



Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto

Two very different — but equally appealing — No. 2s make up this weekend's concerts. Rachmaninoff's ever-popular C minor piano concerto is featured on the first half. After intermission, we'll enjoy Brahms's sunny D major symphony.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873; Semyonovo, Russia

Died 28 March 1943; Beverly Hills, California

Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18

Composed: 1900-01

First performance: 9 November 1901; Moscow, Russia

Last MSO performance: February 2012; Edo de Waart, conductor;
Joyce Yang, piano

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns,
2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion
(bass drum, cymbals), strings

Approximate duration: 33 minutes

Rachmaninoff's exquisitely tuneful Op. 18 is loved by concertgoers the world over. Several of its melodies have been used for popular songs, and its music as a whole is often heard in movie soundtracks. Given this acclaim, it's a bit surprising to realize that the composer penned this concerto at a low point in his life. In 1897, the St. Petersburg premiere of his First Symphony was an unmitigated disaster, largely due to Alexander Glazunov's poor conducting. Rachmaninoff fell into a deep depression and for almost three years was unable to set pen to paper. He made a living by conducting, teaching, and playing the occasional piano recital.

In 1900, Rachmaninoff was urged by his aunt Varvara to seek the help of Nicolai Dahl, a doctor who had studied hypnosis. The composer later wrote in his memoirs: "Day after day I heard the same hypnotic formula while I lay half asleep in Dahl's armchair: 'You will begin to write your concerto. You will work with great ease. The music will be excellent.' Incredible as it may sound, this cure really helped me."

Following his successful recovery, Rachmaninoff set to work on his long-delayed Piano Concerto No. 2, a work he had promised to write for a concert tour to England. Its Moscow premiere, with the 28-year-old composer as soloist, was favorably received. The top of the first page bears the simple dedication, *À Monsieur N. Dahl*.

Following a series of solemn chords in the piano, the first of Rachmaninoff's beguiling melodies — characterized by a palpable Russian soulfulness — is heard in the strings. This theme both stands out against, and blends with, the passionate warmth of the one that follows, introduced by the soloist. A mood of gentle introspection opens the Adagio sostenuto, as the pianist lends elegant accompaniment to the dreamy melody of the flute and clarinet. Near the movement's end, a whirlwind of notes by the pianist leads to an affecting cadenza. The movement concludes with the same almost-religious tranquility with which it began.

The vigorous first theme of the Allegro scherzando is preceded by a march-like orchestral introduction and brilliant passages from the soloist. The composer has reserved an ace up his sleeve, however: a voluptuous melody "sung" by the orchestra. In 1945, this theme was popularized as the hit song "Full Moon and Empty Arms." After a protracted development of the first theme, this familiar tune returns to bring Rachmaninoff's much-loved Op. 18 to its rapturous close.

Recommended recording: Sviatoslav Richter; Stanislaw Wislocki, Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra (Deutsche Grammophon) 🎧

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born 7 May 1833; Hamburg, Germany

Died 3 April 1897; Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Opus 73

Composed: 1877

First performance: 30 December 1877; Vienna, Austria

Last MSO performance: May 2016; Edo de Waart, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns,
2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, strings

Approximate duration: 40 minutes

Buoyed by the success of his First Symphony — a work he struggled with for nearly 20 years — Brahms quickly followed with his second work in the genre: Symphony No. 2 was premiered just over a year after Symphony No. 1. The D major symphony is brighter, more translucent, and more delicate than the C minor symphony. This is noticeably reflected in its instrumentation: bucolic flutes, oboes, and clarinets are given pride of place. When he needs to, though, Brahms can summon the brass's heavy artillery to provide strength and power.

The opening movement, the longest of any in the composer's symphonies, "resembles an agreeable landscape into which the setting sun casts its sublime and somber lights." So wrote Hermann Kretzschmar in an analysis published during Brahms's lifetime. In addition to this contented scenario, there are moments of drama and darkness, when the overall lighter orchestration gives way to richly harmonized phrases for trombones and tuba: "spectral effects," as musicologist Karl Geiringer depicts them. Following a beautiful passage for solo horn, the movement ends quietly.

The Adagio non troppo opens with a serious, pondering theme in the cellos, but within a few pages, the woodwinds usher in a lighter atmosphere. This contrast of mood remains throughout the movement. Despite a formal structure overall, the short thematic elements — some of heartbreaking beauty — follow closely upon one another, denying us the simple repetition of songlike melodies.

Set in the sylvan key of G major, the Allegretto grazioso is probably the most immediately accessible movement in the master's four symphonies. Cast as a rondo, it's a serenade wherein a rustic tune in the oboe alternates with more emphatic sections that feature dancing strings and winds. The D major finale, animated and ebullient, exudes confident happiness. (Kretzschmar likens its wit and exuberance to that of Haydn.) Its rip-roaring coda erupts in a glorious burst of orchestra brass, as Brahms's "Pastoral" symphony "ends in Dionysiac jubilation." (Geiringer)

Recommended recording: Sir Charles Mackerras, Scottish Chamber Orchestra (Telarc) 🎧

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.