



Rachmaninoff's Paganini Rhapsody

Works by Prokofiev bookend today's all-Russian program: an engaging suite from his opera *Love for Three Oranges* and his final masterpiece, the Symphony No. 7. Before intermission, we'll enjoy Rachmaninoff's ever-popular *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born 23 April 1891; Sontsovka, Russia

Died 5 March 1953; Moscow, Russia

Suite from *L'amour des trois oranges* [*Love for Three Oranges*], Op. 33bis

Composed: 1919 (opera); 1924 (suite)

First performance: 30 December 1921; Chicago, Illinois (opera); November 1926; Boston, Massachusetts (suite)

Last MSO performance: MSO premiere

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (glockenspiel, triangle, xylophone, tam tam, field drum, cymbals, bass drum, tambourine), 2 harps, strings

Approximate duration: 15 minutes

Prokofiev wrote his own libretto, in French, for the opera *Love for Three Oranges*. Its "merely lunatic plot" (Donald J. Grout) was based on a fantasy by the 18th-century Italian satirist Carlo Gozzi. In *The World of 20th-Century Music*, David Ewen offers the following plot summary:

Prokofiev's opera is a play within a play. A highly demonstrative audience of Cynics, Emptyheads, Glooms, and Joys watches the performance of a burlesque opera about a legendary Prince. The young man, dying of gloom, can be cured only by laughter. A wicked sorceress, Fata Morgana, thwarts every attempt to lighten his spirits, but when she takes a ridiculous fall during a scuffle with the palace guards, the Prince laughs and is cured. The sorceress now decrees that he must find and fall in love with three oranges. When the Prince finds the oranges in a desert, he learns that each contains a beautiful Princess. Two of the young women perish of thirst. The Cynics of Prokofiev's audience revive the third with a bucket of water. After more trials, the Prince and Princess are united, and the sorceress and her evil cohorts meet suitable justice.

The opera was first heard in Chicago in 1921. A few years later, Prokofiev fashioned a six-movement from the score. "The Ridiculous Fellows" depicts the Emptyheads' hopeless attempts to get the Prince to laugh. In "The Magician Tchelio and Fata Morgana Play at Cards," the two characters engage with ridiculously large cards as the Audience cheers them on. The "March" is part of a scene at the royal court, suggesting its absurdist atmosphere. (This was the theme music for the 1944-58 radio series *The FBI in Peace and War*.) The "Scherzo," set in a tarantella rhythm, occurs during the Prince's frenetic search for the three oranges. Amid its lovely, lyrical melodies, listen for touches of humor in "The Prince and the Princess." "The Flight" accompanies a frenzied chase scene near the end of the opera.

Recommended recording: Nemee Jarvi, Scottish National Orchestra (Chandos) 

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873; Semyonovo, Russia

Died 28 March 1943; Beverly Hills, California

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

Composed: 1934

First performance: 7 November 1934; Baltimore, Maryland

Last MSO performance: April 2017; Anu Tali, conductor;
Behzod Abduraimov, piano

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets,
2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba,
timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel,
triangle, snare drum), harp, strings

Approximate duration: 22 minutes

With his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Sergei Rachmaninoff harkened back to the Romantic-era role of pianist-composer. It was a work he wrote for himself to perform, dashing it off in only seven weeks in the summer of 1934. At this point in this life, the 61-year-old master spent much of his energy making extensive tours as a concert pianist. In the 1934-35 season alone, he played 69 dates. In a letter written not long after the completion of the *Rhapsody*, he worried about such a grueling schedule: "Shall I hold out? I begin to evaporate. It's often more than I can bear just to play. In short, I've grown old."

By this time in his career, Rachmaninoff had composed four piano concertos and at first was unsure of what to call his Op. 43. Though he settled on the title "rhapsody"—a term that implies a loosely organized structure—the work follows a distinctly taut form: a set of 24 variations. The theme is taken from the last of Nicolò Paganini's (1782-1840) *Twenty-Four Caprices for Solo Violin* (c1805). In his exhaustive book on Rachmaninoff, Barrie Martyn explains why this theme (also appropriated by Brahms, Liszt, Blacher, Lutoslawski, Lloyd Webber, et al.) works so well for variations: "It enshrines that most basic of musical ideas, the perfect cadence, literally in its first half and in a harmonic progression in the second, which itself expresses a musical aphorism; and the melodic line is made distinctive by a repetition of a simply but immediately memorable four-note semiquaver [16th note] figure." Indeed, it is a theme that is easily remembered, even hummable.

As several writers have pointed out, the variations essentially fall into three groups that correspond to the fast-slow-fast layout of a traditional three-movement concerto:

- Introduction
- Variation 1
- Theme (violins)
- Variations 2-10 (fast)
- Variation 11 (transition)
- Variations 12-18 (slow)
- Variations 19-24 (fast)
- Coda (two measures)

The "Dies irae" motif, from the Gregorian chant melody in the Mass for the Dead, first appears in Variation 7, recurring in Variations 10, 22, and 24. In Variation 18, some of the most heart-on-the-sleeve music Rachmaninoff ever set down, Paganini's theme is turned upside-down.

Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, on tour in Baltimore, joined the composer for the work's premiere. It has since become a central repertory piece, admired by concert-goers and professional musicians alike. It presents Rachmaninoff's late style at its radiant and quick-witted best and affords the audience the pleasure of watching a pianist put through their paces—with distinctly satisfying returns.

Recommended recording: Zoltan Kocsis; Edo de Waart, San Francisco Symphony (Philips) ☺

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born 23 April 1891; Sontsovka, Russia Died 5 March 1953; Moscow, Russia

Symphony No. 7 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

Composed: 1951-52

First performance: 11 October 1952; Moscow, Russia

Last MSO performance: September 1977; Kenneth Schermerhorn, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, tambourine, glockenspiel, wood block, xylophone, cymbals, triangle, bass drum), harp, piano, strings

Approximate duration: 31 minutes

Prokofiev's C-sharp minor symphony was the last music he ever set down. Its premiere, by the Moscow All-Union Radio Orchestra under Samuil Samosud, was the last concert he attended; five months later he died of a brain hemorrhage on the day of Joseph Stalin's death. The composer would have appreciated the irony of that coincidence. In 1948, Prokofiev had been one of the prominent Russian composers whose works were censored by the government—for being "marked with formalist perversions ... alien to the Soviet people." As a result of this and other disappointments, his health quickly deteriorated, prompting him increasingly to spend time at his dacha in the village of Nikolina Gora, 30 miles outside Moscow.

Several works from his final years, including the Symphony No. 7, were commissioned for the USSR Children's Radio Division. Though his Op. 131 soon outgrew its original intent, Prokofiev's final composition is an appealing and highly tuneful work; there's a vernal lyricism about it.

The opening Moderato is built on three themes. The first is an expressive melody for the strings that soon leads to a soaring aria, one that will recur in the finale. The third subject is relegated to the winds and glockenspiel. The Allegretto begins somewhat boisterously, but before long settles into the sort of gentle waltz that reminds us of the composer's *Cinderella* ballet.

In the serene Andante espressivo, Prokofiev's penchant for affecting melodies, masterfully harmonized and colorfully orchestrated, is on full display. The fourth movement is a frenzied gallop, cut short only briefly for a march interlude. The pace eventually slackens for a restatement of the Moderato's spacious melody and then, arrestingly, the Russian master quotes the glockenspiel theme from the same movement.

Because he was in dire financial straits, Prokofiev had hoped, with his Seventh Symphony, to win the 100,000 rubles that went along with the Stalin Prize. That hope was not realized, but in 1957 the work was posthumously awarded the Lenin Prize. As noted earlier, Prokofiev died the same day (and hour) as Stalin. The composer's death went almost unnoticed, and there was not a single flower at his funeral because Uncle Joe required every blossom. Today, we celebrate Prokofiev as a genius and revile Stalin as a murderous dictator. It's a prescient reminder that writers, artists, and musicians often are later esteemed, even as despots and self-aggrandizing politicians are relegated to the dustbin of history.

Recommended recording: Neeme Jarvi, Scottish National Orchestra (Chandos) ☺

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.