

Peninsula Symphony Program Notes for October 23 & 24, 2015

Soyeon Kate Lee Plays Rachmaninoff

Berlioz, Roman Carnival

Roman Carnival has always been one of Berlioz' best-loved works, full of drama, soaring melody, and his idiosyncratic approach to composition. Though it is based on material from his opera *Benvenuto Cellini*, and came to be used as a prelude to the second act, which actually takes place at a carnival in Rome, he composed it in 1843-4 as a stand-alone work.

Berlioz's career path was anything but straightforward. He was discouraged from studying the piano, though he did have lessons in guitar and flute, and was entirely self-taught in harmony and music theory. He disappointed his parents, who sent him to medical school to follow in his father's footsteps, by dropping out to concentrate on music. He attended the Paris conservatoire and after four tries won the Prix de Rome, which he sought not only for the recognition but for the 5-year stipend that came along with it. Ultimately, he was as recognized and lauded for his musical criticism and his Treatise on Orchestration as he was for his music.

A carnival is a feast for all the senses; full of constantly changing sights, sounds, and smells, energetic sometimes to the point of chaos. Berlioz captures this crackling atmosphere beautifully in *Roman Carnival*, starting with his characteristic use of an enlarged orchestra including four trumpets, three trombones, and two tambourines, among others, in ever-shifting sonic combinations. The overture opens with an energetic and quirky section in the rhythm of the saltarello, a vigorous traditional Italian dance in 6/8 time, which will dominate the second half of the work, but this quickly fades away to be replaced by a serene melody, first in the English horn, then picked up by the violas, and then the full orchestra. Rising and falling scales in the woodwinds lead us back to the festive and flashy saltarello, beginning with muted strings and gradually growing to encompass the whole orchestra. This section is full of abrupt changes of direction, as big brassy passages are interrupted by quieter ones sometimes consisting of just a few woodwinds, until the entire orchestra finally reaches the fast and furious conclusion.

-Patricia L. Whaley

Dvorak, Symphony No. 7 in D Minor, Op.70

From the moment that Beethoven realized in horror that he was going deaf, the composers of the 19th Century turned music on its head by pouring their personal agonies and triumphs into their symphonic music. From Berlioz' drug-induced fantasies, to Brahms' compositional struggles, to Tchaikovsky's agonizing identity crisis, right through to Rachmaninoff's bouts of depression and Mahler's Freudian agonies, Romantic music came to be about the inner life of the artist. Antonin Dvorak was a rare exception, drawing his inspiration from the nationalistic life of Bohemian folk and the beauties of nature.

When he received a major commission from the august London Philharmonic for a new symphony in 1884, Dvorak saw an opportunity to change all that, and, drawing inspiration in part from his mentor Brahms' recent Third Symphony, he undertook to infuse his next work with personal and nationalistic reflection. He found himself deeply motivated by this challenge, taking strength from the growing Czech independence movement, but also from his own attempt to come to grips with the deaths of his mother and his eldest child. He worked fast, completing a sketch of the first movement in just five days, and the second just ten days later.

This Seventh Symphony is a profound and affecting work, raising his compositional aspirations without sacrificing his unique melodic gift. The first movement bubbles with lilting Bohemian melodies, but always with an undertone of trial and suspense. But it is the second movement which takes Dvorak into a new dimension. Beginning with a series of tender and touching woodwind melodies, it suddenly descends into a near stop, pausing for a funeral march, filled with grief and melancholy. As the music moves ahead, the themes move back and forth between sorrow and resolve. In the end, Dvorak summons the will to celebrate life and find solace. It is a miraculous and touching musical transformation.

After all this, the third movement takes us back to Dvorak's trademark folksy dance-like lyricism, not unlike his celebrated Slavonic Dances. Then the Finale opens with a heartfelt outcry, followed by a quiet military march, building ultimately into a triumphal ending worthy of a great composer on a mission to express his nation's grandeur and his own personal trials and resolves. This work did, as he hoped it might, establish the composer as one of the masters of his era.

-Mitchell Sardou Klein

Rachmaninoff, Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

These opening concerts traverse a vast range of great music of the Romantic period, beginning with Berlioz' fabulous festive celebration (Roman Carnival), continuing with Dvorak's heartfelt Seventh Symphony, and culminating in one of the most recognized and treasured concertos of all time.

(Along the way, by the way, expect an unannounced "surprise" selection: can you guess who might make a surprise appearance in a program such as this one?)

Sergei Rachmaninoff was at a crossroads in his life as he approached this concerto in 1900. Having been crushed by the critical failure of his First Symphony three years earlier, followed by long bouts of depression and writer's block, the composer ultimately dedicated this work to the physician who showed him the way through his melancholia. The triumph of this composition brought Rachmaninoff fame and success, if not always serenity.

And few musical works have achieved the iconic standing of this one. It appears prominently in at least a dozen feature films, several Japanese animes, Ayn Rand's novel, *The Fountainhead*, many television programs throughout the world, and it has been adapted into popular songs and as the musical setting for numerous Olympic ice skating and gymnastic routines. Magically, Rachmaninoff finds melodies that draw us in to his emotional world, and never leave our memories.

Such a theme is the disquieting melody that begins the first movement, after the forbidding slow piano chords that set the scene. Then, after a short transition comes one of the most serene melodies of the age. These two themes form the structural basis of the movement, developed at length and presented in the recapitulation with even greater intensity, leading to a characteristic Rachmaninoff grand and glorious rush to the finish line.

The second (slow) movement begins with languid piano arpeggios, over which the clarinet and other instruments of the orchestra exchange and embellish lovely melodic sentiments in a particularly intimate conversation.

The third movement immediately returns us to an agitated mood of urgency and power. Then we find ourselves abruptly in the midst of one of the most celebrated and stirring melodies to come from the composer's pen, made even more famous by Frank Sinatra, as "Full Moon and Empty Arms" in the hit song from 1945, played here by the violas and English Horn, then, exquisitely, by the piano. After extensive development of both themes and moods, the lyrical second theme is played at full voice by the full orchestra, accompanied by a robust, march-like piano passage, and ending in a fast, ecstatic coda with a burst of spectacular virtuosity by the piano.

-Mitchell Sardou Klein