



Gustav Meier
Music Director
60th Season

2nd Subscription Concert
Klein Memorial Auditorium
Saturday, November 5, 2005
8:00 p.m.

Gustav Meier, Conductor
Joel Fan, Piano

Beethoven

Coriolan Overture

Rachmaninoff

Piano Concerto no. 2, op. 18

Moderato

Adagio sostenuto

Allegro scherzando

Joel Fan, Piano

INTERMISSION

Brahms

Academic Festival Overture

Respighi

Pines of Rome

The Pines of the Villa Borghese

The Pines Near a Catacomb

The Pines of the Janiculum

The Pines of the Appian Way

(played without pause)

*Tonight's concert is made possible in part by a generous grant from
the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism.*

Piano provided by Steinway Piano Gallery of Westport, CT

PROGRAM NOTES

Billed as the “Best of 60 years” in honor of this 60th season of the Greater Bridgeport Symphony, tonight’s concert offers four major works, the earliest written in 1807 and the latest in 1924, - that is from 197 to 80 years ago. This time distance from 2005 is confirmation of a process that started in the mid-nineteenth century when a newly affluent industrial society was developing a need for legitimate backdrops, one of which became the large public concert hall. There music lovers (many of them genuine - and trained) could hear high level performances of a repertoire becoming increasingly codified as “classic” without much room for new additions. From then to the present the venerable performance groups and their venues have gradually taken on a museum aspect. Its a social, musical, political and philosophic situation, even a dilemma, and probably a kind of crossroads. Nothing musical is more glorious than a great performance of a symphonic piece by a major orchestra (except, perhaps, of an opera which includes voices), but the period when most of these great works were written is receding more into time.

Two of the composers this evening are giants of the Germanic tradition, that is to say of the dominant western canon from 1700 - 1900 (Beethoven and Brahms), two are outstanding representatives of more regional roots; Russian late-romanticism (Rachmaninoff), and romanticism with an Impressionist overlay, Italian style (Respighi). Beethoven as a bridge between the classic (order, in general) and the romantic (freedom, in general) is still a universal figure reaching across all lines. Brahms as a second generation romantic with a reverence for the past as prelude to the future chose to use the old forms, but felt that after him “music is done for.” That hasn’t quite happened, but he correctly foresaw that the twentieth century would be a breaking apart in many aspects. Including The two devastating world wars were not part of his prediction. Rachmaninoff and Respighi represent the continuation of the styles of their youth which overlap the splintering going on around them.

CORIOLAN OVERTURE`

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827)

According to Plutarch, the Roman General, Coriolanus, was a brilliant, but reckless, warrior

whose contemptuous treatment of the plebians of Rome caused the city to exile him. He joined the Volcians, Rome’s traditional enemies, and came back at the head of their army, intending to conquer his own people. Commissioned by the State to intercede, his mother and wife succeeded in persuading him to withdraw. In Plutarch’s (and Shakespeare’s telling of the story, the Volcians then killed Coriolanus for this breach of his contract with them. Beethoven possessed both books in his library and also knew the version by the Austrian playwright Heinrich Collin, in which Coriolanus commits suicide.

The composer was drawn to this story of a patrician hero backed into a no-win situation by flaws in his own character and behavior. Opening with a few bold chords that immediately suggest the proud, implacable and ferocious nature of Coriolanus himself, the Overture continues with a gentle, lyric second subject suggestive of the pleas for love and mercy that both his mother and wife make. Conflict ensues, but at the conclusion the few quiet, splintered notes represent Coriolanus’ complete, self-destroying capitulation.

CONCERTO NO. 2 FOR PIANO. OP. 18

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 - 1943)

After some success with early compositions (Tchaikovsky, for instance, recognized his talent), Rachmaninoff was thrown into a three-year depression during which he could not write after the failure of his Symphony no. 1 in 1897. The Piano Concerto no. 2 was the first large scale composition completed after he subsequently undertook a series of restorative sessions using hypnosis under Dr. Nicholas Dahl. “The light, gay colors do not come easily to me,” Rachmaninoff once wrote, proving himself part of the *fin de siècle* feeling of regret and vague displacement which the Germans called Weltschmerz (world pain) and the Russians characterized as “a sense of impending doom.” The Communist Revolution was less than a generation away when the Second Piano Concerto was completed in 1901.

The somber, measured chords that open the first movement and the impassioned sway of the first theme are together an effective mirror of such restless melancholy. The theme of sentimental yearning which acts as their foil is typical of Rachmaninoff lyricism.

Elegaic and lovely, the peaceful theme which opens and closes the second movement is first presented by flute and clarinet over graceful tracery in the piano. A quicker tempo dominates the middle part with cadenzas for the soloist. A rhythmic figure, low in the orchestra and a brilliant pianistic flourish then announce the last movement characterized by its forceful first theme and its contrasting nostalgic second melody which has become well known also as the popular song "Full Moon and Empty Arms."

The composer gave the first performance of the Second Concerto at a Moscow concert in 1901. It was an immediate success, further establishing his credentials as a part of the late-romantic group that offered music an ever-expanding and increasingly opulent soundscape. The public (deservedly) has always liked the singing line and passionate moodiness of his works, standing against the academic view of some that they consisted of "gushing, artificial tunes and monotonous structure." The nineteenth century had defined genius in part as granting its possessor unlimited emotional license. Rachmaninoff tailored his share of this freedom to his Russian-ness, using chromaticism, the modern symphony orchestra and the piano, then fully developed in terms of its keyboard and tone-color range. He lived well into the twentieth century, but he never became involved with the new musical style, also valid, of composers like Bartok and Stravinsky that was developing around him.

ACADEMIC FESTIVAL OVERTURE

Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

In 1879, Brahms received an honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Breslau. He was cited at the time as "the most famous living German composer of serious music." A new work was expected to commemorate this event and a year later, he produced the Academic Festival Overture which, with his usual sense of irony, he described as "full of laughter."

The Overture is a setting of several college songs and some original material for the largest orchestra Brahms ever used, one which includes cymbals, triangle and bass drum. The emphasis is on the high spirits of student life, not institutional dignity. Student songs were time-honored and somewhat folk-like, always a plus to a romantic composer. Brahms includes a chorale theme and a freshman ragging song, ending with the Latin hymn, *Gaudeamus Igitur*, (let us be joyful

while we are young), a staple of college singing societies since 1267 in the Medieval period. This last section is "raked by mad fiddle scales," as biographer Robert Schauflyer wrote.

The minor key of the opening, substantial counterpoint in the accompaniments, rich brass writing and the like give the work a deeper specific gravity than the word 'laughter' alone implies, especially when compared with the the 'light classic' overtures of Franz von Suppé, very popular at the time, Brahms claimed to be imitating.

PINES OF ROME

Ottorino Respighi (1879 - 1936)

The Pines of Rome (*Pini di Roma*), written in 1924, is in four consecutive movements which evoke nostalgic thoughts about Roman landscapes. The first, Pines of the Villa Borghese, describes children in a pine grove playing games, imitating soldiers and battles, "twittering and shrieking." The second scene, Pines near a Catacomb, evokes pines at the entrance to a catacomb from which a hymn-like chant arises, solemn, sonorous and somewhat grim. The third, Pines of the Janiculum," reveals the pines atop Gianicolo's hill in the moonlight. A nightingale sings, usually heard from a phonograph record (or CD?) in the orchestra - most likely the first time an electronically-produced sound was part of an orchestral score. The last scene, Pines of the Appian Way, starts with a description of misty dawn in the country along the famous road bordered by solitary pines. Gradually marching steps are heard and Roman Legions are conjured up, thundering along this ancient road in a depiction of past glories.

This championing of "Roman aggression", as Richard Taruskin suggests in the new Oxford History of Music, fed into Mussolini's Fascist platform in the 1930's. Il Duce didn't want Italy known anymore as the musical exporter of lilting songs and operas. Respighi spearheaded an Italian renaissance of symphonic writing (his operas are of lesser importance). As French musicologist Henri Prunières aptly wrote, Respighi's idiom was "an able compromise between the counterpoint of (Richard) Strauss, the harmony of Debussy and the orchestration of Rimsky-Korsakov - and the whole tinted with Italian melody."

-Burton Hatheway