

Program Notes: The Russian Piano

Notes on the program by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

ALEKSANDR SCRIBIN

(Born December 25, 1871/January 6, 1872, Moscow; died April 14/27, 1915, Moscow)

Piano Sonata no. 3 in f-sharp minor, op. 23, *États d'âme* (States of the Soul)

Composed: 1897–1898

Other works from this period: Piano Concerto in f-sharp minor, op. 20 (1896); Polonaise in b-flat minor for Solo Piano, op. 21 (1897); Symphony no. 1 in E Major (with chorus in finale), op. 26 (1899–1900)

Approximate duration: 20 minutes

“The Muscovite seer”; “the Russian musical mystic”; “the clearest case of artistic egomania in the chronicles of music”: Aleksandr Scriabin was one of the most unusual of all composers. Living in the generation between Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev, he showed an early talent for music and trod the accepted path of lessons, conservatory training, and teaching. His visions, however, refused to be channeled into the conventional forms of artistic expression, and he developed a style and a philosophy that were unique. During the last dozen years of his life, Scriabin believed that humankind was approaching a final cataclysm from which a nobler race would emerge, with himself playing some exalted but ill-defined Messianic role in the new order. (He welcomed the beginning of World War I as the fulfillment of his prophecy.) As the transition through this apocalypse, Scriabin posited an enormous ritual that would purge humanity and make it fit for the millennium. He felt that he was divinely called to create this ritual, this “Mystery,” as he called it, and he spent the last twelve years of his life concocting ideas for its realization. Scriabin’s mammoth “Mystery” was to be performed in a specially built temple in India (in which country he never set foot) and was to include music, mime, fragrance, light, sculpture, costume, etc., etc., which were to represent the history of humanity from the dawn of time to the ultimate world convulsion. He even imagined a language of sighs and groans that would express feelings not translatable into mere words. He whipped all these fantasies together with a seething sexuality to create a vision of whirling emotional ferment quite unlike anything else in the history of music or any other art. In describing the *Poem of Ecstasy* to his friend Ivan Lipaev, he said, “When you listen to it, look straight into the eye of the sun!”

Scriabin composed his Sonata no. 3 in f-sharp minor in 1897–1898, soon after he had returned to Russia from the tour that established his reputation in Europe, had married a young pianist named Vera Ivanovna Isakovich, and had begun to imbibe the “theosophy” of the Ukrainian occultist, spiritual medium, and writer Helena Blavatsky, which purported to reveal the mysteries of being, nature, and divinity. The f-sharp minor Sonata was created at that nodal point in Scriabin’s philosophical evolution, and it is his first work to embody the fervent mysticism that became the driving creative force for the rest of his life. He structured it in the traditional four movements—a dramatic opening movement in sonata form, scherzo, slow movement, and culminating finale—but intimated its expressive subtext with the descriptive title *États d'âme: States of the Soul*. Several years after the sonata was completed, Tatyana Schloezer, who was then his mistress and ultimately was his life companion (Scriabin and Vera were never divorced), made explicit the emotional progress of the Sonata no. 3. She wrote, “[First movement, *Drammatico*] The soul, free and wild, thrown into the whirlpool of suffering and strife. [Second movement, *Allegretto*] Apparent momentary and illusory respite; tired from suffering, the soul wants to forget, wants to sing and flourish, in spite of everything. But the light rhythm, the fragrant harmonies are just a cover through which gleams the restless and languishing soul. [Third movement, *Andante*] A sea of feelings, tender and sorrowful: love, sorrow, vague desires, inexplicable

thoughts, illusions of a delicate dream. [Finale, *Presto con fuoco*] From the depth of being rises the fearsome voice of creative man whose victorious song resounds triumphantly. But too weak yet to reach the acme, he plunges, temporarily defeated, into the abyss of non-being.”

Despite the sonata’s contemporariness of thought and style, its first movement is disposed in classical sonata form based on two themes. The main theme comprises a quick leap upward in the bass, a rising three-note step-wise response, and a falling triplet figure; the subsidiary subject is lyrical, almost dreamy. Both ideas figure in the development section before being recapitulated in compressed versions. A coda based on the main theme brings the movement to a quiet, somewhat tentative close. The *Allegretto*, more intermezzo than scherzo, takes an intriguingly harmonized strain of a faintly martial character for its outer sections and a gentle yet playful theme for its central episode. The *Andante*, based on one of Scriabin’s most inspired melodies, is music for a tender, moonlit love scene, which, like romance in real life, passes through a period of sadness in a chromatic passage marked *Dolorosa*—“tearfully.” A hushed reminiscence of the first movement provides a transition to the sonata-form finale, which begins in a tempestuous mood. An expressive alternative is provided by the sweet second subject, but the music then undertakes a long developmental consideration of the tempestuous theme. The sweet theme returns before giving way again to the stormy mood. Finally, the sonata seems to turn toward a triumphant close with a grandiloquent statement of the romantic theme of the *Andante*, but this, too, is ultimately defeated by the tempest. The work comes to a stunningly abrupt ending as “the soul plunges into the abyss of non-being.”

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

(Born March 21, 1839, Karevo, Pskov District, Russia; died March 28, 1881, St. Petersburg)

Hopak from the opera *Sorochintsï Fair* (arr. Sergei Rachmaninov)

Composed: 1874–1881, arranged 1925

Other works from this period: *Five Russian Folk Songs* (arranged for four male voices) (1880); *Pictures at an Exhibition* for Solo Piano (1874); *Pesni i plyaski smerti* (*Songs and Dances of Death*) for Voice and Piano (1875, 1877)

Approximate duration: 2 minutes

Nikolai Gogol’s short story *Sorochintsï Fair* (1831) recounts how a young girl, Parasya, attends a Ukrainian country fair with her father, the farmer Cherevik, and mother, Khivrya. Parasya falls in love in Sorochintsk with the peasant Gritsko and wants to marry him. Her father agrees to the union when he learns that Gritsko is the son of a friend, but Khivrya forbids it. Gritsko, disconsolate, consults a Gypsy, who reveals that Khivrya has planned an assignation with the local priest’s son while Cherevik is out of the house. Complications inevitably ensue, but the objections of Khivrya, now compromised, to the marriage of Parasya and Gritsko are eventually overcome and the young lovers are allowed to wed. Modest Mussorgsky began his opera based on Gogol’s tale in 1874 but left it in unfinished disarray when he died seven years later. Anatoly Liadov orchestrated three numbers from the score and César Cui, Nikolai Tcherepnin, and Vyacheslav Karatigin all attempted to complete the work, but *Sorochintsï Fair* did not reach a settled performable state until it was finished by Vissarion Shebalin in 1932 as part of Pavel Lamm’s complete edition of Mussorgsky’s compositions. The marriage celebration in the opera’s closing scene features a vigorous **hopak**, the national dance of Ukraine that originated with the Cossacks in the sixteenth century.

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.

FRITZ KREISLER

(Born February 2, 1875, Vienna; died January 29, 1962, New York City)

Liebesleid (Love's Sorrow) (arr. Sergei Rachmaninov)

Liebesfreud (Love's Joy) (arr. Sergei Rachmaninov)

Composed: before 1905; arranged 1921 and 1925, respectively

Other works from this period: *Caprice viennois*, op. 2 (1910); *Chanson Louis XIII et Pavane in the Style of Couperin* (1910); *Praeludium and Allegro in the Style of Pugnani* (1910); *Apple Blossoms* (operetta) (1919)

Approximate duration: 11 minutes

Fritz Kreisler—"unanimously considered among his colleagues to be the greatest violinist of the twentieth century," wrote critic Harold Schonberg in the *New York Times* on January 30, 1962, the day after Kreisler died—was admitted to the Vienna Conservatory when he was seven, gave his first performance at nine, and won a gold medal when he was ten. He then transferred to the Paris Conservatoire, where, at age twelve, he won the school's gold medal over forty other competitors, all of whom were at least ten years his senior. In 1888–1889, Kreisler successfully toured the United States, but then he virtually abandoned music for several years, studying medicine in Vienna and art in Rome and Paris and serving as an officer in the Austrian army. He again took up the violin in 1896 and failed to win an audition to become a member of the Vienna Philharmonic but quickly established himself as a soloist, making his formal reappearance in Berlin in March 1899. He returned to America in 1900 and gave his London debut in 1901, creating a sensation at every performance. At the outbreak of World War I, Kreisler rejoined his former regiment, but he was wounded soon thereafter and discharged from service. In November 1914, he moved to the United States, where he had been appearing regularly for a decade. He gave concerts in America to raise funds for Austrian war relief, but anti-German sentiment ran so high after America's entry into the war that he had to temporarily withdraw from public life. He resumed his concert career in New York in October 1919 and then returned to Europe. In 1938, following the annexation of Austria by the Nazis, Kreisler settled in the United States for good; he became an American citizen in 1943. Despite being injured in a traffic accident in 1941, he continued concertizing to immense acclaim through the 1949–1950 season. He died in New York in 1962.

In addition to being one of the twentieth century's undisputed masters of the violin, Fritz Kreisler also composed a string quartet, a violin concerto, and two operettas (*Apple Blossoms* and *Sissy*), but he is most fondly remembered for his many short compositions and arrangements for violin, including two well-known waltzes imbued with the distinctive *Gemütlichkeit* of his native Vienna: *Liebesleid (Love's Sorrow)* and *Liebesfreud (Love's Joy)*, one wistful, the other exuberant.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

(Born June 5/17, 1882, Oranienbaum [now Lomonosov], Russia; died April 6, 1971, New York City)

Pétrouchka, Ballet in Four Tableaux for Piano, Four Hands

Composed: 1911, revised 1946; reductions 1912, 1948

Other works from this period: *The Firebird* (ballet) (1910); *Pétrouchka* (ballet) (1911, rev. 1946); *Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)* (ballet) (1911–1913)

Approximate duration: 35 minutes

Stravinsky burst meteor-like onto the musical firmament in 1910 with the brilliant triumph of his first major score for the Ballets Russes, *The Firebird*. Immediately, Sergei Diaghilev, the enterprising impresario of the troupe, sought to capitalize on this success by commissioning Stravinsky to write a second score as soon as possible. Stravinsky was already prepared with an idea which had come to him even before finishing *The Firebird*. "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite," he recalled in his *Autobiography* of 1936. "Sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to

death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." Such was the theme of *Le sacre du printemps*. Diaghilev was as excited about this vision as was Stravinsky, and he sent the composer off to write the score with all possible haste. Stravinsky continued the story in his *Autobiography*:

Before tackling *The Rite of Spring*, which would be a long and difficult task, I wanted to refresh myself by composing an orchestral piece in which the piano would play the most important part—a sort of *Konzertstück*. In composing the music, I had a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life... Having finished this piece, I struggled for hours to find a title which would express in a word the character of my music and, consequently, the personality of this creature. One day I leaped for joy, I had indeed found my title—*Pétrouchka*, the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries. Soon afterwards, Diaghilev came to visit me. He was much astonished when, instead of the sketches of the *Sacre*, I played him the piece I had just composed and which later became the second scene of *Pétrouchka*. He was so pleased with it that he would not leave it alone and began persuading me to develop the theme of the puppet's sufferings and make it into a whole ballet.

Though his progress on the score was interrupted by a serious bout of "nicotine poisoning," Stravinsky finished the work in time for the scheduled premiere on June 13, 1911. The production was a triumph.

Tableau I. *The Shrove-Tide Fair*. Crowds of people stroll about, entertained by a hurdy-gurdy man and dancers. The Showman opens the curtains of his little theater to reveal three puppets—*Pétrouchka*, the Ballerina, and the Moor. He charms them into life with his flute, and they begin to dance among the public.

Tableau II. *Pétrouchka's Room*. *Pétrouchka* suffers greatly from his awareness of his grotesque appearance. He tries to console himself by falling in love with the Ballerina. She visits him in his cell, but she is frightened by his uncouth antics and flees.

Tableau III. *The Moor's Room*. The Moor and the Ballerina meet in his tent. Their love scene is interrupted by the arrival of *Pétrouchka*, furiously jealous. The Moor tosses him out.

Tableau IV. *The Shrove-Tide Fair towards Evening*. The festive scene of Tableau I resumes with the appearance of a group of wet nurses, a performing bear, Gypsies, a band of coachmen, and several masqueraders. At the theater, *Pétrouchka* rushes out from behind the curtain, pursued by the Moor, who strikes his rival down with his sword. *Pétrouchka* dies. The Showman assures the bystanders that *Pétrouchka* is only a puppet, but he is startled to see *Pétrouchka's* jeering ghost appear on the roof of the little theater.

The version of *Pétrouchka* for piano, four hands, created simultaneously with the orchestral score in 1911 and revised in 1946, was intended to be used both for rehearsals of the ballet and for performance of the music in intimate spaces.