



NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2017

2018 Winter Festival

America, Inspiring: Ravel & Rachmaninoff

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Martinů: *Thunderbolt P-47*. A World War II American fighter jet was the inspiration for this orchestral scherzo. Martinů pays homage to technology, the machine age and the brave pilots who risked death, flying these bombers to win the war.

Ravel: Piano Concerto in G Major. Ravel was enthralled by American jazz, whose influence is apparent in this jazzy concerto. The pristine slow movement concerto evokes Mozart's spirit in its clarity and elegance. Ravel's wit sparkles in the finale, proving that he often had a twinkle in his eye.

Rachmaninoff: *Symphonic Dances*. Rachmaninoff's final orchestral work, a commission from the Philadelphia Orchestra, brings together Russian dance and Eastern European mystery. Listen for the "Dies irae" at the thrilling close.

MARTINŮ: *Thunderbolt P-47, Scherzo for Orchestra*, H. 309

BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ

Born: December 8, 1890, in Polička, Czechoslovakia

Died: August 28, 1959, in Liestal, nr. Basel, Switzerland

Composed: 1945

World Premiere: December 19, 1945, in Washington, DC. Hans Kindler conducted the National Symphony.

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 11 minutes

Between 1941 and 1945, Republic Aviation built 15,636 P-47 Thunderbolt fighter planes. Introduced in November 1942, the aircraft was a bomber equipped with machine guns. British, French and American air forces used them for the last three years of the war.

Early in 1945, the Dutch émigré conductor Hans Kindler commissioned Bohuslav Martinů—himself an émigré from Czechoslovakia who had resided in the United States since March 1941—to write a piece for the National Symphony Orchestra. The fee was modest, so Martinů opted for a short work: a symphonic scherzo written “in praise of speed.” His inspiration was the P-47 Thunderbolt and the brave pilots who flew its dangerous missions.

There is no mistaking the pulsating motor rhythms of the high-tech machine age. Martinů’s heart-pounding score evokes the perils faced by airmen in wartime; however, a core of optimism underlies this work. By 1945, it was increasingly clear that the Allies would prevail. When Martinů completed his score in September, the war was over. One breathes a little easier in his calmer central Moderato, but nothing compromises the swooping thrill of *Thunderbolt P-47*’s outer sections.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

Paris in the 1920s was a major cultural center for painting, sculpture, literature, and theater, as well as music. Before the Great War, Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Diaghilev had created a sensation with the Ballets russes. After the war, Erik Satie was the reigning musical *enfant terrible*, providing satirical contrast to the more conventional compositions of *Les six*: Poulenc, Milhaud, Durey, Tailleferre, Honegger and Auric. Attracted to the lively cultural environment, artists of all nationalities streamed to Paris.

Bohemian-born Bohuslav Martinů arrived in the French capital in October 1923, intending to study composition with Albert Roussel. He remained for 17 years until the Second World War, when he fled

initially to Lisbon, then to the United States. Although his musical expression remained fundamentally Czech, the long sojourn in Paris left a strong imprint on his music, and he composed prolifically. His works from the late 1920s are often flavored by jazz, an American export that captivated Europe—particularly Germany and France—between the wars. Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith brought “hot jazz” to Paris. Ragtime and Brazilian rhythms also caught the French imagination, and Martinů was impressed by such jazz-influenced compositions as Stravinsky’s *The Soldier’s Tale* (1918) and Milhaud’s *The Ox on the Roof* (1919) and *The Creation of the World* (1923), all of which he heard in Paris.

Martinů was an expatriate for much of his adult life. In addition to his years in Paris, he spent a dozen years here in the United States. He chaired the composition department at Princeton for three years and also participated in Tanglewood Music Festivals. Despite the extended American sojourn, ultimately he was profoundly Czech in his musical expression. Nevertheless, the importance of his long sojourns in France and this country is undeniable in assessing his oeuvre, including *Thunderbolt P-47*.

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, snare drum, Basque tambourine, tam tam and strings.

RAVEL: Piano Concerto in G Major

MAURICE RAVEL

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Composed: 1929–31

World Premiere: January 14, 1932, at the Salle Pleyel, Paris

NJSO Premiere: 1971–72 season. Philippe Entremont was the soloist; Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 23 minutes

At the outbreak of the First World War, Ravel was forced to set aside a number of active projects as

patriotic fervor and military necessity swept the country. According to his friend Gustave Samazeuilh, one of the shelved scores was a Rhapsody based on the Basque music of Ravel's native province. Much of the material from this relatively early, abandoned work was later reworked into the Piano Concerto in G Major.

By the time Ravel began serious work on the concerto in 1929, more than a dozen years had elapsed. During the intervening time, of course, the war had ended. The composer had traveled to North America, where exposure to American jazz made an enormous impact on him. Further, he was now thinking in terms of a solo vehicle for himself, and he began furiously practicing difficult piano pieces by Chopin and Liszt to refine his technique and stimulate his own musical thinking.

While working on the Piano Concerto in G Major, Ravel was contacted by an agent of the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm during the war. Remarkably, Wittgenstein resumed a successful career as a concert pianist, despite his amputation. Ravel accepted the commission for a left-handed piano concerto. Fascinated by the possibilities of writing for one hand, he became absorbed in writing the Wittgenstein concerto, fulfilling the commission in less than a year. The entire time, he was also working on the G-major concerto. Upon its completion in 1931, he told Michel Calvocoressi:

It was an interesting experience to conceive and realize the two concerti at the same time. The first, which I propose to play myself, is a concerto in the strict sense, written in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. I believe that a concerto can be both gay and brilliant without necessarily being profound or aiming at dramatic effect. It has been said that the concerti of some great classical composers, far from being written *for* the piano, have been written *against* it. And I think that this criticism is quite justified.

The composer's assessment is thought-provoking, but few would think that Ravel wrote "against" the piano. To the contrary: his music makes friends easily. Listeners will have little trouble in pinpointing the Gershwin-like flair with which Ravel assimilates jazz harmony and syncopation, to which he was introduced during his time in the United States [see sidebar, "In the Composer's Words"]. They will love how he merges these elements with unexpected touches like the cadenzas for harp and

woodwinds that precede the piano cadenza, and the solos for French horn and trumpet. Similarly, they will be enraptured by the simplicity and elegance of the slow-movement waltz, which draws on the understated, proto-minimalist lyricism of Satie and the ostinato accompaniment of a Bach aria. Marguerite Long, the pianist who eventually played the first performances of this Concerto, later recalled:

It is a difficult work especially in respect of the second movement where one has no respite. I told Ravel one day how anxious I was, after all the fantasy and brilliant orchestration of the first part, to be able to maintain the cantabile of the melody on the piano alone during such a long slow flowing phrase ... "That flowing phrase!" Ravel cried. "How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!"

The slow movement features the entire wind section, affords glorious moments for flute and, later, English horn. Ravel's finale opens with a snare drumroll, heralding a rambunctious, good-humored romp that challenges both pianistic technique and ensemble. Opening declarations from a saucy clarinet and slide trombones add piquancy to the whirlwind music. Later, a dazzling bassoon solo contributes its low-register impetus to the headlong rush.

The score specifies 32 strings. Ravel had a smaller, chamber orchestra in mind, and in the spirit of more intimate forces he has written characteristically and well for each player.

Instrumentation: flute, piccolo, oboe, English horn, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, percussion, harp, strings and solo piano.

SIDE BAR: IN THE COMPOSER'S WORDS

In 1931, shortly before the premiere of the Piano Concerto in G Major, the French music critic Pierre Leroi interviewed Ravel for *L'Excelsior*. Excerpts from Leroi's article published on October 30, 1931, follow.

My only wish was to write a genuine concerto, that is, a brilliant work, clearly highlighting the soloist's virtuosity, without seeking to show profundity. As a model, I took two musicians who, in my opinion,

*best illustrated this type of composition: Mozart and Saint-Saëns. This is why the concerto, which I originally thought of entitling *Divertissement*, contains the three customary parts: the initial Allegro, a compact classical structure, is followed by an Adagio, in which I wanted to render particular homage to "scholasticism," and in which I attempted to write as well as I could; to conclude, a lively movement in Rondo form, likewise conceived in accordance with the most immutable traditions. In order not to needlessly weigh down the orchestral texture, I called for a reduced orchestra.*

Five months later, the Dutch composer and critic Jacques Beers published “Ten Opinions of Mr. Ravel on Compositions and Composers” in *De Telegraaf* on April 6, 1932. He asked Ravel about jazz influence in his Violin Sonata and the Piano Concerto in G Major. Ravel responded:

What is being written today without the influence of jazz? It is not the only influence, however; in the concerto one also finds bass accompaniments from the time of Bach, and a melody that recalls Mozart, the Mozart of the Clarinet Quintet, which by the way is the most beautiful piece he wrote. What I wanted to do in the violin sonata was to accentuate the contrast between the percussive piano accompaniment and the weaker violin melody. In the concerto, I have also tried to realize this, but in a somewhat different way.

Both articles are translated in Arbie Orenstein’s *A Ravel Reader*.

RACHMANINOFF: Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

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

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

Composed: 1940

World Premiere: January 3, 1941, in Philadelphia. Eugene Ormandy led the Philadelphia Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: 1982–83 season; Thomas Michalak conducted.

Duration: 35 minutes

Celebrity get-together, 1940s style

During the summer of 1940, following an exhausting concert season, Rachmaninoff took refuge on the then-bucolic north-shore town of Huntington, Long Island. He hoped to compose some music and regain his failing health. Though he lived nearly three years longer, the work he composed that summer proved to be his last complete score. And a magnificent swan song it was. Rachmaninoff was deservedly proud, writing excitedly on August 21 to Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Eugene Ormandy:

Last week I finished a new symphonic piece, which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra. It is called ‘Fantastic Dances.’ I shall now begin the orchestration. Unfortunately my concert tour begins on October 14. I have a great deal of practice to do and I don’t know whether I shall be able to finish the orchestration before November.

I should be very glad if, upon your return, you would drop over to our place. I should like to play the piece for you.

Ormandy responded promptly, accepting the composer’s invitation for the following week. By then, Rachmaninoff had changed the title to *Symphonic Dances*.

Although Rachmaninoff flirted with the idea of presenting the piece as a ballet, it is essentially a symphonic work that celebrates a lush orchestral palette. At the same time, vigorous dance rhythms suffuse all three movements, providing forward momentum and catching us up in a whirl of mysterious, compelling sound.

Expert outside consultant

Symphonic Dances’ string parts are notoriously difficult, presenting a major challenge to the finest orchestra. There is a good reason: Rachmaninoff enlisted the assistance of the eminent violinist and composer Fritz Kreisler in editing the string parts, including all the bowings. While the strings do not always occupy the foreground, their presence is a constant factor throughout the work.

The saxophone: unusual orchestral soloist

The first movement is dominated by a descending triad motive from which the balance of the musical material unfolds. Rachmaninoff takes superb advantage of his orchestral resources, continually surprising us with a panoply of percussion, woodwind and brass accents amidst the ongoing sweep of the strings. A unique stroke is the luscious solo awarded to alto saxophone in the more leisurely middle section. Precedent for using saxophone as an orchestral soloist lay in Bizet's *L'Arlésienne Suites*, Ravel's *Boléro* and Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Rachmaninoff's countryman Alexander Glazunov composed both a solo concerto for saxophone and a saxophone quartet. Still, the timbre was unusual: peculiarly close to the human voice, and vividly set with clarinet and oboe sharing a light accompaniment.

Another concert waltz, now in Rachmaninoff's voice

The central waltz opens with muted trumpets in an eerie reminder of the composer's Russian roots. Pizzicato strings establish the ghostly waltz rhythm; a free violin solo lends a folksy, half-Gypsy facet to the music. Rachmaninoff focuses on individual instrumental colors, whose chromatic lines often seem like veiled threats undulating beneath the smooth exterior of the waltz. The brass of the opening measures return periodically, as if to herald the sinister spirits that seem to underlie this disquieting dance. Metric vacillation from 6/8 and 3/8 to 9/8 and back again add to the haunting character.

Dies irae: the wrath of God

Much has been made of Rachmaninoff's recurrent use of the medieval Dies irae chant in his music. The best known example is *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, but there are several other occurrences among the composer's works. Its presence in the finale to *Symphonic Dances* has been called Rachmaninoff's last and definitive statement. An English horn solo also makes use of Russian Orthodox chant. The two ideas bind together with the composer's original material to build to a dynamic close.

Rachmaninoff's achievement in this thrilling work is the melding of balletic impulse and symphonic grandeur. Vastly more sophisticated than the heart-on-sleeve romanticism of the early piano concerti,

Symphonic Dances is a superb example of his mature orchestral style.

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, tubular bells, xylophone, tam-tam, glockenspiel, piano, harp and strings.