Program Notes: Towards the Flame

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

SERGEI RACHMANINOV

(Born March 20/April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia; died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California)

Suite no. 2 in c minor for Two Pianos, op. 17

Composed: 1900–1901

First performance: November 24, 1901, Moscow, by the composer and Aleksandr Siloti

Other works from this period: Piano Concerto no. 2 in c minor, op. 18 (1900–1901); Sonata in g minor for Cello and Piano, op. 19 (1901); *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* for Piano, op. 22 (transcription) (1902–1903)

Approximate duration: 21 minutes

In the years following his death, with manifold strains of modernism animating an increasingly contentious musical landscape, the unabashed **Romanticism** of Rachmaninov's compositional language did his legacy no favors. Writing in the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* Eric Blom infamously asserted that Rachmaninov, belying the celebrity he had achieved in his lifetime as composer, pianist, and conductor, "did not have the individuality of Taneyev or Medtner." Blom went on to predict, "The enormous popular success some few of Rachmaninov's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded it with much favor."

Hindsight half a century hence has reinforced the music critic Harold C. Schonberg's acute dismissal of Blom's assessment as "one of the most outrageously snobbish and even stupid statements in a work that is supposed to be an objective reference." (Schonberg did acknowledge that Blom was only articulating the day's prevailing critical thought.) The early twenty-first century finds Rachmaninov's image rehabilitated and, indeed, his artistic legacy more compelling than ever before. While the pop-star sheen of his performing career has long since faded, Rachmaninov endures as one of the repertoire's most cherished, and most performed, composers.

Rachmaninov's catalogue of music for his own instrument—from solo works to four concerti—rests at the center of that legacy. This body of work includes three works for two pianos: *Russian Rhapsody,* composed in 1891, when Rachmaninov was eighteen; the *Fantaisie-tableaux* (Suite no. 1), composed two years later; and the Suite no. 2, **op.** 17, completed in 1901. This last work was part of a triumphant string of successes that marked a comeback from creative trauma for Rachmaninov.

In 1897, a reportedly inebriated Aleksandr Glazunov conducted the premiere of Rachmaninov's First Symphony. The performance was a disaster. César Cui called the twenty-one-year-old Rachmaninov's new work "a program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt...If there was a conservatory in Hell, Mr. Rachmaninov's symphony...would no doubt thoroughly entertain all of Hell's creatures." Three depressed, fallow years followed (which nevertheless had a bright side: hesitant to compose, Rachmaninov took up conducting, an arena in which he would find considerable success). Visits to a hypnotist restored Rachmaninov to "a cheerfulness of spirit, a desire to work, and confidence in his abilities," wrote his sister-in-law. And he returned to composition with a vengeance, producing the Second Piano **Concerto,** the Cello **Sonata,** the Opus 23 **preludes,** *Spring* (a cantata), Twelve Songs (op. 21), and the Suite no. 2.

Beyond overcoming demons, it was also during this period and in these works that Rachmaninov found his compositional voice. The Second Piano Concerto casts off the youthful angst and bombast of the beleaguered symphony in favor of the ravishing harmonies and impassioned lyricism that would become his signature.

These qualities likewise characterize the Suite no. 2. Like the concerto, the suite is poetically expressive and stylistically assured. It is cast in four **movements,** beginning with a bold introduction, orchestral in its conception. Dizzying passagework elevates the second-movement ***Valse*** from elegance to ecstasy. Even in its luxurious middle section, the movement remains rapturous. The third movement *Romance* is one of Rachmaninov's loveliest creations. Long, generous melodic lines rise from a texture conceived from the sonic opulence of two pianos. The suite concludes with a heady **tarantella**.

As in his concerti, Rachmaninov's ferocious skill as a pianist is audible in the suite. Its virtuosic bravado and majestic sound serve as much to glorify the instrument as to gratify the pianists. For its perfect matrimony of technical assurance and personal expression, the Suite no. 2 must be heard as one of Rachmaninov's finest artistic achievements.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

(Born April 25/May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Vyatka province; died October 25/November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg)

Serenade in C Major for Strings, op. 48

Composed: September 9/21–October 14/26, 1880

Published: 1881

Dedication: Karl Albrecht

First performance: October 18/30, 1881, St. Petersburg

Other works from this period: *Souvenir d'un lieu cher* for Violin and Piano, op. 42 (1878); Concerto no. 2 in G Major, op. 44 (1879–1880); *1812 Festival Overture* in E-flat Major, op. 49 (1880)

Approximate duration: 28 minutes

A work of tremendous immediate appeal, Tchaikovsky's **Serenade** for Strings could equally well be heard on deeper listening as an artistic credo of sorts. Composed simultaneously with the *1812* ***Overture,*** the serenade, in contrast to the bombast of *1812,* represents an intent focus on craft as a vehicle for personal expression.

The private anguish Tchaikovsky wrestled with throughout his life has been well documented, centering primarily on his sexuality and social relationships. Add to these his cultural orientation as a less palpable, but no less pointedly felt, source of angst. Tchaikovsky was Russian and held a fervent love for his homeland. He likewise grew up with a deep affinity for French culture: his mother, with whom he was close, was an amateur pianist and singer of French descent. One anecdote relates how, as a child, Tchaikovsky would kiss Russia on a map of Europe and then spit on the rest of the continent—but with his hand covering France.

The Russian-Western dichotomy would become more pronounced in his artistic maturity. Among the Russian composers of his generation, Tchaikovsky was the most firmly rooted in the Western **Classical** tradition and thus aesthetically distanced from his self-trained compatriots known as "the Five" (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov), who strove to create a distinctly Russian school of music. He was, in other words, not as Russian as the Russians, nor did he quite fit in among the German Romantics (Brahms, et al.).

In the Serenade for Strings, Tchaikovsky seems to work out his cultural identity before our very ears. The work demonstrates Western technique styled after Mozart—Tchaikovsky's musical idol—and Beethoven. It is, surmises musicologist Roland John Wiley, "as closely knit a motivic work as Tchaikovsky ever wrote." The opening ***Pezzo*** *in forma di* ***sonatina***—an overt homage to Mozart in both form and character—begins with a descending melodic figure that unifies much of the work. The ascending scales that follow become the **theme** of the fetching second-movement *Valse* and reappear in the introductory measures of the poignant ***Élégie.***

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

The serenade's rollicking finale is based on what Tchaikovsky identifies as a *Tema russo,* yet it derives from the **motif** that opens the Mozartian *Pezzo in forma di sonatina.* Lest there be any doubt, the Russian theme slows to a verbatim reprise of the previous melody before the serenade's climactic end. Wiley interprets the serenade as "an essay in Western/Russian rapprochement which favors Russian at the end." It is also, more importantly, a work of sheer triumph. Tchaikovsky's catharsis is our gain.

ALEKSANDR SCRIABIN

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

Preludes for Piano: *Andante* in B Major, op. 16, no. 1; *Andante* in B-flat Major, op. 11, no. 21
***Vers la flamme (Towards the Flame),* op. 72**

Composed: Opus 16: 1894–1895; Opus 11: 1888–1896; *Vers la flamme:* 1914

Other works from this period: Prelude and Nocturne for the Left Hand, op. 9 (1894); Piano Concerto in f-sharp minor (1896); Piano Sonata no. 3 in f-sharp minor, op. 23 (1897)

Approximate duration: 10 minutes

In every sense one of Western music history's singular figures, the Russian pianist and composer Aleksandr Scriabin has been an object of, in equal measure, cultish fascination and scorn. Both stem from his utterly unique artistic identity: the ravishing music that manifests that identity has won fervent admirers, just as the persona behind the music has drawn contempt. The self-absorption and off-putting egocentricity that so fueled Scriabin's creativity—in essence, his messiah complex—make him an easy target for our derision. In 1905, Scriabin unveiled his Third Symphony not merely as his latest composition but as "the first proclamation of my new doctrine." From such grandiosity, the arc is not so difficult to trace to his unrealized **fantasy**-masterpiece, the *Mysterium:* a weeklong ritual for orchestra, choir, dancers, and (naturally) piano soloist, involving lights, scents, and such esoteric elements as "bells suspended from the clouds," to be performed in the Himalayas and which would bring about the apocalypse.

But Scriabin's eccentricities aside, his extraordinary oeuvre of piano music has endured, and, no matter the listener's taste for the composer's "doctrine," these works warrant hearing on their own terms. "The cycle of ten [piano] sonatas," writes pianist Jonathan Powell, "is arguably of the most consistent high quality since that of Beethoven." For Russia's greatest pianists throughout the twentieth century, Scriabin's piano music has been essential repertoire. (Count Scriabin himself among these pianists, though he lent his exceptional virtuosity exclusively to his own music in public performance.)

This evening's program brings together three works from Scriabin's sizable output of music for piano: two preludes, of which he composed over one hundred in his career, and *Vers la flamme (Towards the Flame),* a short work that was to be the beginning of his eleventh piano sonata but instead appeared as a "poem" for solo piano.

The Prelude in B Major, op. 16, no. 1, is an ***Andante*** in the glimmering key of B major. This is music of heart-stopping tenderness. Scriabin sets a gentle, **cantabile** melody within limpid textures and two-against-three **cross-rhythms** between right hand and left, evoking a tranquilly flowing stream. The *Andante* in B-flat Major, op. 11, no. 21—from a set of twenty-four preludes composed contemporaneously with Scriabin's Opus 16—demonstrates a similar gentleness.

That *Vers la flamme* stands in stark contrast to these is evident immediately from the "poem's" opening **stanza,** which is mysterious and primordial. The music's rhythmic ambiguity and dense **chromaticism** reinforce this quality. The temperature rises as Scriabin instructs the pianist to play *avec une émotion naissante* ("with incipient emotion")—the music remains rhythmically murky, marked by a five-against-three accompaniment pattern. The work arrives abruptly at its feverish climax (marked *Éclatant, lumineux*—"vivid, bright"—and *comme une fanfare*). Its conclusion is fittingly incandescent.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

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

***Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)* for Piano, Four Hands**

Composed: 1911–1913; final movement revised 1943

Publication: This version for four-hand piano was published in 1913; the full score was published later, in 1921.

First performance: May 29, 1913, Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, Paris, conducted by Pierre Monteux

Other works from this period: *The Firebird* (ballet) (1910); *Pétrouchka* (ballet) (1911, rev. 1946); Three Pieces for String Quartet (1914)

Approximate duration: 33 minutes

A succession of large orchestral scores produced during Stravinsky's mid-twenties, at the end of his apprenticeship to Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, solidified the young composer's reputation as a master of orchestral color. *The Faun and the Shepherdess* (1906) and the Symphony in E-flat Major (1907) appeared together on a program in 1908 that attracted Stravinsky's first press notice: *Stolichnaya Pochta* declared that Stravinsky's "lively cheerfulness of musical thinking...distinguishes him to his advantage from many of the newest composers." The harmonic language and colorful orchestration of the ***Scherzo*** *fantastique* (1907–1908) betrayed Rimsky-Korsakov's influence as much as they proclaimed Stravinsky's own mature craftsmanship. Most triumphantly, Stravinsky's pithily thrilling *Fireworks* (1908) heralded the emergence of a significant new voice.

These successes caught the attention of numerous among the Russian culturati, including the art critic and ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev. Diaghilev commissioned Stravinsky to provide two orchestrations for the choreographer Mikhail Fokin's *Chopiniana,* to be presented as part of the Ballets Russes's 1909 Paris season (under the title *Les sylphides*). Two further commissions quickly followed, from Aleksandr Siloti, for orchestrations of works by Mussorgsky and Beethoven. Stravinsky completed the first, but the second was derailed by a consequential telegram from Diaghilev: the next three scores Stravinsky produced would forever alter the course of Western music.

Parisian audiences had criticized the 1909 Ballets Russes season for lacking musical interest to match its outstanding dance and design. Taking the criticism to heart, Diaghilev responded with a series of new commissions. The first of these, Stravinsky's *The Firebird,* premiered on June 25, 1910, at the Paris Opéra. The *Nouvelle Revue Française* declared *The Firebird* "the most exquisite marvel of equilibrium we have ever imagined between sounds, movements, and forms." The score delivered as expected on orchestral invention (its dazzling sonorities utterly bewildered both dancers and musicians in rehearsal) and made the twenty-eight-year-old Stravinsky—theretofore unknown to Western audiences—into an overnight sensation.

Far from provincial St. Petersburg (where he had studied), Stravinsky became the toast of the Parisian elite—feted by Debussy, Ravel, and Satie, as well as the likes of Proust, Claudel, and Sarah Bernhardt—and opted to stay in the West. In September 1910, with his wife expecting the couple's third child, Stravinsky moved his family to Lausanne. He began discussing a scenario for a new ballet on a prehistoric subject with the painter and designer Nicholas Roerich, which would be realized as *Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring),* arguably the single most notorious work of the twentieth century.

The ballet's scenario centers on a sacrificial pagan fertility rite. As Stravinsky wrote years later: "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring."

The composer's own four-hand piano arrangement of *The Rite of Spring* represents the work's original manifestation. Stravinsky habitually worked out his musical ideas at the keyboard. Musicologist and pianist Peter Hill has surmised, "The piano seems to have exerted an unseen influence on the *Rite,* far more than just a useful composing tool. The music

has strong pianistic qualities: the snug 'fit' under the pianist's hands of its harmonies suggests that many were discovered while improvising...Heard in concert, the four-hand version makes a distinctive and valid alternative: pared to essentials the music's rhythmic and harmonic dissonance have an even sharper focus."

The Rite of Spring received its historic premiere on May 29, 1913, at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris. Choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky (who one year before had premiered a ballet for Diaghilev on Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*), the premiere created a legendary scandal. The bold dissonances and rhythmic patterns of Stravinsky's score, combined with Nijinsky's shockingly erotic choreography, led to agitated jeers from the audience and vociferous arguments in the house between those who supported the work and those who opposed it.

The Rite of Spring unfolds in a series of **episodes** over two parts. Part I, *The Adoration of the Earth,* begins with a solo melody—set, in the orchestral version, in the bassoon. At the time of *The Rite of Spring*'s premiere, the bassoon (still oft regarded today as "the clown of the orchestra" for its nasal, sometimes cartoonish double-reed timbre) had rarely been entrusted with a melody of such lyricism and dramatic import. Stravinsky moreover set the melody in the bassoon's seldom-used high **register,** eliciting laughter from cynical listeners at the premiere. History has vindicated Stravinsky: this opening melody has become one of the twentieth-century literature's signature moments. In the four-hand piano arrangement, even without the bassoon's curious timbre, these opening measures set a mysterious tone. The introduction proceeds to traverse increasingly thorny textures, until the opening melody returns.

A **staccato** march-like figure signals the end of the introduction, and heavy-handed bass chords announce the next episode, *The Omens of Spring: Dance of the Maidens*. Stravinsky sets the dance to strange rhythmic patterns with irregular accents, which accelerate into the frantic third episode, *Ritual of Abduction.* The agitated melody yields to a gentle **trill,** and a new pastoral melody heralds the next episode, *Spring Rounds (Dances).* Following this innocent new melody, however, comes a series of stoic, primordial chords, sounding as if emerging from beneath the surface of the earth. The music escalates into loud, crashing dissonances, culminating in a volcanic burst of energy. Through the frenzied *Ritual of the Rival Tribes* emerges the melody of the next scene, *Procession of the Sage*. After a sudden pause comes a brief interlude, *The Kiss of the Earth,* and the music immediately returns to a frenetic tempo for the Part I finale, *Dance of the Earth.*

Part II, *The Sacrifice,* begins with an eerie, menacing introduction, which ends with rumbling, subterranean chords that recall the earlier *Spring Rounds;* a lyrical melody, harmonized by harsh dissonances and set over a staccato eighth-note pattern, depicts the *Mystic Rites of the Maidens.* Drawing closer to the crux of the ritual, the dance is interrupted for the *Glorification of the Chosen Maiden.* In preparation for the sacrifice, the following episode depicts the *Evocation of the Ancestors.* Quiet eighth notes and ominous chromatic figures set the scene for the *Ritual of the Ancestors*. The ballet culminates in the *Sacrificial Dance of the Chosen Maiden.* Marked by its impossibly difficult rhythms, this final episode represents perhaps the entire work's most drastic departure from traditional concepts of ballet and has become one of the most notorious passages of twentieth-century music.