

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Rachmaninoff on Paganini

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JESSIE MONTGOMERY (b. 1981)

STARBURST

Jessie Montgomery is enjoying her musical moment. The composer, violinist and activist appears everywhere these days, and her original compositions are branding themselves into the repertoire like a hot iron.

A member of the Sphinx Virtuosi – a Detroit-based ensemble made up of African American and Latino musicians – Montgomery creates music triggered by social and racial issues. Her commitment to addressing inequality is one reason the New York Philharmonic honored her as a featured composer for its Project 19, which last year marked the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

“As an artist, she has a real finger on the pulse of what’s going on, a really good sense of what’s happening in our country,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “She has a musical viewpoint that’s unique, and so we want to look at her a little more in our concerts.”

This weekend, TFO will offer its first performance of Montgomery’s *Starburst*, along with works by Ravel and Rachmaninoff. It marks the second time this season that Francis has programmed a piece by Montgomery, following *Strum* during the opener in October. Montgomery appeared with Sphinx in early 2020 during a residency at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg.

She originally scored her three-minute *Starburst* for string orchestra, but many performances include a transcription for flutes, clarinets, violins, viola, cello and piano. She describes it in cosmic terms, saying it reflects “the rapid formation of large numbers of new stars in a galaxy at a rate high enough to alter the structure of the galaxy.”

Starburst explodes from its first note, and the body of strings keeps listeners on edge with steely, off-key tones and a persistent rhythm reminiscent of Bernard Hermann’s score for *Psycho*. Plucked strings trickle through a lyrical middle section, the sharp rhythm soon returning as the ensemble tackles more and more complex harmonies before closing on an abrupt high note.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

MOTHER GOOSE SUITE

Ravel was a small man, precise in manner and exceedingly well groomed and dressed. His musical tastes were conservative, preferring traditional form and structure when much of the world around him followed the flow of Wagner or the acerbic edge of Stravinsky. It was the latter, in fact, who referred to Ravel as “a Swiss clockmaker,” a backhanded compliment to his attention to detail and instrumental brilliance.

This certainly describes Ravel's *Ma mere l'oye* (*Mother Goose*) from which a suite has found a home in the repertoire. Ravel composed it in 1908 as a piano duet for a friend's two children, and three years later fleshed it out as a whimsical ballet with a prelude and four interludes.

The title, however, is misleading. Ravel based the work on various nursery rhymes and stories he shared with the children – rather than the specific text of the *Mother Goose* collection. A lilting interlude links the various tableaux, and the overall effect wraps youthful innocence and fantasy into one of Ravel's most luxuriant scores. The suite you will hear tonight includes the *Prelude*, *Spinning Wheel Dance*, *Sleeping Beauty Pavane*, *Dialogues of the Beauty and the Beast*, *Tom Thumb*, *Empress of the Pagodas*, and the *Fairy Garden*.

The gem-like orchestration that holds Mother Goose together hides the technical scaffolding on which it was built. Ravel toiled to make the music sound effortless and seamless, and once said, "I did my work slowly, drop by drop. I tore it out of me by pieces."

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943) **RHAPSODY OF A THEME OF PAGANINI**

Many years ago, when TFO was playing Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* at the Mahaffey Theater, a young couple on a Saturday night date sat rapt in their seats, entranced by the music. When the pianist introduced the lushly romantic 18th variation, the woman began to cry.

Rachmaninoff would have been pleased. One of the last of the great romantic composers – although he lived well into the 20th century – he could play on emotion as well as anyone, infusing his scores with pungent harmonies and urgent rhythms that are his alone. An anti-modernist, he remains popular today precisely because of his nostalgia. It didn't hurt to be a master of the piano.

Rhapsody is his tribute to Niccolò Paganini, whose 24 *Caprices* for solo violin have been revered by fiddle players for two centuries. Paganini was arguably the finest violin virtuoso of the early 19th century, and his ominous looks and brazen technique drew comparisons to Mephistopheles himself.

Rachmaninoff found much to explore in the *Caprices*, and in 1934 wrote a set of variations for piano and orchestra. He completed the score during a stay near Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, and the stress-free atmosphere may have enhanced the relative effortlessness of his writing.

Although called a rhapsody, it unfolds as a loosely constructed piano concerto in three unbroken movements: variations 1 through 11 make up the first section; 12 to 18 comprise the slow movement; and 19 through 24 flesh out the finale. Most are short, lasting anywhere from 20 seconds to three minutes, and Rachmaninoff added an additional theme with his oft-quoted melody from the Latin Mass for the Dead – the *Dies Irae* – or *Day of Wrath*.

The dreamy 18th variation in D flat is the longest set in the score and a tune Rachmaninoff inverts, or turns upside down, from Paganini's original. The music has become something of a calling card for the composer, and can be heard on pops concerts, in movies and television commercials. Royalties from the score kept him flush with cash – no wonder he once quipped that "this one is for my agent."

Kurt Loft, former music critic for The Tampa Tribune, has been writing about the Tampa Bay arts for more than 40 years.