PROGRAM PAGE

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

RACHMANINOFF'S PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2

Michael Francis, *Conductor*
Janice Carissa, *Piano*
Nicole Cabell, *Soprano*
Roderick Williams, *Baritone*
The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay
Heather Mitchell, *Artistic Director*

Friday, May 29, 2026, Straz Center, Ferguson Hall at 8 pm
Sunday, May 31, 2026, Mahaffey Theater at 2 pm

Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873 - 1943)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18
I. *Moderato*
II. *Adagio sostenuto*
III. *Allegro scherzando*
Janice Carissa, *Piano*

Intermission

Ralph Vaughan Williams
(1872 - 1958)

Symphony No. 1 (A Sea Symphony)
1. *A Song for All Seas, All Ships*
2. *On the Beach at Night Alone*
3. *Scherzo: The Waves*
4. *The Explorers*

Thank you to Tampa Friends, Steinway Piano Gallery Tampa, and Charles Hunt, for their generous sponsorship of soloist Janice Carissa and Friday night's performance.

We extend gratitude to philanthropist and patron Dr. Robert Wharton Jr. for his extremely generous sponsorship of Sunday's concert.

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Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)
Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor
Duration: ca. 33 minutes

What to listen for:

- This lush, emotional music represents the pinnacle of the late-Romantic concerto.

Rachmaninoff lived most of his life in the 20th 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.

For traditional listeners, he wrote music that sticks to the bone, and he would take pride in knowing his *Second Piano Concerto* ranks among the most played in the repertoire, along with Beethoven's *Emperor* and the Tchaikovsky B Flat. For all its popularity, however, the concerto 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 20th-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 the 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 said in an interview with the *Tampa Tribune* prior to his appearance with TFO. "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."

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
Symphony No. 1, *A Sea Symphony*
Duration: ca. 63 minutes

What to listen for:

- Rather than standard orchestral fare, this multifaceted work combines the elements of symphony, oratorio and opera.

The music of England was quiescent throughout much the 19th century, when France, Germany, Russia, Spain and other European countries forged their own identities. But England soon would wake from its slumber and give the world a distinctive style based on deep-rooted traditions dating back to the late Middle Ages.

It came through the works of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst, Delius, Britten and a handful of others who revived England's long-dormant musical personality. Vaughan Williams, a large, sluggish man who finished nine symphonies before his death at age 85, was interested in reflecting music of his own country, rather than following in the shadow of the Germanic-Europeans. "As long as composers persist in serving up at a second hand the externals of the music of other nations," he once said, "they must not be surprised if audiences prefer the real Brahms, Wagner, Debussy and Stravinsky to their pale reflections."

Vaughan Williams loved the tradition of the English folk song and music that mirrored the landscape of his country. After earning a doctorate degree in music at Cambridge in 1901, he joined the English Folk Song Society and immersed himself in simple songs he found in small villages and towns throughout England. This was to be a turning point for the composer, who said "the knowledge of our folk songs did not so much discover for us something new, but uncovered something which had been hidden by foreign matter." This strident English view gave us the popular *Fantasia on Greensleeves, On Wenlock Edge* and the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

But let's not forget the composer's large-scale orchestral works, as his nine symphonies form one of the most distinctive cycles of the 20th century, and none sound the same as another.

For those new to Vaughan Williams, it makes sense to start with the *Symphony No. 1*, *A Sea Symphony,* which combines huge orchestral and choral forces and stretches more than an hour. Set to poems by Walt Whitman, this imposing work is known for its power and grandeur, a blend of symphony, oratorio and opera. It serves as the composer's philosophical meditation on the oceans as well as the perseverance of the human spirit.

Vaughan Williams cast the symphony in four named movements:

I - *A Song for All Seas, All Ships*. A brass fanfare introduces a full-throated chorus, which is soon greeted by surging orchestral waves.

II - *On the Beach, at Night, Alone*. This nocturnal slow movement for baritone and chorus ruminates on the vastness of the oceans.

III - *Scherzo: the Waves*. The chorus comments on the passing of ships as the orchestra suggests the surge of waves and gusts of winds.

IV- *The Explorers*. The chorus ponders the human existence and the pace of civilization, all against the restless nature of the ocean.

Kurt Loft is a journalist and music critic who has written for various newspapers, magazines and arts groups for more than 40 years. A member of the Music Critics Association of North America, he lives in St. Petersburg.