

# Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

# Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2

Michael Francis, Conductor  
Joyce Yang, Piano

Friday, February 17, 2023, Straz Center- Ferguson Hall at 8:00 pm  
Saturday, February 18, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm  
Sunday, February 19, 2023, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

**Jean Sibelius**  
(1865-1957)

**Jean Sibelius**

**Serge Rachmaninoff**  
(1873-1943)

**Swan of Tuonela, Op. 22, No. 2**

**Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82**

- I. Tempo molto moderato; Allegro moderato - Presto
- II. Andante mosso, quasi allegretto
- III. Allegro molto; Misterioso

*Intermission*

**Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18**

- I. Moderato
  - II. Adagio sostenuto
  - III. Allegro scherzando
- Joyce Yang, *Piano*

TFO is grateful to Dr. Robert Wharton for his generosity as patron, donor and sponsor of this concert

*Part of St. Petersburg's Celebration of the Arts*

*Joyce Yang plays the Steinway Piano from the Music Gallery, exclusive agents for Steinway & Sons.*

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## **Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**

### ***The Swan of Tuonela, Op. 22***

Duration: ca. 9 minutes

Why would one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most gifted composers lay down his pen at the peak of his creative powers? For the last three decades of his life, his musical career fell into silence. After composing seven symphonies – and hundreds of songs and piano pieces – Sibelius retired in 1929, living out his days on a government stipend.

What shut off the creative spigot? Why would a composer of such iconic status, and with so much time to explore and develop, end the flow of what everyone regarded as genius?

Historians have posited a number of theories: the composer's hypercritical attitude toward his work, depression, a sense of accomplishment and completion, creative exhaustion, and alcoholism. Sibelius answered the question himself: "My drinking has genuine roots that are both dangerous and go deep. In order to survive, I have to have alcohol. And that's where all my problems begin."

But sewn in and around those problems was a unique musical signature that bridged the 19th and 20th centuries, and his voice became a hallmark of Finnish nationalism. Only a few seconds into most any piece by Sibelius, a listener can feel transported to the composer's homeland, with its misty terrain, dense forests and postcard winters. Like Wagner, Sibelius was fascinated by myth and legend, and wove ancient characters into many of his tone poems.

One of his best-known is *The Swan of Tuonela*, part of the *Lemminkäinen Suite*. Sibelius originally wrote it as a prelude to an opera, but decided it was a poor fit, so he used it as the second of his *Four Legends* that comprise the suite.

*Tuonela* is the mystical land of death, the Hades of Finnish lore, and on its black and perilous river that separates the living from the dead glides a singing swan. A masterpiece of orchestral atmosphere, the music brings together two themes: the tune of the swan, as played by the English horn, and a rising theme introduced by the cello and then muted strings. A harp offers a glimpse of light in the darkness, but as the music moves forward, the swan's song fades and slowly disappears.

*Tuonela* follows a story based on the legend of the *Lemminkäinen* – the ill-fated shaman who sought to kill the swan – but Sibelius believed in notes over words, the abstract over the literal, because "music begins where the possibilities of language end."

## **Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**

### ***Symphony No. 5 in E-Flat Major, Op. 82***

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

To say Sibelius struggled with completing his *Fifth Symphony* would be an understatement. He continually revised it, making changes at rehearsals and up to its premiere in 1915 in a concert marking his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Although he was internationally famous and had just returned from the United States armed with an honorary doctorate from Yale, the mood at home was grim. World War 1 had ravaged much of Europe, and isolationism and fragile economies threatened to collapse otherwise robust societies. All this weighed on the composer and his ability to concentrate, and he kept bringing the symphony back in for repairs. He conducted his final version – the one you will hear tonight – in 1921.

"A symphony is not just a composition in the ordinary sense of the word," he wrote about the challenges in composing such a complex work. "It is more of an inner confession at a given stage of one's life." When he sat down to write the *Fifth*, he admitted "I'm really planning to let my inner being – my fantasy – speak."

All of Sibelius' seven symphonies explore new formal paths, and none more than the *Fifth*, his most integrated and certainly most popular large-scale piece. He reduced the original four-movement scheme to three, and its bright character and novel coda stand in contrast to the gloom of the *Fourth Symphony*.

The opening is unique in presenting itself as two separate movements, a slow intro followed by a scherzo built on the same material. Fusing two otherwise traditional sections into one has given musicologists a field day – especially regarding the exposition and recapitulation of sonata form – although most listeners will enjoy this music for its palpable feeling of tension and release. The quiet middle movement goes back to the classical days of Haydn and Mozart, spinning a simple variation on a tune.

Then comes what we've all been waiting for: One of the most triumphal moments in the literature, a grand finale in the truest sense. After whispery tremolos in the strings comes a series of distant bell-like calls on the horn, supported by a countermelody in the woodwinds and cellos. Other instruments take up the melody before the sound broadens, the heroic horn call returning but this time on the trumpet.

Suddenly, two rival keys play against each other in a resounding crescendo that concludes in six massive chords by the full orchestra, an ending of vast tonal sweep that the English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey described as "Thor wielding his hammer."

**Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

***Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18***

Duration: ca. 33 minutes

Rachmaninoff lived most of his life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but his music is a product of the romantic era, a throwback more in line with his countrymen Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov than his contemporary, Stravinsky.

He wrote music that sticks to the ribs of traditional listeners, and he would take pride in knowing his *Second Piano Concerto* remains the single-most played work in the repertoire. Not surprisingly, TFO has scheduled it no less than 15 times over the years. It comes from a good family, as Rachmaninoff's *Second Symphony*, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, *Prelude in C-Sharp Minor* and the herculean *Third Piano Concerto* (the subject of the 1996 film *Shine*) remain embedded in concert halls across the globe.

However, the popularity of the *Second Concerto* would come with a price, notes Max Harrison in his 2005 book *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings*: "Excessive familiarity can spread like poison through our perceptions and Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, like a certain Tchaikovsky concerto and a particular Beethoven symphony, has been performed so many times that it is difficult for us actually to hear it." Still, he praises the work's "immediate emotional power and yearning insistence."

The work was borne out of struggle. Rachmaninoff was seriously depressed in 1900 following the failures of his *First Symphony* and *First Piano Concerto*, which were snubbed by both audiences and critics.

"Something within me snapped," the composer wrote. "All my self-confidence broke down. A paralyzing apathy possessed me."

He sought treatment from Nicholas Dahl, a doctor familiar with auto-suggestion techniques. Dahl convinced his patient to compose a concerto for piano "with the greatest of ease."

So Rachmaninoff rested, meditated, and began writing with renewed energy, combining music of palpable mood with seamless and soaring melody. He dedicated the work to Dahl, who should in some small way be credited with inspiring a 20<sup>th</sup>-century masterpiece.

The second of his four concertos – extravagant and voluptuous from start to finish – it opens with eight ominous chords that serve as a hypnotic prelude to the contrasting themes of the first movement. The impassioned piano cadenza takes the music to its peak before a sigh of resignation by the orchestra, a solo call from the horn, and a march-like finish.

The adagio introduces an aching theme at the onset, and piano, woodwinds and strings seem to be in a continuous dialog of sadness. The pop singer Eric Carmen borrowed this theme for his 1975 hit *All By Myself*, losing a copyright dispute in the process (a year later, he used a theme from the *Second Symphony* for another song, *Never Gonna Fall In Love Again*).

The energy of the finale perks up our ears before Rachmaninoff delivers one of his ripest melodies – shared by oboe and viola – before the orchestra brings the work to an electric, if unsettled, close.

"In the world of art and music, there are certain works that are perfect, and the Rachmaninoff *Second* is perfect," the pianist Garrick Ohlsson told the *Tampa Tribune* before a TFO performance in 1997. "It has a flawless, heavenly quality to it. It's a romantic journey from despair to triumph, full of brooding tragedy and some of the most gorgeous tunes ever written. It sounds as if this piece dropped out of heaven fully formed."

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***