

# Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

# Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Michael Francis, Conductor  
Yulianna Avdeeva, Piano

Saturday, Oct 28, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm

Sunday, Oct 26, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 2:00 pm

**Michael Daugherty**  
(b. 1954)

**Metropolis Symphony** 🎵

1. Lex
2. Krypton
3. Mxyzptlk (pronounced "Mix-yes-pittle-ick")
4. Oh, Lois!
5. Red Cape Tango

*Intermission*

**Sergei Rachmaninoff**  
(1873-1943)

**Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43** 🎵

**Maurice Ravel**  
(1875-1937)

**La Valse**

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## **Michael Daugherty (1954- )**

### ***Metropolis Symphony***

Duration: ca. 40 minutes

Musicians of The Florida Orchestra have their own special talents, even if they can't match Superman in being faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. But they might come close during the Florida premiere of Michael Daugherty's full *Metropolis Symphony*, a 40-minute, five-movement work inspired by the adventures of the iconic comic book superhero.

"This is really a piece that grabs modern contemporary pop culture and turns it into a brilliant orchestral showcase," says Music Director Michael Francis. "It's Dvorak with a dash of Marvel comics thrown in."

A professor of composition at the University of Michigan, Daugherty grew up reading comic books, and later found a creative outlet in their zany, colorful, pulsing themes. Working on multiple commissions from the Baltimore, New Jersey, Albany and Cleveland Chamber orchestras, he began composing the music in 1988 – the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Superman comic – and spent five years tweaking the score.

"The *Metropolis Symphony* evokes an American mythology that I discovered as an avid reader of comic books in the 1950s and '60s," Daugherty notes on his website. "Each movement – which may be performed separately – is a musical response to the myth of Superman ... a compositional metaphor in order to create an independent musical world that appeals to the imagination."

The symphony was inspired by comic book figures but isn't meant to be programmatic or taken too literally. Rather, the music expresses "the energies, ambiguities, paradoxes and wit of American popular culture. ... I combine the idioms of jazz, rock and funk with symphonic and avant-garde composition."

Here are descriptions of each movement, along with quotes from the composer:

**Lex** (9 minutes) – The opening movement personifies the evil Lex Luthor, first introduced to comic book fans in 1940 as Superman's arch enemy. Marked "diabolical" in the score, "this movement features a virtuoso violin soloist who plays a fiendishly difficult fast triplet motive in perpetual motion, pursued by the orchestra and a percussion section that includes four referee whistles."

**Krypton** (7 minutes) – The next section depicts the doomed planet Krypton, where Superman was born and fled, first mentioned in 1939 in Action Comics. "A dark, microtonal sound world is created by glissandi in the strings, trombone and siren. ... Gradually the movement builds toward an apocalyptic conclusion."

**WXYZPTLK** (7 minutes) – The scherzo, played in the orchestra's higher registers, suggests the wicked doings of Mister Mxyzptlk, or Mxy, introduced in 1944 as another villain, and one with the power to warp reality. "It features two dueling flute soloists positioned on either side of the conductor. Rapidly descending and ascending flute runs are echoed throughout the orchestra, while open-stringed pizzicato patterns, moving strobe-like throughout the orchestra, are precisely choreographed to create a spatial effect."

**Oh, Lois!** (5 minutes) – The symphony's shortest movement represents Lois Lane, the love interest of Superman (and alter-ego Clark Kent) who first appeared in print in 1938. "Marked with the tempo 'faster than a speeding bullet,' this concerto for the orchestra uses flexatone and whip to provide a lively counterpoint that suggests a cartoon history of mishaps, screams, dialogue, crashes and disasters, all in rapid motion."

**Red Cape Tango** (13 minutes) – Superman appears in the finale, which Daugherty composed after the hero's fight to the death with Doomsday. "The principal melody, first heard in the bassoon, is derived from the medieval Latin death chant *Dies Irae* (*Day of Wrath*). The tango rhythm concludes with a crash of cymbals, brake drum and timpani. The orchestra alternates between legato and staccato sections to suggest a musical bullfight."

## **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

### ***Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini***

Duration: ca. 24 minutes

Years ago, deep into The Florida Orchestra's performance of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, the musicians fell silent as the pianist began the heart-rending 18<sup>th</sup> variation.

Sitting in the middle of the Mahaffey Theater was a young couple, maybe on their first date, listening intently. As soloist and orchestra swept the five-note theme to its lush conclusion, 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 20<sup>th</sup> century – he could play on emotion as well as anyone, infusing his scores with pungent tunes and harmonies that are his alone. Nowhere is this more palpable than in this tender moment from the *Rhapsody*.

The music pays homage to Niccolò Paganini, whose *24 Caprices* for solo violin have been revered by fiddle players for two centuries. 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* – which also is used in the *Metropolis Symphony* that opens this program.

“The music is delicious, dark and macabre,” TFO Music Director Michael Francis says about the Medieval accent in the score.

The dreamy 18<sup>th</sup> variation in D flat – which might bring *you* to tears – is the longest set 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, a tune heard by millions in television commercials, pops concerts and in the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*.

One of his most successful scores, *Rhapsody* kept Rachmaninoff flush with cash from copyright royalties – a reason he once quipped that while he composes for listeners, “This one is for my agent.”

### **Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

#### ***La Valse***

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

If Mozart could compose an entire symphony while playing billiards, Ravel struggled with every note. “I did my work slowly, drop by drop,” he once said. “I tore it out of me in pieces.”

Such pains aren’t obvious in the hauntingly beautiful *Pavane* or the daybreak from *Daphnis and Chloe*, which seem to flow like musical oil. Stravinsky may have called him a Swiss clockmaker, but Ravel was far more: a supreme technician with a yearning for fantasy in his musical expression.

His best works are luxuriant and emotionally calculated, noted above all for their exquisite craftsmanship. They also are marked by a refined sense of taste, and an ear for structural brilliance. As an orchestrator, he was unmatched, taking his cue from that master of instrumental coloring, Rimsky-Korsakov.

Ravel’s affinity for ballet inspired a work that would become a stand-alone concert piece, *La Valse*. A delirious take on the traditional Viennese dance, *La Valse* was Ravel’s *joie de vivre*, what the composer called a “homage to the memory of the great Strauss, not Richard – the other, Johann.” Some have called it a waltz deconstructed, others say it echoes a world war in which the dust had hardly settled.

*La Valse* is Old Europe waltzing in the twilight, notes Alex Ross in his book *The Rest is Noise*, who calls it “both a dazzling incarnation of the 1920s and a dazzling satire of it.”

The music poses something of a paradox because the waltz means different things to different people, and this is hardly what listeners at the time, or even today, might expect. It sounds as if pumped on steroids as it mimics and mocks tradition. It begins with the low strings creeping out of the shadows, followed by a lilting tug and pull of waltz in motion, and soon the full orchestra explodes in a brassy, ferocious crescendo that threatens to break apart at the seams over the work’s short 12 minutes of life.

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