

Anchorage Symphony Orchestra

Made in America

Saturday, March 2, 2019 – 8pm

Atwood Concert Hall, ACPA

**Program Notes by ASO Education Consultant
Susan Wingrove-Reed**



Joan Tower

Born 1938

Made in America

ASO Premiere Performance

When orchestras commission a new piece it is rarely played more than once. Sometimes a professional orchestra will tour with new music by a living composer, but this is expensive and uncommon. Joan Tower's *Made in America* has had an exceptionally successful musical journey – the music toured to all fifty states during an eighteen-month period in 2006-7; the Alaska premiere (2007) was by the Juneau Symphony. This remarkably successful commission was the result of an innovative consortium of 65 orchestras in 50 states partnering with the American Symphony Orchestra League, Meet the Composer and the Ford Motor Company.

Joan Tower is one of America's most important living composers; the fact that she is female is secondary to her outstanding legacy and career. Her music is bold, full of fascinating contrasts, honest and imaginative expression and sensitive nuance. In addition to being a revered composer, she is a respected conductor, pianist and educator. She earned her undergraduate degree at Bennington College and a Master's and Doctorate in composition at Columbia University. She has taught at Bard College for over forty years.

Tower shared that her family moved to Bolivia for nine years (her mining engineer father was the manager of several tin mines) when she was nine years old. When she returned to the U.S., "I was proud to have free choices, upward mobility and the chance to try to become who I wanted to be. I also enjoyed the basic luxuries of an American citizen that we so often take for granted: hot running water, blankets for cold winters, floors that are not made of dirt and easy modes of transportation.... When I started composing this piece, the song 'America the Beautiful' kept coming into my consciousness and eventually became the main theme for the work. The beauty of the song is undeniable.... One can never take for granted, however, the strength of a musical idea – as Beethoven (one of my strongest influences) knew so well. This theme is challenged by other more aggressive and dissonant ideas that keep interrupting, unsettling

it, but 'America' keeps resurfacing in different guises (some small and tender, others big and magnanimous), as if to say, 'I'm still here, ever changing, but holding my own.' A musical struggle is heard throughout the work. Perhaps it was my unconscious reacting to the challenge of how do we keep America beautiful."

Tower was extremely careful crafting the new work, always conscious that a variety of orchestras would be playing the piece; she wisely chose to have extensive dialogue with a variety of conductors and musicians as the score evolved. "They told me, 'That's too fast, that's too high, don't feature that instrument.' I wanted the lowest level of these orchestras to play this piece." Yet there was also the responsibility to compose a work that would be successfully performed and well-received on every "premiere".

Allan Kozinn insightfully wrote in the New York Times, "The piece is a celebration of America with fragments of 'America the Beautiful' as a leitmotif. The idea is charmingly antiquated, the kind of thing composers did regularly in the 1940's. That said, *Made in America* is not chest-thumping jingoism; its triumphal moments are offset by dark, ominous stretches. The quotations from 'America' peek through these tense sections as affirmations – often gentle ones – that the country's ideals will prevail. Yet the work ends ambiguously, with the future in question." A wonderful recording by the Nashville Symphony won the 2008 Grammy for Best Classical Contemporary Composition as well as the Grammys for Best Classical Album and Best Orchestral Performance.

Tower holds strong opinions about the reluctance of some orchestras (thankfully not the Anchorage Symphony!) to program the works of living composers on concerts; "I don't think it's healthy for the dead composers, actually. I think Beethoven needs someone next to him that reminds you the music is vulnerable rather than it's just a masterpiece and so therefore why should we even bother to think about it. The wonderful thing about new music is the reaction it provokes. 'Do I like this or don't I like it?'" In the case of *Made in America*, the overwhelming national verdict has been that we like it very much indeed!



Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: 1873

Died: 1943

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30

Last ASO Performance October 2006

Rachmaninoff completed his third piano concerto in 1909 at Ivanovka, his Russian summer home. He had received many offers to tour, as a pianist and as a conductor, and he finally accepted an invitation to visit North America. Rachmaninoff described the difficult decision, writing to a friend, “My hands tremble. You could not possibly understand what tortures I live through when I realize that this question has to be decided by me and me alone.” Annotator Jonathan Kramer theorized, “He had decided to come to the United States with some trepidation, since he did not particularly like Americans. He complained that all they ever thought about was business. Yet it was for business reasons that the composer planned his American tour; he wanted to raise money to buy a car.” But beyond his yearning for a new vehicle, Rachmaninoff was interested in injecting new life into his career (even though he found touring to be highly stressful).

He was so busy writing the new concerto to present in America that he did not have enough time to learn the music before the lengthy cruise trip. He took along a silent practice piano so he could work every day in his cabin without bothering anyone, and by the time the ship landed he had mastered the breathtakingly difficult part. The tour was a huge success; he appeared as either composer and pianist, or conductor and composer, to great acclaim in every location. After touring in America several more times he moved permanently to the U. S. in 1935.

However, his impressions of America during the first tour were not favorable. He wrote, “I am weary of America and I have had more than enough of it. Just imagine – to concertize almost every day for three months! I was a great success and was recalled to give encores as many as seven times. The audiences were remarkably cold, spoiled by the guest performances of first-class artists. Those audiences always seek something extraordinary...their newspapers always remark on how many times the artist was recalled to take a bow....”

Many musicians feel that the third concerto is the most imposing of his keyboard works; Rachmaninoff showcases a confident mastery writing for his beloved piano and a deep understanding of the orchestra. Annotator Peter Laki points out, “He was the last of the great Romantic pianist-composers in the lineage of Chopin, Liszt and Rubenstein. Rachmaninoff also wanted, it seems, to emulate the synthesis between concerto and symphony achieved by Brahms. This is shown by the many orchestral solos that join and sometimes compete with the soloist as well as by many thematic links between movements....” The concerto was dedicated to the legendary pianist Josef Hoffman; the score honors his incredible virtuosity. However, Rachmaninoff had huge hands and could

easily reach the interval of a 13th while Hoffman had much smaller hands; he never played the work. The demands on the pianist are monumental, both in technique and stamina. The third concerto has justifiably earned the reputation of being one of the most technically daunting in the entire piano repertoire; some performers affectionately refer to it as “knuckle-busting... a sort of Mt. Everest to be vanquished.” Annotator Michael Steinberg observed, “Rachmaninoff sees the soloist not merely as someone who can sing soulfully and thunder imposingly, but as an alert, flexible, responsive musician who knows how to listen, blend and accompany.”

The piano enters after a two-measure orchestral introduction with a melancholy Slavic theme. Musicologist Joseph Yasser, a friend of the composer, believed that the melody was derived from an ancient chant of the Russian Orthodox Church – *The Tomb, O Savior, Soldiers Guarding*. However, Rachmaninoff said that the melody “simply wrote itself!” This theme appears throughout the concerto as a unifying element. The composer stated he hoped the pianist would “sing the melody on the piano as a singer would sing it” and his responsibility was to craft an accompaniment “that would not muffle the singing.” The quiet second subject, played by the strings, is followed by a detailed development section leading into an exquisitely accompanied piano cadenza, one of the highlights of the concerto. The movement ends in a subdued mood.

As the expansive, adventurous *Intermezzo* opens the woodwinds present a soulful Russian tune that is repeated by the strings and then the piano; the orchestral passages that frame this movement provide the soloist with the only resting points in the entire piece. Eventually a second subject by the clarinet and bassoons is played against the background of a feather-light waltz rhythm in the strings.

The rhapsodic, expansive final movement follows without a pause, signaled by an explosive and virtuosic piano solo. Restless, vigorous energy finds relief during a section that recalls the first movement with a set of surprising, creative variations. Then, the torrent of energy resumes, the tempo steadily increases and the concerto concludes with stunning, jubilant cascades of notes from the heroic soloist.



Howard Hanson

Born: 1896

Died: 1981

Symphony No. 2, Op. 30 “Romantic”

Last ASO Performance February 1994

When American composer Howard Hanson visited Rochester, New York in 1924 as guest conductor for the Rochester Philharmonic, he met Kodak’s George Eastman, the founder of the orchestra. Eastman had recently opened a music school and was looking for a director; he decided Hanson was perfect for the job. Hanson remained for forty years and during his tenure the Eastman School of Music became one of the most respected institutions in the U.S. Described as “larger than life”, he was beloved for remembering the names

of every student he met! He founded an annual series of American composer’s concerts at the school in an era in which contemporary American music was being ignored; he was a tireless, passionate champion for new composers. By the time Hanson retired, the festival had featured over fifteen hundred compositions by seven hundred composers.

A respected administrator, teacher and conductor, Hanson’s compositions have also earned him a very important place in the history of American twentieth century music. He wrote six symphonies and an opera – his Fourth Symphony won the 1943 Pulitzer Prize. But it is the Second Symphony that has become his most popular. Hanson reflected, “My music springs from the soil of the American Midwest. It is music of the plains rather than of the city and reflects, I believe, something of the broad prairies of my native Nebraska. Though I have a profound interest in theoretical problems, my own music comes from the heart and is a direct expression of my own emotional reactions.”

Musicologist David Ewen described Hanson’s legacy, writing, “He has the traditionalist’s respect for classical form and his satisfaction with the accepted harmonic and tonal structures of the past. Hanson is at his best writing in a romantic vein, giving freedom of movement to his supple and expressive lyricism. It is the comparative restraint with which Hanson speaks his heart – his restraint in the use of color, dynamics, and tender melodies – that has tempted some commentators to describe him as ‘the American Sibelius.’”

The Second Symphony, “Romantic”, was commissioned in 1930 for the fiftieth anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by legendary Serge Koussevitzky. Annotator Janet E. Bedell notes, “The subtitle ‘Romantic’ was more than a name – for Hanson, it was a statement of faith. In 1930, ‘Romantic’ music was out of favor and the Neo-Classicism of Stravinsky and the atonality of Arnold Schoenberg were ‘in.’” Skillfully crafted and engagingly tonal, the three-movement symphony explores the interval of a perfect fourth for its tunes and harmonies.” When the Second premiered, Hanson shared that it represented “my escape from the rather bitter type of modern

musical realism which occupies so large a place in contemporary musical thought...I do not believe that music is primarily a matter of the intellect, but rather a manifestation of the emotions. I have, therefore, aimed to create a work that was young in spirit, lyrical and Romantic in temperament, and simple and direct in expression.”

Hanson borrowed an idea embraced by Romantic composers like Franz Liszt who used the first main melody as a motto that would reappear in all three movements; a horn quartet introduces this heroic theme after a slow introduction. Bedell aptly observed, “ A little later, mellow strings introduce a second theme, a true romantic melody in the style of the 1930’s and as warm and relaxing as your favorite easy chair.” This memorable, lyrical theme has become famous in its own right as the “Interlochen theme” – performed for many years at the end of concerts at the Interlochen Center for the Arts. The main body of the *Allegro moderato* features sections of great dramatic tension alleviated by heart-wrenching rhapsodic lyricism.

The richly orchestrated *Andante con tenerezza* starts with a simple melody that is then showcased with a lovely horn counterpoint and string descant. The flutes play a major role resolving dissonances into an idyllic episode. A more menacing dissonance evolves but the opposing forces of sound eventually reconcile after some poignant harmonies.

The horns are featured with lively fanfares based on the motto theme as the finale begins. Later in the movement, careful listeners may detect a reference to Stravinsky and an homage to *The Rite of Spring* – insistent repeated patterns with heavy percussion drumbeats. The music builds to a huge snowball of a climax but Hanson inserts a delicious reprise of the mellow “easy chair” theme before the splendid conclusion of this gratifyingly powerful masterpiece.