

Masterworks 2 The Rach 2
Fort Wayne Philharmonic

PROGRAM NOTES

Violin Concerto

Aram Ilych Khachaturian

(b. 1903, Tbilisi, Russian Georgia; d. 1978, Moscow, USSR

Arranged as a Flute Concerto by Jean Pierre Rampal

While working under the artistic restrictions imposed by the Soviet government during Communism's 20th-century reign in Russia made composers like Shostakovich suffer, Aram Khachaturian was one artist who managed both to be true to himself and to prosper. In 1953 he wrote: "All my life I have written only what has appealed to my artistic imagination, and I therefore find it hard to believe in the sincerity of lamentations over the alleged lack of creative freedom for the Soviet composer." Musicologist Boris Schwarz, who specialized in the Soviet period, wrote of Khachaturian: "He represents socialist realism at its best."

As an Armenian growing up in Soviet Georgia, this composer was happy to follow the Soviet dictum urging composers to exploit the many ethnic musical traditions within the vast Soviet Union and to avoid the "decadent" modern experiments favored in Western countries. As he explained, "I grew up in an atmosphere rich in folk music, ... the vivid tunes of Armenian, Azerbaijan and Georgian songs and dances performed by folk bards and musicians — such were the impressions that became deeply engraved on my memory, that determined my musical thinking."

Khachaturian's ballets *Gayane* (1940–42) and *Spartacus* (1954) were huge hits at the Bolshoi Ballet as well as on that company's international tours; his "Sabre Dance" from *Gayane* was inescapable on American symphonic programs in the 1940s and '50s. His 1940 Violin Concerto also easily won international fame and is still a core repertoire piece for violinists today. It was a grand demonstration of virtuosity designed to showcase the phenomenal abilities of its dedicatee, David Oistrakh.

More than two decades later, a virtuoso on another instrument, the French flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal, was begging Khachaturian to create a concerto work for him. The frantically busy composer responded by offering his Violin Concerto to Rampal to transcribe for the flute. Staying very close to Khachaturian's original score, but adjusting some of the violin feats to better display the capabilities of the flute, Rampal accomplished this in 1968. His version has greatly enriched the flute's orchestral repertoire and been embraced by flutists talented enough to tackle it.

The Concerto's bounty of appealing melodies are colored by the exoticism of Armenian and Asian-Russian music, although all of them are Khachaturian's own inventions. And there's also an urban edge to the bright, brass-flavored orchestration and syncopated rhythms that reminds us that Khachaturian spent most of his career in Moscow and that he loved the music of George Gershwin.

In **movement one**, after some show-business gestures from the orchestra, the flute launches the principal theme: a lively folk dance of repeated notes and nervous, urban energy. Exotic high woodwinds and the syncopated strumming of the harp set the stage for the languid, sensual second theme, also introduced by the soloist. Armenian folk melismas decorate this lengthy song melody, ideal for showing off the flutist's lyrical expressiveness.

In the middle development section, listen for the cellos' suave rendition of the sensuous second theme while the flutist executes an intricate free commentary above. Near the end of the development comes a haunting duet between the flute and solo clarinet, embroidered in Armenian style. This leads into an extended cadenza for the flute exploring both the movement's major themes with a mixture of soulfulness and agility.

Eastern exoticism also rules the lyrical **second movement**, in which sensitive orchestral writing matches the soloist's expressiveness. The dark orchestral introduction, featuring cellos and bassoons and a mournful bassoon solo, establishes the brooding atmosphere. The strings then set a swaying 3/4 beat for the flute's sadly impassioned song. Later when the flute in its throaty lower range returns to this melody, it is beautifully accompanied by the solo clarinet's soaring arabesques. The orchestra responds with the movement's

most dramatic outburst, underscoring the pathos. The music then closes in hovering expectancy.

This expectancy is released by the galloping energy of the *Allegro vivace finale*. Khachaturian followed the tradition of many famous violin concertos, including the Tchaikovsky and the Brahms, by setting this movement as a brilliant rondo. Its recurring rondo refrain is another folk-dance theme for the flute, relentless in its high-speed virtuosity. Finally, the music eases a bit, and the flute takes up something that sounds very familiar. It is, in fact, the sensuous song theme from the first movement — Khachaturian certainly knew how to milk a good thing! But it affords only a brief moment of relaxation before the soloist resumes the taxing feats that ultimately secure our applause.

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, opus 27

Sergei Rachmaninoff

(b. 1873, Oneg, Russia; d. 1943, Beverly Hills, California)

One of Russia's most lavishly gifted musicians, Sergei Rachmaninoff was not only a composer but one of this century's greatest pianists and during his Russian years a celebrated operatic and symphonic conductor as well. But he often found his multiple talents more curse than blessing. As he explained, "When I am concertizing, I cannot compose. When I feel like writing music, I have to concentrate on that — I cannot touch the piano. When I am conducting, I can neither compose nor play concerts. ... I have to concentrate on any one thing I am doing to such a degree that it does not seem to allow me to take up anything else."

In 1906, the urge to compose predominated. But first Rachmaninoff had to extricate himself from his post as conductor at Moscow's Imperial Grand Theater and the hectic social life that came with it. To secure the serenity he needed for creation, he moved his family to Dresden in Germany, where he lived virtually incognito for the next three years. The fruits of this self-imposed exile included his First Piano Sonata, the brooding tone poem *The Isle of the Dead*, and his Second Symphony.

Composing this work required laying some demons to rest. In 1897, Rachmaninoff's First Symphony had had a disastrous premiere in St. Petersburg; the brutal reviews it received almost scuttled his composing career for good.

Thus, he was very secretive with friends and the press about what he was up to in Dresden, even flatly denying he was working on a symphony. “I give my solemn word — no more symphonies. Curse them! I don't know how to write them, but mainly I don't want to.” But in fact the Second Symphony was drafted at high speed in the final months of 1906, then painstakingly revised and orchestrated throughout 1907. Rachmaninoff returned to Russia to conduct its premiere in St. Petersburg on January 26, 1908. Its unqualified success finally vindicated his powers as a symphonist.

Soviet music critic Konstantin Kuznetsov has called this work the “Russian Lyric Symphony”: “so direct and sincere are its themes, and so naturally and spontaneously do they develop.” Indeed, the Second draws its power and popularity from Rachmaninoff's talent for creating ardent, emotionally compelling melodies. “Music must first and foremost be loved,” he once said. “It must come from the heart and it must be directed to the heart. Otherwise it cannot hope to be lasting, indestructible art.”

The **first movement** grows from its opening phrase, played quietly by cellos and basses. This motto idea — an upward sigh of a half step, sinking back into a curling four-note tail — spawns all this movement's themes and also underpins the entire symphony. The violins immediately spin it into a swirling melody. The music of this slow introduction reaches a peak of emotional ardor before the English horn leads smoothly into the main *Allegro* section. Above rocking clarinets, the violins introduce the principal theme, itself more lyrical and expansive than most symphonic first themes. A dramatic transitional passage provides necessary contrast before Rachmaninoff presents his even more lyrical second theme, with melancholy woodwind sighs and a soaring violin melody. Solo violin launches the development section, which explores the dramatic potential of the motto. We only realize we are safely home from this turbulence when the woodwind-violin second theme reprises its tender melancholy.

The **second-movement scherzo** is as vigorous as the first movement was languorous. Throughout his career, Rachmaninoff used the stark, down-and-up “Dies irae” chant theme from the Catholic rite for the dead as a *leitmotif*; here, it is hidden in the horns' boisterous opening theme. Yet in the midst of this movement's manic energy, there is time for another luxuriant Rachmaninoff tune for the violins. The middle trio section features a ferocious string fugue, so testing that it is included on orchestral auditions for aspiring violinists and violists. The

remarkable ending has a demonic edge, as the brass intone a sinister chorale, derived from the “Dies irae” and the symphony’s opening motto idea.

The **Adagio third movement** is luscious, heartfelt melody from beginning to end. The most famous is the violins’ upward sighing phrase at the beginning. But this is only introduction to the solo clarinet’s long-spun-out melody. A plaintive dialogue among solo oboe, English horn, and strings fills the middle section; this music recalls nostalgically the themes of the symphony’s slow introduction.

Rachmaninoff opens the **finale** with a wild Italianate *tarantella* dance. A wry march for woodwinds provides a second thematic strand. And the third is the last big lyrical melody for violins, the most sweeping of them all. The exposition closes with a reminiscence of the *Adagio*'s upward-sighing music. In the development section, listen for one of the work's most extraordinary passages: a long crescendo of downward scales in different speeds for the various instruments. This is a dazzling recreation of the peeling of Russian church bells, a sound Rachmaninoff loved as a child and recalled in many of his works. The coda offers a grand reprise of the violins’ big tune and finishes in a blaze of Czarist splendor.