

# Program Notes



**Saturday, November 7, 2009, 8 pm**

**Sunday, November 8, 2009, 3 pm**

**Venue: Ohio Theatre**

## **DVOŘÁK'S NEW WORLD SYMPHONY**

**Beethoven** - Overture to *Fidelio*

**Rachmaninoff** - Piano Concerto No. 3

**Dvořák** - Symphony No. 9, "From The New World"

**Jean-Marie Zeitouni**, conductor

**Barry Douglas**, piano

### **Overture to *Fidelio*, Op. 72b**

**by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

*Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn on December 16 or 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed the first version of his only opera—originally called Leonore—in 1804-05. After the first performance, on November 20, 1805, Beethoven revised the work for a revival the following year. The opera received its final form, and a new title, Fidelio, in 1814. The present overture was written for this final version, which was premiered on May 23, 1814.*

*The Overture to Fidelio runs about 6 minutes in performance. Beethoven scored it for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.*

The story of how Beethoven came to write his only opera, *Fidelio*, is as full of dramatic twists and turns as the opera itself.

Primarily an instrumental composer, Beethoven revolutionized symphonic, chamber, and piano music by introducing a level of personal expression that had been completely unheard of. Naturally, when he turned to opera, he wanted it to be a personal statement about the human values that were the most important to him: the celebration of freedom, the defeat of tyranny, and love between husband and wife (a happiness that forever eluded this lifelong bachelor). As a young man, Beethoven had been deeply affected by the ideas of the French Revolution; it is not surprising, then, that he found the subject for his opera in a French play from the revolutionary period, Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's *Léonore ou L'Amour conjugal*. The story was about Leonore, a political prisoner's wife who disguises herself as a man in order to rescue her husband from jail.

Beethoven was not the first composer to be attracted to this story; in fact, three others had written operas based on the same play before him. Nor was Beethoven's version successful from the start: the first production (1805) had only three performances, a revised version the following year only two. The upheavals of the Napoleonic wars, coupled with theatrical intrigues and insufficient rehearsal time, conspired to doom these productions. (At this point, the name of the opera was still *Leonore*). The opera was then put aside for eight years and then revised again in 1814, now under the new title *Fidelio*. This time, the premiere was an unqualified success.

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For each of these productions, Beethoven wrote a different overture. The 1805 version was introduced by what we now know as *Leonore* Overture No. 2, the 1806 revival by *Leonore* Overture No. 3. (*Leonore* Overture No. 1 was written in 1807 for another production that never materialized). The three *Leonore* overtures share some musical materials in common; the *Fidelio* overture of 1814, on the other hand, is completely new music.

The main ideas of the *Fidelio* overture, presented right at the beginning, are a fanfare-like melody played by the whole orchestra, and a slow-moving theme for a pair of horns answered by the clarinets. Elements of one or another are almost constantly present in this tightly constructed, spirited overture.

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## **Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30 by Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

*Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff was born on the estate of Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943, three days before his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.*

*Rachmaninoff completed his Third Piano Concerto in 1909. It was first performed on November 28 of the same year, with the composer as soloist and Walter Damrosch conducting the orchestra of the New York Symphony Society. (The second performance, which took place shortly after the first, was led by Gustav Mahler). The concerto was dedicated to the great pianist Josef Hofmann who, however, never played the work.*

*This concerto runs about 40 minutes in performance. Rachmaninoff scored it for solo piano, plus an orchestra of 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals), and strings.*

The decade before Rachmaninoff's emigration from Russia was, without a doubt, the apex of his career as a composer. Between 1907 and 1917 he wrote many of his greatest works: in addition to the Third Piano Concerto, the Second Symphony, the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*, the choral symphony *The Bells*, the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, and a large number of songs and piano pieces all date from those years.

The Third Piano Concerto was written for Rachmaninoff's first American tour in 1909. The composer never dreamt at the time that he would be visiting the country where he would make his home and where he would eventually die. He accepted the offer only after some hesitation, and then only because he hoped that the fees he was promised would allow him to realize his dream of buying an automobile.

In this work, Rachmaninoff aspired to be worthy of the 19th century virtuoso tradition in every respect. The last of the great Romantic pianist-composers in the lineage of Chopin, Liszt, and Rubinstein, Rachmaninoff also wanted, it seems, to emulate the synthesis between concerto and symphony achieved in the two piano concertos of Brahms. This is shown by the many orchestral solos that join, and sometimes compete with, the piano soloist, as well as by the numerous thematic links between movements, carefully planned and masterfully executed.

Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto certainly doesn't lack pianistic brilliance (to say the least). But the first two dozen measures of the piano part could actually be played by a child. This is the famous "Russian hymn" theme that some commentators have tried to trace to an old religious chant from Kiev, although Rachmaninoff insisted that there was no such connection. When asked how his theme had been conceived, the composer said only: "It simply wrote itself!..."

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The first theme is immediately repeated by the violas, accompanied by piano figurations that grow more and more complex. The changes in texture are gradual, and in less than three minutes, the “Russian hymn” evolves into a cadenza. A new idea is then announced, first in the form of a staccato dialog between piano and orchestra, and only then as the singing second theme that we have been expecting. After a spectacular elaboration upon this theme, the “Russian hymn” returns in its original form, introducing a free development section in the course of which the rhythmic accompaniment of the first theme is always clearly heard. At the climactic moment, the tempo becomes faster and the entire orchestra enters fortissimo on a dissonant diminished seventh chord. Soon the pianist launches into the second and main cadenza. Rachmaninoff later replaced his original cadenza with an even bigger one, but he preferred to play the first version. (The printed score contains both cadenzas, which in fact differ only in their first halves.) The cadenza includes an accompanied portion with haunting wind solos recalling the “Russian hymn,” and a fantasy, for piano alone, upon the singing second theme. Therefore, the cadenza effectively functions as the movement’s recapitulation, and all that is needed afterward is a brief coda. The coda states the “Russian hymn” in its original form one last time, followed by the first staccato version of the second theme that has been heard in this form only once before. The repeat of this almost-forgotten detail at the end shows that a good composer wastes nothing, and every detail finds its place in the larger structure. The formal design of the movement is, in fact, quite original, by no means as conservative as Rachmaninoff is often made out to be.

The second-movement “Intermezzo” opens with an orchestral introduction that gives the pianist the only respite in the entire concerto. The soulful melody, presented in turn by woodwinds and strings, is subsequently taken over by the piano and is considerably intensified in the process. (One of the transitional passages from the first movement, a descending sequence in thirds, is recalled by the solo piano, with the addition of some sensuous chromatic harmonies). The virtuoso figurations surrounding the theme form a bridge to the next section, a brief scherzando, in which the “Russian hymn” from the first movement reappears, played by the clarinet and bassoon. The “Intermezzo” melody is then recalled, followed by a transition of a few measures leading into the finale.

The last movement is in a broad A-B-A form. The A section consists of a string of themes with a sharp rhythmic profile, plus an expansive lyric idea. The B section itself can be divided into three sections, with a central “Lento molto espressivo” (slow, very expressive) flanked by a brilliant scherzando. The entire B section is based on material from the first movement: what was originally a lyrical second theme becomes the basis for a series of scintillating variations, combined at one point with the “Russian hymn.” The “Lento” is, in essence, another variation on the first movement’s second theme. After a recapitulation of the A section, the tonality changes from D minor to D major, for an ending that is both solemn and jubilant.

*Rachmaninoff on Gustav Mahler, who led the second performance of the Third Piano Concerto:*

Mahler was the only conductor whom I considered worthy to be classed with [Arthur] Nikisch [the most celebrated conductor of the time]. He touched my composer’s heart straight away by devoting himself to my Concerto until the accompaniment, which is rather complicated, had been practiced to the point of perfection, although he had already gone through a long rehearsal. According to Mahler, every detail of the score was important—an attitude which is unfortunately rare among conductors.

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## **Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 9 (“From the New World”) by Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)**

*Antonín Dvořák was born in Nelahozeves, Bohemia, on September 8, 1841, and died in Prague on May 1, 1904. He wrote his “New World” Symphony in New York City between December 1892 and May 1893. (He added the subtitle *Z Nového světa*, “From the New World,” in November 1893, shortly before the work’s premiere at Carnegie Hall, New York, by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Anton Seidl.*

*Dvořák’s manuscript and the program for the first performance in 1893 list the “New World” Symphony as No. 8; when it was published in 1894, it was redesignated as No. 5, because it was the fifth of Dvořák’s symphonies to be published. The symphonies were renumbered chronologically in the 1950s as part of the publication of the critical edition of Dvořák’s works (including the recently rediscovered Symphony No. 1); it was at that time that the “New World” became No. 9.*

*The symphony runs about 45 minutes in performance. Dvořák scored it for 2 flutes (second doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (second doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbals and triangle), and strings.*

The credit for bringing Dvořák to the United States belongs to Jeanette M. Thurber (1850-1946), wife of a wealthy New York businessman. Mrs. Thurber was one of the dedicated philanthropists to whom the musical life of this country has always owed so much. In 1885-86, she founded both the National Conservatory of Music and the American Opera Company. One of her greatest achievements was a scholarship program for minority students, which enabled many Blacks and Native Americans to become professional musicians. Another was to persuade Antonín Dvořák to come to the United States from his native Bohemia and become the director of the Conservatory.

After a long round of negotiations, Dvořák arrived in the United States in 1892, for what would be a stay of three years. He was accompanied by his wife, two of his six children, and a secretary. His duties at the Conservatory were not very onerous. He had to teach composition three mornings a week and conduct the student orchestra on two afternoons. This schedule left him enough time for conducting at public concerts as well as composing.

Mrs. Thurber later claimed it was at her suggestion that Dvořák first started to work on his Symphony in E minor. As she recollected:

*He used to be particularly homesick on steamer days when he read the shipping news in the Herald. Thoughts of home often moved him to tears. On one of these days I suggested that he write a symphony embodying his experiences and feelings in America—a suggestion which he promptly adopted.*

This prompting would hardly have sufficed, had Dvořák himself not felt ready to “embark” on a new symphony. But embark he did, and when the score was finished the next spring, he made the following inscription on the last page of the manuscript: “Praise God! Completed 24<sup>th</sup> May 1893 at 9 o’clock in the morning. The children have arrived at Southampton (a cable came at 1:33 p.m.).” The four children Dvořák had left behind joined their parents in New York a few days later. Thus, both the beginning and the end of this symphony’s composition seem to be connected with ships leaving and arriving.

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Much ink has been spilled over the question as to whether the E minor Symphony incorporates any melodies Dvořák heard in the United States, and whether the symphony is “American” or “Czech” in character. Dvořák interest in both Negro spirituals and American Indian music was evident, but he actually knew very little about the latter and, as far as the former was concerned, relied mainly on a single source of information. Harry T. Burleigh, an African-American student at the Conservatory, who later became a noted composer and singer, performed many spirituals (and also Stephen Foster songs) for Dvořák, who was very impressed but his knowledge of American musical traditions must have remained limited. The composer did not claim to have used any original melodies, trying instead to “reproduce their spirit,” as he put it in an interview published three days before the symphony’s premiere.

We will understand what Dvořák meant by this if we compare the famous English horn solo from the symphony’s slow movement with the spiritual “Steal Away,” which was probably among the songs Dvořák had heard from Burleigh. Many years later, H.C. Colles asked Burleigh to sing to him the songs he had sung to Dvořák, and noted that “the sound of the English horn resembled quite closely the quality of Burleigh’s voice.” Both melodies share the same rhythmic patterns and the same pentatonic scale. It is no wonder that Dvořák’s melody was subsequently adopted as a spiritual in its own right under the title “Goin’ Home,” with words by one of Dvořák’s New York students, William Arms Fisher. Several other melodies in the symphony have similar songlike shapes, suggesting folk inspiration. One instance where a possible model has been identified is the first movement’s second theme, which is strongly reminiscent of the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

Another link between the “New World” Symphony and the New World has to do with an aborted opera project based on *The Song of Hiawatha*. It was another one of Mrs. Thurber’s suggestions that Dvořák write an opera on Longfellow’s poem, with which he had long been familiar, having read it in Czech translation 30 years before. The opera never quite got off the ground, but it has recently been shown that the slow movement was conceived with Minnehaha’s Forest Funeral from *Hiawatha* in mind. Additionally, the Scherzo was inspired by the dance of Pau-Puk-Keewis.

Discussions of the ethnic background of Dvořák’s themes should not, however, divert the attention from other aspects of this symphony that are at least equally compelling. For beautiful melodies alone, whatever their provenance may be, do not a symphony make. In his Ninth, Dvořák proved not only his supreme melodic gifts, but also his mastery in organizing his melodies into coherent and wellbalanced musical structures.

The opening horn theme of the first-movement Allegro molto, already hinted at the preceding slow introduction, serves as a unifying gesture that returns in each of the symphony’s movements. In the second movement Largo, it appears at the climactic point in the faster middle section, shortly before the return of the English horn solo. In the Scherzo, it is heard between the Scherzo proper and the Trio; this time, the energetic brass theme is transformed into a lyrical melody played by the cellos and the violas. Between the trio and the recapitulation of the Scherzo, the theme resumes its original character. The same melody can also be found in the finale shortly before the end, in a coda that incorporates quotations from the second and third movements as well. The ending of the symphony, then, combines the main themes from all four movements in a magnificent synthesis.

*Program notes by Peter Laki*