

Friday and Saturday, November 13 - 14, 2015 at 8 p.m.

Symphonic Dances

Courtney Lewis, conductor

Arnaud Sussmann, violin

STRAVINSKY • Symphony in Three Movements

1. Overture; Allegro
2. Andante; Interlude: L'istesso tempo
3. Con moto

PROKOFIEV • Violin Concerto No. 2

1. Allegro moderato
2. Andante assai
3. Allegro, ben marcato

INTERMISSION

RACHMANINOFF • Symphonic Dances

1. Non allegro
2. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)
3. Lento assai - Allegro vivace - Lento assai. Come prima - Allegro vivace

These performances are dedicated to the memory of Corlis Jefferson "Jeff" Driggers (1924-2013), who would have turned 91 this month. Jeff was an internationally recognized authority on the music of Frederick Delius and a driving force in the musical life of Jacksonville for several decades. In addition to tireless work with the Delius Society, he was Chief Librarian of the Art and Music Department in the old Haydon Burns Library, where he developed an extensive collection of fine arts materials that served the entire Southeast. Jeff would have been especially pleased with this program. At the last concert he attended he cited the Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff as works he hoped the Symphony would play.

Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff are the most popular composers born in the Russian Empire during the late 1800s, with Stravinsky arriving nine years after Rachmaninoff, and Prokofiev nine after Stravinsky. Rachmaninoff represents the last great flowering of Russian Romanticism, with sweeping melodies and lush harmonies. Stravinsky, the father of Modernism and exemplar of Neoclassicism, is the master of unpredictable rhythms and a quirky manipulation of melodic fragments. Prokofiev, said now to be the most-performed composer of his generation, synthesizes broad "Russian" lyricism with a dynamic, "modern" rhythmic flair.

The three were never close personally, despite similar backgrounds and navigating the same social circles. Besides artistic differences, one suspects big egos and little jealousies came into play, as when the slightly built Stravinsky called Rachmaninoff "six-foot-six of Russian gloom." And Prokofiev reported that he and a rudely critical Stravinsky almost came to blows during the presentation of Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* to impresario Serge Diaghilev.

Prior to the 1917 Revolution, Stravinsky had already left Russia to work with Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in Paris. After the Revolution, both Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev headed to the U.S. to escape the political uncertainty of their homeland, and Rachmaninoff took up permanent residency here. But by the early 1920s Prokofiev was mostly back in Europe, due to failing finances. He settled in Paris in 1923, and in

1936, in the throes of the Great Depression, Prokofiev returned to Soviet Russia. In 1938, Stravinsky lost his daughter Ludmilla to tuberculosis, and by the following summer his first wife and mother likewise had passed. In the wake of these tragedies and the outbreak of World War II, Stravinsky sailed for America in 1940.

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

Symphony in Three Movements (1942-45)

Stravinsky, The Legend, already had a thriving career here. He recently had lectured at Harvard, and earlier commissions included *Symphony of Psalms* and *Symphony in C Major*, from the Boston and Chicago symphony orchestras respectively. Settling in West Hollywood, Stravinsky wasn't the first composer-in-exile solicited to write film scores. But he probably was the least successful: he simply couldn't see the necessity of letting filmmakers edit his music to fit their footage. He must have been especially happy to get the commission from the New York Philharmonic for his *Symphony in Three Movements*. Even so, each movement is directly related to the cinema.

Listen Up: Stravinsky rebuked any notion that his instrumental music had extra-musical connotations—except for this "War Symphony." He said the first movement "was inspired by a war film...of scorched earth tactics in China," with his central portion representing "the Chinese people scratching and digging in their fields." Stravinsky includes a percussive piano part, and there are echoes of *The Rite of Spring*. The middle movement features harp, and includes music originally intended for *The Song of Bernadette*, one of the movie projects Stravinsky didn't get. Back to wartime newsreels, the final movement depicts goose-stepping Nazi soldiers, and includes a fugue meant to suggest "the rise of the Allies" as the piano and harp join forces.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 63 (1935)

In 1935, Prokofiev was commissioned to write a concerto for French violinist Robert Soetens, who would give the premiere in Madrid that December. In 1932, Soetens' partner for the premiere of Prokofiev's *Sonata for 2 Violins* had been Samuel Dushkin, for whom Stravinsky had written a concerto—this no doubt provided additional incentive for Prokofiev. The reception of Prokofiev's previous, relatively opulent *Violin Concerto No. 1* had been disappointing. Though completed in 1917, its first performance wasn't until 1923, by which time the fashion-conscious Parisians dismissed Sergei's lyricism as old-hat, preferring instead Igor's new-hat *Octet* played on the same concert.

Listen Up: Prokofiev said he wanted this follow-up concerto "to be altogether different from No. 1 in both music and style." He uses a smaller orchestra, but nonetheless retains a similar lyric warmth heated to virtuosic frenzy as needed. The soloist opens the sonata-form first movement with a brooding theme in G minor, balanced by a tender tune beginning in B-flat Major; the aforementioned "frenzy" occupies the transitions and development, and the movement ends with rather ominous *pizzicatti*. The gorgeous slow movement manages a simultaneous restraint and effusiveness that might make Rachmaninoff weep; and although not named "Aria" as are the two middle movements of Stravinsky's concerto, one suspects Prokofiev was demonstrating *his* take on how a Neoclassical aria *should* sound. The finale assumes the air of a *danse macabre* with castanets (perhaps in deference to the premier audience), and races to a thrilling conclusion. The concerto was, and remains, a huge hit.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (1940)

Besides these *Symphonic Dances*, after leaving Russia Rachmaninoff only wrote four other extended works: Piano Concerto No. 4, *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and the Third Symphony. Of these, only the *Rhapsody* was a success during his lifetime, partly due to its adaptation as a ballet by Michel Fokine, the choreographer who had staged Stravinsky's *Firebird* and *Petrushka*. Fokine likewise agreed to choreograph the *Symphonic Dances*, but died before that happened.

Listen Up: Rachmaninoff's "Romantic" harmonies and rhythms aren't so very different from many mid-twentieth-century composers (at least among those still frequently performed), but there's no denying a conscious nostalgia because he quotes early works in the outer movements. Drawn from an unfinished ballet, the first Dance opens with quick flashes of a three-note motif that infuses most of the movement, and really kicks off after a brief, menacing outburst suggesting the funereal *Dies irae* plainchant (that's actually quoted in the harmony). The opening motif also informs the characteristic "big tune" of the voluptuous middle section, introduced by Rachmaninoff's only use ever of saxophone. Under a glittering halo of harp, piano and glockenspiel, the coda quotes Rachmaninoff's First Symphony (with the first four notes matching the *Dies irae*). Initially hesitant, the centerpiece is an otherworldly waltz that whirls into oblivion. The finale again elicits the *Dies irae*, but ultimately Life triumphs over Death with the appearance of an Eastern Orthodox Resurrection chant from Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*.

At one time or another all three composers were criticized for not being "modern" enough—even Stravinsky, when a rowdy group of Parisian students (led by Pierre Boulez) disrupted a 1945 performance of *Four Norwegian Moods* because it didn't embrace their serialist manifesto. Undoubtedly, critics excel at discerning trends, old and new. But maybe not so much in recognizing the timeless.

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