

Program Notes, September 16, 2017

MUSIC LOVERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!

Our **Revolutions and Revelations** series asks the question: How does music respond to political revolution? Tonight, on the eve of the centennial of the Russian Revolution, GBS takes you first to Czarist Russia, where Glinka's music reveals the Western influences prevalent in Russia at the time. The rise of the Soviet Union had a profound effect on the life and music of our three other featured composers, who all fought against the Revolution in their own way. Pärt was born into Stalin's U.S.S.R.; his mysterious music is haunted by Russia's heavily religious past. Rachmaninoff was forced to leave his native Russia, and lived thereafter in Europe and America. Shostakovich struggled all his life for acceptance, against tremendous odds; he was ostracized, and his family was persecuted by the Stalinist government. As our soloist, Alex Beyer, says, "Shostakovich always wants you to know you are *on the edge*."

Mikhail Glinka (1805-1857)

Overture to Ruslan and Ludmila

"Music is my soul," wrote Glinka in describing his relationship to the art form. This "soul" became the foundation for a Russian style of notated classical music that would be developed, transformed and challenged from his time to the present. Glinka arrived onto the scene with perfect timing for this task.

Peter the Great had visited Europe in the late seventeenth century and became inspired to create a city in Russia that was influenced by European technical construction. Peter built his city in a place where no prior inhabitants lived, so he had the opportunity to start from scratch and build his plan for an entire city all at once.

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One hundred and twenty years later, Glinka spent four years in Italy and Germany soaking up European styles and attitudes before returning to Russia to unpack a musical style which, though carrying the wisdom of European designs was Russian in its heart and spirit.

Glinka wrote two operas, both of which influenced the history of Russian music. He wrote the first, *A Life of the Tsar*, in 1834, at age 30), and it was well-received. His second opera was a wild fantasy piece called *Ruslan and Ludmila*. This work took more than six years to develop and was first performed in 1842. The libretto was based on a poem by Pushkin, and the great Pushkin himself had intended to create the libretto for this opera just prior to his death in a pistol duel.

The overture to *Ruslan and Ludmila* is a staple of the orchestral literature. Glinka himself described the opening of the overture as "blows of the fist." It strikes and then reloads with scalar lines that curve and twist. The energy is swift and caffeinated. Listen for a contrasting lyrical tune played by the violas. The interplay of these two different styles of music is central to the overture. The development, mostly in minor keys, is organized like the design of streets in St. Petersburg: it is methodical, grid-like, and precise. Surprises lay in store at the close of the overture as the trombones play descending whole-tones scales that melt into fireworks of sound.

Arvo Pärt (Soviet Estonian, b. 1935)

Fratres for Strings, Percussion, and Solo Violin

Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers—in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning . . . Tintinnabulation is like this. Here I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very

few elements—with one voice, with two voices. I build with the most primitive materials—with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of the triad are like bells. And that is why I called it tintinnabulation.

Composer Arvo Pärt

Mysterious and meditative, Pärt's music has found an audience in the 21st century, where it speaks clearly to us even in an age of distractions. The work, whose title simply means “brethren” or companions, was written in 1977 when the composer was still unknown outside of Estonia.

Stillness and chanting, complexity and focus alternate in this work of about 12 minutes duration. Focus on the phrases played by the orchestra—they consist of a clause of 4 syllables followed by a phrase of 6 syllables, followed by a phrase of 8 syllables. This pattern: 4, 6, 8 is restated and then a percussive marker is sounded. This process repeats eight times to create the ceremony of its performance.

The brethren are perhaps represented by the solo violin—music that dances systematically within the crystalline precision of its surroundings.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (Russian-American, 1873-1943)

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Born in the lifetime of Mozart, Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) changed the popular conception of a virtuoso into a form that lasted well beyond the 19th century. He played in a relaxed posture and developed bewildering new technics, fingerings and articulations. Audiences greeted him in a form of ecstasy, and rumors of all sorts surrounded his lifestyle. In the age of Rock & Roll, one might compare his influence and mystique to Jimi Hendrix.

Almost one hundred years after Paganini's death, Rachmaninoff found himself living in Switzerland, in a time when the new world powers surrounding him were dangerous, aggressive, and progressively frightening. He must have found solace in connection to the mysterious past of this enigmatic virtuoso.

In only six weeks during the summer of 1934 Rachmaninoff created and fully notated his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. His source for the theme was the 24th and final movement of Paganini's famous and frequently studied Caprices for solo violin.

In the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* Rachmaninoff wrote 24 variations on the 24th caprice. With a smile he wrote a brief introduction and presented the first variation (for orchestra alone) before we hear the “theme.” The work then continues with the second variation. Each variation is brief—most lasting under a minute. It is not necessary to count or track them in order to love this work, but there are guideposts to help reveal where we are along the pathway.

The piano soloist will play octaves and a few cadential chords as the work opens—this is the introduction. The orchestra plays two phrases alone—that is the first variation. The next time the pianist plays (single notes in the simplest style) you are hearing the “theme.” All of this takes place within the 90 seconds of the composition.

The machinery of variation activates, and the music becomes progressively more complex and figured. Suddenly the strings sustain a chord and the piano plays music that sounds improvisational. Time itself seems to stretch and slow. This group of two variations (6 and 7) mark a parenthesis and processional. The piano chords of the 7th variation introduce a theme known to musicians through Gregorian chant. It is called the *Dies Irae* – The Day of Wrath. Musicians of the 19th century (including Berlioz and Liszt among many others) quoted this tune to represent the darker sides of fate and the

fear of an ultimate reckoning after death. Rachmaninoff quoted this passage in many works. Listen for how this new tune returns throughout the *Rhapsody* and eventually fuses with the Paganini theme.

The machinery spins again with sudden fury in the final set of three variations that mark the first larger division within this *Rhapsody*. A toccata is followed by a jazzy interlude (featuring col legno strings) and a devilish march with a return to the *Dies Irae*. The piano voices the highest pitched A on the instrument like a flash of the eye.

There is a longstanding tradition in writing variation sets that the tonality is kept constant so that one can focus on the textural changes of the variation process. Rachmaninoff keeps the first and last third of this work in the tonality of A minor, but the middle third blossoms in a variety of keys and lyrical moods. Like the *Wizard of Oz*, this central section is in color.

Quiet string tremolos and windswept writing for piano, with lovely wind doublings and harp glissandi, mark this 11th variation. Again, time stretches into stillness. Pizzicato strings lead into a minuet in D Minor featuring several orchestral soloists.

Music of conflict and warfare is interrupted by a jazzy parenthesis followed by two variations of night-music. One can sense the imprint of anxieties from the mid-thirties if one listens closely. Night dissolves with music of sunrise: the famous 18th variation.

You have probably heard this variation before—even if this is the first time you are hearing this *Rhapsody* in its entirety. It has been used as a soundtrack in several movies, including *Somewhere in Time*, a 1980 movie about chasing ghosts and mirages in a pursuit that becomes reckless. In the film, the D-flat major andante cantabile from this 18th variation becomes a symbol of unsponsored recognition. The andante cantabile is well suited for this world of reflection. This variation was created by inverting the contour of the Paganini theme upon which the work is based: every musical interval of the theme was reflected in the opposite direction in the 18th variation—just like a mirror.

The final six variations return to the film noir world of A Minor that opened the *Rhapsody*. The music is flashy, fast, spirited. The virtuosity becomes increasingly spell-binding. We meet an image of Paganini translated into the sound of the piano from the pen of a 20th century virtuoso.

In Marilyn Monroe's 1955 film *The Seven Year Itch*, she exclaims (in character, of course), "Rachmaninoff! It isn't fair. Every time I hear it, I go to pieces . . . it shakes me, it quakes me. It makes me feel goose-pimplly all over. I don't know where I am or who I am or what I'm doing. Don't stop. Don't stop. *Don't ever stop!*"

Dmitri Shostakovich (Soviet Russian, 1906-1975)

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5

Art can inspire, motivate, question, protest. We believe ourselves to be open-minded. Are we? What if music were to inspire violence? If music were to be connected to violence, what would our obligations become? Who would decide?

Dimitri Shostakovich was born in 1906 into an age in which art could have an edge. The Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, and for a while, the most fantastic art suddenly flourished. Art sent a message that society could be rebuilt, modernized and brought into a future that was bold and limitless.

Shostakovich's early music is bold and filled with grotesque imagination. He wrote an opera (recently performed at The Met) called *The Nose*, during that era. Imagine an opera about a nose that has decided it will no longer stay on a man's face . . . so it leaves and has its own adventures.

But things in the Stalinist world around Shostakovich were changing, darkening, and he did not recognize the implications of the shift. His music was suddenly considered violent and dangerous. His opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, was first performed in 1934. Joseph Stalin attended a performance in 1936, and was offended and horrified by the musical language and subject matter of the opera. Shostakovich's music was summarily condemned from every direction. But worse: he and his family were now in danger.

His music did not promote the aims of the Soviet government. People he knew were beginning to disappear in the wake of what was called the "Great Terror." It was a risky era to be an artist. Shostakovich made difficult choices in that strange time. He withdrew his *Fourth Symphony* and tried to stay out of the spotlight.

The *Fifth Symphony*, written in 1937, was Shostakovich's response to the Great Terror. He made no other response, but a newspaper article published by supporters of the state indicated that Shostakovich himself felt that the symphony was "a Soviet artist's creative response to just criticism." Heartbreaking. But the truth is that the symphony put Shostakovich back on safe ground. He was never the same. How could he be . . . ?

Debate continues to rage over the meaning of many passages within this work. Is the ending celebratory, or is it forced celebration?

The *Fifth Symphony* opens with a two-note cypher and its reflection. This haunted motive returns frequently, sometimes threatening to spin out of control. Listen for a theme based on scales; rising or falling lines. It is contrasted by a theme with gaps. Connected movement contrasted by movement around things that are missing. The ending is quiet, stunned.

The second movement is brief. It is comic, dark, bittersweet. The third movement is built from the sound of the strings. Watch the bow movements of the section violins carefully and you will notice that they are scored in three parts—not two. The strings are all deeply divided. It creates rich colors. A solo for flute and harp mark its midpoint.

The finale is music of determination. It corners like a ride in an adventure park, accelerating as it develops, increasingly approaching the danger of spinning out of control. A trumpet solo and the entrance of the xylophone lead to a new theme, and the fastest tempo of the movement. Then, sudden quiet. The music begins to decelerate. Listen for a heart-breaking horn solo, and later a flute solo. This passage is what tears would sound like if they became audible.

We are led away from this oasis by a gradual building of intensities and concerns. The music seeks determination once again. We are led into a closing in D Major, but the major key is altered by tones that do not belong. Is it victorious: Light winning over darkness? Is it ironic? Tragic? All of them? Listen.

Jeffrey Johnson
University of Bridgeport