



Gustav Meier
Music Director

61st Season

1st Subscription Concert
Klein Memorial Auditorium
Saturday, October 7, 2006
8:00 p.m.

Gustav Meier, Conductor
Andrew Armstrong, Pianist

PROKOFIEFF March and Scherzo from The Love of
Three Oranges

PROKOFIEFF Piano Concerto no. 3, Op. 26
Andante - Allegro
Tema con variazioni - Andantino
Allegro, ma non troppo
Andrew Armstrong, Pianist

INTERMISSION

RACHMANINOFF Vocalise

RACHMANINOFF Symphonic Dances, op. 45
I. Non allegro
II. Andante con moto (tempo di valse)
III. Lento assai -allegro vivace

Tonight's concert is made possible in part by generous grants from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism, the Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation, and Rotair Industries, Inc.

Piano provided by Steinway Piano Gallery of Westport, CT

PROGRAM NOTES

From the time of Glinka (d. 1857), Russian music had been on a glorious track, creating in the process a national style less dependent on European models, one which included a greatly expanded orchestration technique as well. Rachmaninoff and Prokofieff, born 18 years apart and dying within ten years of each other, inherited this accomplishment, but also the effects of events that led to the Communist Revolution in 1917, probably the greatest and most powerful political coup of the 20th century, albeit one based at first on a reforming ideology. Rachmaninoff was 45 when he left Russia in late 1917, never to return. Prokofieff was 28 when he left for Europe and America in 1918, returning in 1936 to face Stalinist control of the arts (as everything else) for the rest of his life: both he and the dictator ironically died on the same day in 1953. This “brain drain” from the Soviet Union also included Stravinsky (b. 1882). Of significant composers, only Shostakovich (b. 1906) stayed in Russia his whole life to face unconscionable pressure from the regime.

Rachmaninoff's 1873 birthdate meant he could be educated in still-functioning Czarist institutions - (there had been no music conservatories in Russia until one opened in St. Petersburg and another in Moscow in 1862). Starting in the former, Rachmaninoff was sent at 12 to the latter for its greater discipline. Tchaikovsky became an early champion and mentor there, emphasizing the handing-on-the-torch nature of his study. Subsequently, Rachmaninoff had a triple career as composer, pianist and conductor, excelling at all three. World-wide, he became “the most effective anti-modernist standard bearer because he seemed to be the only one capable of successfully maintaining the prestigious style of the 19th century classics into the 20th century: modernist's derided him.” (Taruskin - Oxford History of Western Music).

The younger Prokofieff's situation was somewhat different. Enrolled also at the St. Petersburg Conservatory by the time he was 13 in 1904, he was an “unruly student”. In 1905, the ‘Bloody Sunday’ riots there were the first rumblings of revolution and the conservatory was closed for six months. He chafed at the dullness of his harmony lessons and the highly-colored romantic essence of the orchestration of his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakoff, who had helped invent the idiom. Along with other ‘avant garde’ students, he played his first daring compositions that “pushed-the-button” at the ‘Evenings of Modern Music’, an organization outside the Conservatory framework. Critics said “unintelligible and ultramodern”, yet there were champions too. He accepted the position of “enfant terrible”. Subsequently he had a career as a fine pianist, mostly of his own music (whereas Rachmaninoff played the full range of the classics)

and gradually made his way as a composer. One can say ‘conservatives derided him’, in contrast to the quote about modernists above, but actually he was caught in a bind, extending past forms, but not abandoning them. He had the imagination to adapt to a very changing world.

In 1931, Rachmaninoff, non-political in general, joined two others to send a letter to the New York Times criticizing several Soviet policies. A bitter attack followed in a Moscow newspaper and resulted in a ban on the performance of his music in Russia which lasted two years. In 1948 with bureaucratic demands for music glorifying socialist goals (Socialist Realism) in full sway, Prokofieff sat for three days with his back turned to Stalin's cultural minister, Zhadanov, who railed against the “decadent” shortcomings in this regard of his and other composer's music.

Rachmaninoff and Prokofieff have both survived such attacks. No political regime has ever succeeded in suppressing art which has something to say for long.

MARCH AND SCHERZO FROM THE LOVE OF THREE ORANGES

Sergei Prokofieff (1891 - 1953)

Written in New York in 1919 and first produced in Chicago in 1921 when Mary Garden was director of the Lyric Opera, *Love for Three Oranges* is based on an 18th century *Commedia dell'Arte* play by Carlo Gozzi. The libretto takes up the author's disenchantment with the vulgar theater of his day in which he feels both tragedy and comedy are full of sham with improbable events and shallow moralizing. Meyerhold (libretto) and Prokofieff (music) expanded this concept 200 years later; *Comedians, Tragedians, Cranks, Lyricists and Empty Heads* are on stage right and stage left egging on the action and sometimes interfering with it. They destroy the illusion of being in a theater and give the real audience a lot to ponder. The whole unlikely stew fit the disillusioned mood of the West after the First World War (Does anything matter? How can mankind be so unkind to itself?). Audiences found mockery and challenges and grotesques in my *Oranges*,” Prokofieff wrote, “when all I had done was write a merry show (more irony).

The father of an unhappy Prince who is dying of melancholy oils the pavement in front of the palace hoping someone will stumble and make the Prince laugh. This finally happens when a clumsy somersault is made by a witch. Unamused, she curses the Prince and decrees he will fall in love with three oranges - which first have to be found! The “famous, bizarre” March is played during a scene change while the Prince is being hauled from his sick bed to court. The vivacious Scherzo comes from an interlude between episodes in the

Prince's search for the three oranges. Incidentally each orange contains a Princess. Two die from lack of water, but the third lives and becomes the Prince's wife.

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 3, OP. 26

Prokofieff

Written in 1921 from a collection of themes which occurred to Prokofieff over a period of 10 years, the Third Piano Concerto is the best known of the five he wrote. His reputation as iconoclast was never more than an honest attempt to express himself in relation to his times and the Third Concerto is distinguished by the five elements he himself singled out as typical of his style in an autobiographical sketch in 1941: (1) classical structure as found in the sonata and concerto forms of the 18th century, (2) an innovative harmonic-melodic line aimed at strong emotions, (3) motor energy derived from the reiterative pulse of the toccato, (4) lyricism which he says "developed slowly because it was long denied appreciation" and (5) the grotesque which he sees as having three dimensions, "jest, laughing and mockery."

The first movement opens with a quiet theme on the clarinet, but the piano soon enters in a burst of motor energy and a touch of the grotesque. A second subject follows which Prokofieff called "more expressive. The tempo reverts to the opening Andante and the first theme is subjected to an impressively broad treatment." The faster allegro tempo is then resumed and "the chief themes are developed with increased brilliance and the movement ends with an exciting crescendo."

The haunting melody beginning the second movement serves as the basis for five variations: (1) sentimental, (2) "tempestuous", (3) "still fast but broader", (4) "piano and orchestra discourse on the theme in quiet and meditative fashion", (5) "energetic." The theme is then restated by the orchestra with delicate chordal embroidery from the piano.

The last movement "begins with a staccato theme which is interrupted by the bustling entry of the piano." The middle section develops into a soaring, strained splendor, one of the composer's finest lyric moments. The opening material returns in a "brilliant coda".

VOCALISE

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 - 1943)

In picking texts for his 71 songs, Rachmaninoff wrote "the mood of a poem should be rather sad than gay. Light colors do not come easily to me." True to this dictum, the melody of the wordless Vocalise, last of the 1912 set of fourteen songs, op. 34, is elegaic, but stunningly sensuous at the same time. The composer made this transcription for orchestra alone.

SYMPHONIC DANCES, OP. 45

Rachmaninoff

In 1939, sensing the imminence of war - given Hitler's aggressive annexations, Rachmaninoff came back to America with his wife and daughter, although by so doing he never saw his other married daughter, who stayed in Paris, again. In 1940 he wrote his last work, the Symphonic Dances, on a rented estate in Huntington Long Island, dedicating the score to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, his favorite American ensemble. This group gave the first performance in January 1941, year of the Pearl Harbor attack. The themes may lack the opulent lyric immediacy of earlier works (he was youthful then, now he was developing cancer), but as a kind of summation (unconscious), sense of its time (given the composer's background) and symphonic scope (decades of access to major orchestras for performances) its historical significance and dramatic force are clear. "What I try to do, when writing down my music, is to make it say simply and directly that which is in my heart....," Rachmaninoff had written.

Rachmaninoff originally gave the three movements titles - Noon, Twilight and Midnight - and, although he withdrew them, they have a certain relevance. The first movement is the most directly vigorous and energetic, but in the middle offers a nostalgic 'Russian-like', long-drawn out melody first heard on a saxophone, classic instrument of American jazz Big Bands.

The second movement is a "deeply ironic and bittersweet Waltz. Almost inescapable is the emblematic association with the shattered culture of a Europe that Rachmaninoff could no longer visit." The third movement is rhapsodic; at one point reaching a deep, dark place low in the orchestra over which a short, anguished motive is highlighted. Toward the end Rachmaninoff uses the Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) chant motive that had always fascinated him as a kind of ominous force. "The extremes of dark and light, hope and despair, are encountered in this finale that now seems to be very much of its time", as Eric Roseberry wrote for CD notes.

Bartok was writing fierce music at this time to hang on to life-enhancing energy in the face of the 20th century's powers of wholesale destruction. Rachmaninoff was being true to himself, but also here reacting to the same forces.

-Burton Hatheway