody on the “Star Spangled Banner” theme. Drawing on musical and historical sources from various world anthems and patriotic songs, I’ve made an attempt to answer the question: “What does an anthem for the 21st century sound like in today’s multi-cultural environment?” The structure is loosely based on traditional marching band form where there are several strains or contrasting sections; I have drawn on the drum line chorus as a source for the rhythmic underpinning in the finale.

As a culture, we Americans are perpetually in search of ways to express our ideals of freedom, to proclaim, “we’ve made it!” as if the very action of saying it aloud makes it so. And for many of our nation’s people, that was the case: through work songs and spirituals, enslaved Africans promised themselves a way out and built the nerve to endure the most abominable treatment for the promise of a free life. Immigrants from Europe, Central America and the Pacific have sought out a safe haven here and, though met with the trials of building a multi-cultured democracy, continue to find roots in our nation and make significant contributions to our cultural landscape. A tribute to the U.S. national anthem means acknowledging the contradictions, leaps and bounds and milestones that allow us to celebrate and maintain the tradition of our ideals.

Montgomery’s eight-minute rhapsody deconstructs phrases from the familiar tune, rethinking them and combining them with snippets of other musical Americana. Collectively, they feel like a jumbled kaleidoscope, or perhaps a crowded fairground. The piece has some of the patchwork crazy exuberance of Charles Ives, who drew on America’s diverse musical cultures more than a century ago. But the immediacy, string agility and quicksilver mood changes are Montgomery’s own.

We hear the original version of *Banner*: for solo string quartet and string orchestra. Montgomery subsequently arranged it for string quartet and chamber orchestra.

## **Aaron Copland: *Appalachian Spring Suite* (1945)**

### **Aaron Copland**

**Born:** November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn, New York

**Died:** December 2, 1990, in North Tarrytown, New York

**Composed:** 1943–44; re-arranged in 1945

**World Premiere:** October 4, 1945 in New York (New York Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor Artur Rodzinski)

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** Suite: 2000–01 season; Zdeněk Mácal conducted.

**Duration:** 25 minutes

**Instrumentation:** Two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, bass drum, claves, suspended cymbal, wood block, xylophone, orchestra bells, snare drum, tabor, triangle, harp, piano, strings.

*Appalachian Spring* is one of three “folk ballets” – along with *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo* – that constitute the foundation of Aaron Copland’s substantial reputation. Only his *Fanfare for the Common Man* is arguably better known than these ballets. *Appalachian Spring*’s sentimental appeal derives from the strong sense of Americana with which Copland suffused his score. Even though the only borrowed melody is the Shaker tune “’Tis a gift to be simple,” his original music communicates the *sense* that we have always known it. Somehow Copland distills the essence of our nation’s spirit in ways that speak to us all.

The Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation commissioned Copland to compose this ballet for Martha Graham in 1943. He completed the score in 1944 while teaching at Harvard. The premiere took place in Washington, at the Library of Congress’ Coolidge Auditorium that October; Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham danced the principal roles. *Appalachian Spring* was an immediate success, earning the New York City Music Critics’ Circle Award for the outstanding theatrical work of the 1944–45 season, and the Pulitzer Prize in music for 1945. It was re-arranged and performed again as a suite a year later.

The ballet scenario takes place in the early 19th century. A young farming couple in Pennsylvania Dutch country are being married; the wedding celebration centers around their new pioneer farmhouse in the Appalachian foothills. Copland’s complete ballet took approximately 34 minutes in performance. His orchestral suite, nearly ten minutes shorter than the complete ballet, maintains the gentleness of spirit that permeates Copland’s lovely music. He later acknowledged the essential message that guided his thinking when he composed this ballet: “I knew certain crucial things -- that it had to do with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope.”

## Sergei Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30

### Sergei Rachmaninoff

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

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

**Composed:** 1909

**World Premiere:** November 28, 1909, in New York City. The composer was the soloist; Walter Damrosch conducted the New York Symphony.

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** 1968–69 season. Abbey Simon was the soloist; Henry Lewis conducted.

**Duration:** 39 minutes

**Instrumentation:** Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, solo piano and strings.

*The work grows in impressiveness upon acquaintance and will doubtless take rank among the most interesting piano concertos of recent years, although its great length and extreme difficulties bar it from performance by any but pianists of exceptional powers.*

—*The New York Herald*, January 17, 1910

Amen.

Since this review of Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto appeared in print, only a relatively small number of the world's pianists, all of whom aspire to perform it, have successfully endeavored to master those 'exceptional powers.' They are responding to popular demand. Listeners *love* this piece.

Indeed, when a work is so familiar, so central to the repertoire, it is difficult to grasp how fresh and exciting it must have sounded to Rachmaninoff's first audiences. He introduced the concerto in late November 1909, performing with the New York Symphony under the baton of Walter Damrosch. In New York, a brand new piece by a famous European composer-pianist was a major event. For the January performance that *The New York Herald* reviewed, the celebrity factor was even greater. This time, not only was Rachmaninoff the soloist, but Gustav Mahler was on the podium.

### Summer vacation: a working holiday

As it happens, the premiere was a big event for the composer, too. He had weighed the prospect of an American tour for some time. Rachmaninoff had reservations about such a long and taxing journey; however, his solo pieces and Second Concerto enjoyed immense popularity in the United States, therefore such a trip would be highly lucrative. As plans for the tour coalesced, it became apparent that he would require a new piece for piano and orchestra to showcase on the American concerts. He worked on the new concerto during summer 1909, while on holiday at Ivanovka, a country estate belonging to his wife's family, completing the manuscript on September 23. Three weeks later he was en route to the United States, with manuscript and parts in his luggage. There was no time to engrave printed music.

### How to top a known winner?

The challenge that Rachmaninoff faced was to match the quality and appeal of his popular Second Piano Concerto in original and compelling music. He knew that the new work would be compared to the earlier one. His solution was to take a different approach in thematic treatment. In the second concerto, after the dramatic solo piano chords of the opening, the orchestra declaims the first theme forte, while the piano surges in tandem with Schumannesque arpeggios.

Rachmaninoff altered his tactic for the Third Piano Concerto. The soloist states the theme straightaway in open octaves, preceded only by two bars of a subdued orchestral accompaniment. The dynamic level is quiet and the texture spare. Rachmaninoff's melody is deceptively simple, moving primarily in stepwise motion or in small intervals. The theme is also unusually long, which makes it linger in our ears. Motives from it will recur throughout the entire concerto, providing subtle thematic unity.

When the orchestra takes up the theme, the soloist embarks on a series of exploratory variations, leading to a second theme that has all the warmth and lyricism we associate with Rachmaninoff. He develops this material with a profusion of brilliant writing for piano. While the keyboard technique is indebted to Liszt, Rachmaninoff's style is distinctive. He demands quick shifts of hand position, rapid repeated notes, the ability to play with delicacy and lightness as well as with power—and plenty of enormous chords. In places, the piano practically explodes with activity.

### Gemini cadenzas

After the furor subsides, Rachmaninoff proceeds to his solo cadenza. He actually composed two cadenzas for this concerto. Only their closing measures are the same. The first is shorter—possibly he wrote it in order to accommodate the time restrictions of 78 rpm records—and emphasizes complex passage work. The second, a massive 75 bars, requires both strength and stamina for extensive chordal playing. Both cadenzas are wonderful musically and pianistically. Some pianists believe that the briefer version expresses a more succinct and musically sensitive aspect of Rachmaninoff's keyboard personality. Others prefer the thunderous drama of the 75-bar version. For these performances, Yefim Bronfman plays the longer cadenza.

The slow movement, which Rachmaninoff called *Intermezzo*, consists of a theme and four variations. Oboe introduces the melody; the orchestra establishes an elegiac atmosphere. The piano joins in with extravagant harmonic wanderings. The music feels improvisatory, yet at every turn there are hints and fragments of that opening theme from the first movement. Occasional outbursts from the piano precipitate mood changes and enhance the narrative flow. It proceeds without pause to the finale, a dance-like, energetic movement in the Russian tradition—and a bravura *tour de force*.

From the standpoint of compositional technique, the Third Piano Concerto represents an enormous leap forward for Rachmaninoff. The flow and continuity are superb. He writes with more immediacy and variety to his rhythms. The cyclic references among the three movements allow his ideas to blossom. Orchestral moments are rich and abundant. The virtuoso display aspect of the solo part has eclipsed Rachmaninoff's

symphonic approach to concerto form. His writing for winds and brass is far more imaginative than in the earlier concertos.

The power and bravura of the piano part rarely fail to prompt audiences to their feet at the conclusion of this concerto. Its splendor and genius lie just as much in the delicate, whimsical moments and the infinite variety of Rachmaninoff's decorative passages.

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