

## IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971) Symphony in Three Movements

*Overture – allegro*  
*Andante – interlude*  
*Con moto*

In 1938 and 1939 Stravinsky suffered the triple loss of his daughter, wife and mother and, with the clouds of war gathering, left Europe for the United States where he was to live for the rest of his life. Not surprisingly given his personal circumstances, these initial years in America were ones of artistic crisis: pieces were begun and then hastily cast aside; works were pieced together out of unconnected fragments; and worst of all for this most serious of musicians, circumstances dictated that openly commercial work must be taken on (including a polka composed for the Barnum and Bailey Circus danced by a troupe of baby elephants!). Yet in the early 1940s, and without realising it at the time, Stravinsky began the composition of one of his finest masterpieces, the *Symphony in Three Movements*, much of which was only shaped into symphonic form after the New York Philharmonic Orchestra commissioned him to write a symphony to celebrate the allied victory at the end of the Second World War.

As this might suggest, the work had rather disjointed origins. Its first movement dates back to 1942, a time of intense anxiety about the political situation in Europe, and was originally conceived as part of a concerto for orchestra with a prominent role for a solo piano. The second movement was initially intended as music for Franz Werfel's *The Song of Bernadette*, though when the film was released in 1943 it contained none of Stravinsky's music. Unusually for him the composer later attributed a 'war plot' to the work's outer movements, claiming their sources of inspiration to be newsreels of goose-stepping Nazis, a documentary on the 'scorched-earth' tactics of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and finally the triumph of the allies. For a musician who so insisted on the autonomy of music – on the belief that music is simply notes on the page, a closed system with no relationship to the world beyond it – these claims to pictorialism were extraordinary, and it is tempting to believe the finale's 'story' to be little more than a convenient add-on, though one eminently suited to the remit of the work's commission. Ultimately though, the listener must decide.

### First movement

The first movement opens with a series of bold declamatory gestures and the material that follows is of a highly rhythmical nature that frequently recalls passages from the composer's *The Rite of Spring* (1913). Other references are clearly audible: there are jazz-like episodes with 'walking bass' lines so popular at the time; passages the composer wished "to sound like a rumba"; and there are even nods in the direction of Beethoven and Brahms (Stravinsky was nothing if not eclectic). Eventually there is a coda in which the infectious power of the movement gradually subsides into nothing.

### Second movement

The film scene Stravinsky had in mind for this music was called 'The Apparition of the Virgin'. Hence the pert and percussive piano – so prominent in the first movement – falls silent and gives way to a harp, traditionally that most chaste and celestial of instruments. Structured in a three-part 'A-B-A' form (with a mysterious contrasting central section), flutes also contribute to the seeming innocence of its two outer sections.

### Third movement

A short interlude precedes the finale, a ferociously energetic movement. After grotesque marching, trombone and piano herald the onset of a fugal section (in which the various instruments enter successively with similar musical material). Stravinsky claimed that the initial "immobility" of the fugue corresponded to the "overturned arrogance of the Germans when their machine failed". To again quote the composer, the conclusion of the work reflects "The rise of the Allies", the decisive final chord an expression of his "extra exuberance at the Allied triumph" – whether or not Stravinsky's retrospective description of the work convinces us, it is surely significant that he added that final chord on the fateful day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

## **FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)**

### **Piano Concerto No.2 in A major**

During 2011 – the bicentenary of Liszt's birth – this remarkable musician has received a good deal of attention, and his music has been much discussed and reappraised. Of course, Liszt has long been iconic as a formidable pianist-composer who single-handedly transformed ideas of what could be played on the instrument. However, recent performances of works such as his 'Faust' and 'Dante' Symphonies, as well as a number of his tone poems (he invented the genre), reveal him to be a significant orchestral composer and in this respect an influence not only on his son-in-law Richard Wagner but also on one of the greatest of all symphonists, Gustav Mahler.

Yet this is not to lessen Liszt's significance as a composer of piano music, including his two groundbreaking concertos for the instrument. Liszt actually began work on his 'second' concerto as early as 1839, at the same time as the Concerto No.1, but was not able to complete the two works until 1849 after he had withdrawn from his punishing schedule as an international concert pianist to become Kapellmeister in the German city of Weimar. The work was first performed in 1855 with Liszt conducting and one of his students, Hans von Bronsart, on the piano. As was typical of Liszt, between then and 1861 he made a number of revisions to the score.

As well as its stunning virtuosity, part of the work's originality lies in its structure. Here Liszt – this pioneering musical Romantic – departs from the traditional three-movement concerto form and replaces it with a single unified movement, one that is nevertheless replete with contrasts in tempo, tonality and texture. Throughout Liszt employs a technique of 'thematic metamorphosis' – an apparently daunting term that simply means the opening melody of the work is subject to a process of continuous transformation. Thus the surface of the music is both constantly changing but ever the same, providing the work with a richly satisfying unity (a technique that was to remain hugely influential well into the 20th century).

The languidly lyrical melody we hear at the opening might seem an unlikely one to bear such a weight of responsibility. Introduced by the woodwinds, the theme is then elaborated by the piano in the most poetic fashion. With the onset of a cadenza for the piano alone, however, the mood is transformed into something altogether more dramatic and virtuosic. After another piano cadenza, lyricism returns in the form of a sumptuous cello solo, the piano, initially at least, now cast in the role of accompanist. The mood of introspection is eventually dispelled by the emergence of an energetic scherzo-like section and then a grand march (again, both variations on the work's opening theme). Lyric and dramatic elements continue to battle it out for supremacy until with a torrent of astonishing piano virtuosity – including a series of remarkable *glissandi* (or slides) up and down the keyboard – Liszt leads us to the most triumphant of conclusions.

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## **SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)**

### **Symphony No.3 in A minor, Op.44**

*Lento – allegro moderato*  
*Adagio ma non troppo*  
*Allegro*

Rachmaninov's musical language has its roots deep in the music of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and, most importantly, the Russian Orthodox Church. His musical training was unusually thorough, involving ten years of study at the conservatories of St Petersburg and Moscow, and his outstanding performance was rewarded by the presentation of a Gold Medal from the latter. By the time he wrote his Second Symphony in 1907 his instantly recognisable compositional style was fully formed, and in later years he made only slight adjustments and additions to it.

The Third Symphony, written in 1935-36, was received with scant enthusiasm by public and critics alike. It was composed with the virtuoso forces of the Philadelphia Orchestra in mind, and it was this group that gave the premiere in November 1936 under the baton of Stokowski. A typically harsh critic of the time, B.H. Haggin of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, dismisses it as "a chewing-over again of something that never had importance to start with". It may be that this reviewer expected all composers to follow the example of Stravinsky, constantly adopting new techniques and undergoing a stylistic reversal every few years. Rachmaninov certainly did not work in this way, expressing his approval of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (1910), but saying of *Petrushka* (1911) that "it is already worse", and finding his compatriot's later works receding further from his taste.

Criticism came also from the opposite quarter. Some listeners evidently expected another work from precisely the same mould as the ever-popular Second Symphony and Second and Third Piano Concertos, which all date from the first decade of the 20th century, long before the turmoil of the First World War, the Revolution and

Rachmaninov's exile. They were disappointed and perplexed to find deviations from what they knew and loved. The composer Nikolai Medtner was apparently distressed by his friend's concessions to modernism, though from the perspective afforded by 75 years of musical 'progress' it is hard to hear what he was concerned about.

The Third Symphony nevertheless found some admirers. Rachmaninov's cousin and sister-in-law Sophia Satina said on her first hearing of it: "I have no doubt at all that the symphony is about Russia, about Russia's history, and that it expresses your own devotion to our beloved country". Henry Wood expressed the opinion that the work would take its place alongside Tchaikovsky's symphonies in the public's affection. Rachmaninov himself felt that the Third Symphony was worthwhile, writing to a friend in Russia soon after the premiere that "both audience and critics responded sourly. Personally I'm convinced that this is a good work".

In comparison to the Second Symphony, the Third shows Rachmaninov enjoying greater rhythmic freedom, extending the boundaries of his harmonic language and employing the orchestra in a far more flamboyant way. A remarkable formal innovation is the compression of the slow movement and Scherzo into a single unit, allowing the usual four movements to be cut down to three. At the heart of the work is the juxtaposition of a new-found structural tautness and economy of means with the intensely lyrical Romanticism so familiar from his earlier works.

### **First movement**

Heralding the Third Symphony is a brief and meditative motif oscillating around a single note, in the manner of Russian Orthodox chant, which Rachmaninov assigns to the subtle blend of horn, two clarinets and one muted cello. After an angry full orchestral outburst, the movement continues with a succession of haunting and sorrowful melodies on the woodwind and strings. Coloured throughout by a mood of yearning and nostalgia, the *Lento – allegro moderato* is punctuated by moments of almost Mahlerian tragedy. A recollection of the initial chant motif closes the movement.

### **Second movement**

The *Adagio non troppo* is in an asymmetrical arch-form in which the central Scherzo is framed by *Adagio* passages. It opens with an extended variation of the chant motif for the solo horn with a richly-textured harp accompaniment. In the words of Rachmaninov's biographer Patrick Piggott the subsequent Scherzo section is "one of Rachmaninov's most vivacious and colourful pieces of orchestral writing". In the final bars of the rapturous *Adagio* that succeeds it, the chant motif makes a portentous appearance.

### **Third movement**

Since the *Symphonie fantastique* of Berlioz (1830), a rich symbolism has grown around the *Dies irae* plainchant from the Mass for the Dead. Despite its origin in the liturgy of the Catholic rather than the Russian Orthodox Church, no composer has embedded it so deeply into his music as has Rachmaninov. The Third Symphony proves no exception. Reminiscences of a Russian folk celebration are set in a mood of resolute defiance in the *Allegro* finale. At the centre of the movement is a vigorous fugue led by the strings, and its continuation provides a backdrop for an allusive reference to the *Dies irae*. In the closing section Rachmaninov transcends the gloom of the *Dies irae* to provide a radiant, hopeful passage, darkened finally by a recollection of the chant motif of the opening bars.

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