

Program Notes – Winter Concert

Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka (1804-1857)

Capriccio Brillante

The great Russian Romantic tradition that reached its peak with Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Rachmaninoff was born in the music of Glinka. It was, in fact Tchaikovsky who called Glinka “the acorn from which the oak of Russian music sprang.”

Like many Russian composers, such as the former naval officer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and the chemistry professor Alexander Borodin, who pursued other careers, Glinka did not devote himself to music immediately. Born to a wealthy land-owning family, he was sent to a school for young aristocrats in St. Petersburg, where he also studied the piano. Glinka then assumed a post in the civil service that was undemanding enough to allow him to dabble in composition. In Tchaikovsky’s words, he was a “dilettante who played the violin and piano a little” and “composed completely insipid quadrilles, fantasias upon popular Italian tunes,” as well as chamber music and songs.

The turning point in Glinka’s life seems to have been his sojourn in Italy, where he lived from 1830 to 1834, and attended the premieres of Bellini’s *La Sonnambula* and Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena*. Glinka’s experience of Italian opera inspired him to create a truly Russian opera of his own. With the 1836 premiere of *A Life for the Tsar*, based upon the tale of the peasant Ivan Susanin, who gave up his life to save his tsar, Russian music entered a new era. What had been a culture of liturgical and folk music became one of opera, concerto, and symphony. Tchaikovsky describes Glinka’s achievement as “suddenly...creating an opera for which genius, sweep, originality, and irreproachable technique stands beside the greatest and most profound in all musical art!”

Following the poor reception to *Ruslan and Ludmilla* in 1842, Glinka again traveled abroad, living in Spain from 1845 to 1847. Like Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel, and Debussy after him, Glinka evidently found Spanish folk melodies irresistible, using them as the basis for two Spanish Overtures. The first is better known by the title on tonight’s program, the *Capriccio Brillante on the “Jota Aragonesa.”*

Glinka traveled westward again in 1852, living in Paris for two years before moving to Berlin, where he died suddenly in February 1857.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Piano Concerto No. 2

Although Rachmaninoff never lost favor with the general public, he was, for many years, regarded as hopelessly old-fashioned by the musical establishment.

In 1954, eleven years after his death, *Grove's Dictionary of Music* (the “bible” of classical music) disparaged Rachmaninoff's compositions as “severely limited...monotonous in texture” and “artificial and gushing.” And, in an especially glaring example of poor prophecy, the writer predicted that “...the enormous popular success some of Rachmaninoff's works had in his lifetime is not likely to last, and musicians never regarded them with much favor.”

Today, Rachmaninoff's reputation is once again on the rise, and his music is now as esteemed by critics as much as it always has been by ordinary music lovers. No longer dismissed as a throw-back to an earlier era, a relic among modernists, he is now appreciated as a composer of true genius who expressed himself in a musical language all his own.

This critical about-face comes as no surprise to Philadelphians, for it was here that Rachmaninoff established a second musical home. After appearing as a piano virtuoso with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra in its younger days, Rachmaninoff returned with increasing frequency and developed a lifelong bond with the ensemble that he called “the greatest orchestra the world has ever heard.” The Orchestra gave the world premieres of Rachmaninoff's last major works, including the *Piano Concerto No. 4* and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (with the composer as soloist), as well as the *Symphony No. 3* and the *Symphonic Dances*.

But had Rachmaninoff not been able to recover from an early crisis of confidence, none of these works might ever have seen the light of day. Although he was recognized as a virtuoso pianist and had won the Moscow Conservatory's Gold Medal for composition, the disastrous premiere of his *First Symphony* threw him into such a depression that he could not even look at a page of blank composition paper for three years. Rachmaninoff's family was so alarmed by his state of mind and his drinking that they prevailed upon him to seek help. Rachmaninoff visited a “neuropsychologist,” Dr. Nikolai Dahl (who was also a talented amateur musician), who used mild hypnotic suggestion to encourage Rachmaninoff. “I heard the same formula repeated day after day while I lay half asleep in Dr. Dahl's study,” Rachmaninoff recounted, “You will begin to write your concerto...you will work with great ease...it will be of excellent quality. Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me. At the beginning of the summer, I began to compose again. The material began to grow, and new musical ideas began to stir within me.”

The result was the work we hear tonight. When he completed the concerto in 1900, Rachmaninoff showed his gratitude to Dr. Dahl by dedicating it to him. Filled with

memorable themes, brilliant passages for the soloist, and exhilarating rhythms, it remains one of his most popular works.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Procession of the Nobles from Mlada

Rimsky-Korsakov bridges two of the great eras in Russian music. One, as a nationalist composer following in the footsteps of Glinka and Balakirev; the other, as a respected teacher whose pupils included Sergei Prokofiev and Igor Stravinsky.

But perhaps the most remarkable thing about Rimsky-Korsakov's musical career is how close he came to never having one at all. Rimsky-Korsakov was born into an aristocratic family with a tradition of service in the Russian military. So, despite early signs of musical talent, he was shipped off to the Russian Imperial Naval Academy from 1856 to 1862. While studying navigation in St. Petersburg, he met the composer Mily Balakirev in 1861. Balakirev encouraged Rimsky-Korsakov, but any serious pursuit of music would have to wait until the young naval cadet completed a three-year cruise (which included a visit to the United States).

When Rimsky-Korsakov returned to Russia, his military duties were undemanding enough to allow him to devote himself to music almost full time. When he left the navy in 1871, he had progressed far enough to be named to the faculty of the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

Rimsky-Korsakov was essentially a self-taught composer. To meet the demands of his new position, he immediately began learning all he could. "Having been undeservingly accepted at the Conservatory as a professor," he later wrote, "I soon became possibly its best pupil." Two years later, when he was named Inspector of Navy Bands, he would bring instruments home at night to study their capabilities and explore their potential. In the process, Rimsky-Korsakov acquired the skills that helped him become one of the greatest masters of orchestration in the history of music.

Better known in the west for his colorful orchestral compositions, such as *Scheherazade*, *Capriccio Espagnole*, and the *Russian Easter Overture*, Rimsky-Korsakov was most prolific as an operatic composer. In all, he wrote fifteen operas, many of them based on Russian history, legends, and folklore.

Although many of Rimsky's operas are still heard regularly in Russia, *Mlada*, with its extensive production demands, is one of the least performed. *The Procession of the Nobles*, however, has escaped that fate. Filled with brass fanfares, the piece opens the second act of the opera in splendid fashion (the title is pretty much self-explanatory).

Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Festival Overture: The Year 1812

Ever since 1974, when Boston Pops conductor Arthur Fiedler turned the city's traditional July 4th celebration into a true spectacular by performing the *1812 Overture* complete with fireworks, real cannon, and church bells, Tchaikovsky's music has become increasingly identified with America's Independence Day.

But would Americans—especially during the Cold War—cheer the rousing finale as much if they knew the piece was written to commemorate a *Russian* military triumph? In 1812, Napoleon was master of Europe, in command of an army that had never been defeated on the battlefield. With Russia, under Tsar Alexander I, becoming more closely allied to his nemesis, Great Britain, Napoleon decided to strike on a massive scale, sending over half a million soldiers across the Russian border. The Russian Imperial Army seemed no match for the invaders; but following a strategy of trading space for time, they managed to avoid facing the full force of Napoleon's army until the Battle of Borodino. The battle ended in a stalemate, but with casualties estimated as high as 100,000, it amounted to a tactical defeat for Napoleon. Before he could occupy Moscow, the Russians burned the city, denying the French supplies and shelter as winter approached. The ensuing retreat was a catastrophe. Harassed by the Russian Army and Cossack cavalry, and beset by disease and extreme cold, Napoleon's *Grande Armée* was virtually wiped out; only one in ten of the invading soldiers ever made it back.

The Overture tells the same story in music. The opening theme is a Russian hymn ("God preserve thy people") that expresses the Russian people gathering in their churches to pray for deliverance. This is followed by an anxiously martial passage as the conflict looms. A strain of the *Marseillaise* signals the approach of the French. Then, just as the French seem about to prevail, the opening theme returns followed by a folk tune ("At the Gate"). The battle is joined, as French and Russian themes struggle for dominance. Finally, Napoleon is repulsed as cannons roar, church bells peal, and the Tsarist anthem ("God Save the Tsar") rings out in a blaze of glory.

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