NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2025

Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Sergei Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

By the skin of its teeth, Rachmaninoff's beloved Second Piano Concerto is a 20th-century work. He 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 concertos is the glorious piano writing and Rachmaninoff's consummate skill in handling orchestral resources. He also strikes a fine balance between Russian gloom and rhapsodic ecstasy. It is little wonder that several popular songs of the 1930s and 1940s were based on this concerto's themes.

The Second 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 in 1897. The concerto's success boosted Rachmaninoff's international reputation as a master of the genre, affirming his genius to a broad public.

Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

Shostakovich was the greatest symphonist of the 20th century. His contribution is important not only because he left 15 examples (more than any other symphonist of his stature), but also because they are musically so substantive.

He composed his Fifth Symphony on the heels of a major musical and political setback: Joseph Stalin's adverse reaction to Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and his subsequent attack in *Pravda* in January 1936. The following year, 1937, was the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution. For that occasion, Shostakovich composed his Fifth Symphony. The new work put him back in official good graces. With this symphony, Shostakovich responded successfully to Stalin's political directive for music with a mission. He composed, as it were, a Soviet symphony; this was the piece that won governmental approval, becoming Shostakovich's passport to official "rehabilitation." The symphony also did a considerable amount to boost Shostakovich's reputation outside the Soviet Union. And yet, in spite of its surface compliance with the party

line, it is still a work of passion and heartfelt emotion, managing to be personal without sacrificing power. The composer later wrote:

> The theme of my symphony is the development of the individual. I saw man with all his sufferings as the central idea of the work, which is lyrical in mood from start to finish. The finale resolves the tragedy and tension of the earlier movements on a joyous, optimistic note.

While the two outer movements have become the Fifth Symphony's best-known segments, the inner two better reflect Shostakovich's emerging style. The scherzo, a quasi-Schubertian country dance tinged with Mahlerian satire, shows the dry, sardonic side of Shostakovich's personality to perfection. And the slow movement, a showcase for the string section, embodies the tragedy and poetry inherent in the human condition. The Fifth Symphony is usually regarded as the window looking into Shostakovich's middle period, but its music has such polished maturity that it more than foreshadows the rich masterpieces that would follow during and after the Second World War.

Sergei 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
Composed: Primarily in 1900–1901
World Premiere: November 9, 1901, in Moscow. Rachmaninoff was the soloist; Alexander Siloti conducted.
Duration: 33 minutes
Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two trumpets, four horns, three trombones, tuba, timpani, solo piano, and strings

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 hegemony over the orchestra, yet paradoxically indicating her co-dependence. 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.

By the skin of its teeth, the Second 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 concertos 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 several popular songs of the 1930s and 1940s were based on this concerto's themes.

The Second 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 Symphony No. 1. Its success boosted Rachmaninoff's international reputation as a master of the concerto, affirming his genius to a broad public.

Early in 1900, Rachmaninoff traveled to Yalta in Southern Crimea. He had been sent there by his family, who were 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, the playwright Anton Chekhov, the Romantic realist author Maxim Gorky, and the composer Vasily Kalinnikov. Rachmaninoff's traveling companion was the Russian operatic bass Feodor Chaliapin.

The Yalta 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 him, enjoyed his discussions with Dr. Dahl, 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 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 Second Concerto has been a mainstay of literature ever since. When it was published, Rachmaninoff included a dedication to Dr. Nikolai Dahl.

Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

Dmitri Shostakovich
Born: September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg
Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow
Composed: April to July 1937
World Premiere: First performance November 21, 1937, in Leningrad. Yevgeny Mravinsky led the Leningrad Philharmonic.
Duration: 44 minutes
Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, xylophone, glockenspiel), two harps, celesta, piano, and strings

Shostakovich was the greatest symphonist of the 20th century. His contribution is important not only because he left 15 examples (more than any other symphonist of his stature), but also because they are musically so substantive. There are striking parallels to Beethoven in Shostakovich's career. Among the most startling is the role that a Fifth Symphony played in each of their output. In both cases, the Fifth is considered to be a pivotal work, one that delineated a major shift in his music. Shortly before his Fifth Symphony's premiere, Shostakovich wrote:

> The theme of my symphony is the development of the individual. I saw man with all his sufferings as the central idea of the work, which is lyrical in mood from start to finish; the finale resolves the tragedy and tension of the earlier movements on a joyous, optimistic note.

Listeners who know the Beethoven Fifth will immediately sense a kinship. Beethoven's symphony deals with the struggle against Fate, in which man emerges triumphant in the finale. Another factor the works have in common is their unification by a concise musical motto that recurs in almost every movement. In Beethoven it is the famous "fate knocking at the door" that opens the symphony; in Shostakovich it is a pronounced iambic (short-long) rhythm, which is particularly dominant in the opening Moderato.

Shostakovich wrote his Fifth Symphony on the heels of a major musical and political setback: Joseph Stalin's adverse reaction to Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and his subsequent attack in *Pravda* in January 1936. The following year, 1937, was the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution. For that occasion, Shostakovich composed his Fifth Symphony. The new work put him back in official good graces. With this symphony, Shostakovich responded successfully to Stalin's political directive for music with a mission. He

composed, as it were, a Soviet symphony; this was the piece that won governmental approval, becoming Shostakovich's passport to official "rehabilitation." The symphony also did a considerable amount to build Shostakovich's reputation outside the Soviet Union. And yet, in spite of its surface compliance with the party line, it is still a work of passion and heartfelt emotion, managing to be personal without sacrificing power.

The degree to which the Fifth Symphony remained personal to the composer emerges in his later writings. In particular, Solomon Volkov's *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, first published in 1979, includes the following remarkable passage:

> I discovered to my astonishment that the man who considers himself its greatest interpreter [the Russian conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky] does not understand my music. He says that I wanted to write exultant finales for my Fifth and Seventh Symphonies but I couldn't manage it. It never occurred to this man that I never thought about any exultant finales, for what exultation could there be? I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, "Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing," and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, "Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing."
>
> What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that. [The author Alexander Alexandrovich] Fadeyev heard it, and he wrote in his diary, for his personal use, that the finale of the Fifth is irreparable tragedy. He must have felt it with his Russian alcoholic soul.

Shostakovich's trenchant and bitter remarks imply a layer of irony in the finale that encourages thoughtful listening. Even those who know the Fifth Symphony well are likely to hear it with fresh ears in the context of these comments. It is only fair to note that Volkov's *Testimony* is highly controversial, and that scholars and musicians have challenged its authenticity. In her landmark 2000 biography, the American scholar Laurel E. Fay noted, specifically with respect to the last movement:

> The "finale problem" in Shostakovich's symphonic works was an issue that would crop up again, notably in connection with his Tenth Symphony. In the light of comments attributed to the aging, embittered composer in *Testimony*, the suggestion has gained wide currency that Shostakovich may have deliberately set himself up to fail in crowning the Fifth Symphony with a genuinely jubilant finale, intending instead to convey the sense of rejoicing under duress.

It is food for thought. Nevertheless, as Fay observes, the musical substance of Shostakovich's symphony ultimately contributed to its acceptance and acclaim by musicians and audiences worldwide, regardless of any overt or implicit political agenda.

While the two outer movements have become the Fifth Symphony's best-known segments, the inner two better reflect Shostakovich's emerging style. The scherzo, a quasi-Schubertian country dance tinged with Mahlerian satire, shows the dry, sardonic side of Shostakovich's personality to perfection. And the slow

movement, a showcase for the string section, embodies the tragedy, and poetry inherent in the human condition. The Fifth Symphony is usually regarded as the window looking into Shostakovich's middle period, but its music has such consummate maturity that it more than foreshadows the rich masterpieces that would follow during and after the Second World War.