

Epic Rachmaninov – October 19 & 20, 2019

Apu: Tone Poem for Orchestra

Gabriela Lena Frank
b.1972

American composer and pianist Gabriela Lena Frank was born in Berkeley, California, to parents of widely mixed background: Her mother is of Peruvian/Chinese ancestry and her father of Lithuanian/Jewish descent. A graduate of Rice University in Houston and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Frank has traveled extensively in South America drawing on its folk culture as inspiration for her compositions. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009, she is currently composer-in-residence with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Vanderbilt University.

Frank composed *Apu* in 2017 on commission from Carnegie Hall. She writes:

“In Andean Perú, spirits are said to inhabit rocks, rivers, and mountain peaks with the intent of keeping a watchful eye on travelers passing through highland roads. The *apu* is one of the more well-known spirits that is sometimes portrayed as a minor deity with a mischievous side who is rarely seen. Simple folk song and a solemn prayer often successfully placate the *apu* to ensure safe passage through the mountains.”

“*Apu: Tone Poem for Orchestra* begins with a short folkloric song inspired by the agile *pinkillo* flute, a small slender instrument that packs well into the small bags of travelers who must travel light. It is followed by the extended *hailli* of the second movement, a prayer to the *apu*, which flows attacca to the third movement in which the *apu* makes its brief but brilliant and dazzling appearance before disappearing once again into the mountain peaks.”

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

Sergey Rachmaninov
1873-1943

By 1895 Sergey Rachmaninov felt confident enough to compose a symphony. The premiere took place in St. Petersburg in 1897 but was a dismal failure, in large part due to the shoddy conducting of Alexander Glazunov who was under “the influence.” It produced in the young composer a severe depression, and for three years he was unable to do any significant composing. He finally went for therapy in 1900 to Dr. Nikolay Dahl, an internist who had studied hypnosis and rudimentary psychiatry in Paris. The result was one of the first well-known successes of modern psychotherapy. Although the composer was able to return to creative work, relapses into depression dogged him for the rest of his life.

Rachmaninov expressed his gratitude to Dr. Dahl by dedicating the Second Piano Concerto to him. The first performance, in November 1901 with the composer at the piano, was an instant success. It is Rachmaninov's most frequently performed and recorded orchestral work. It even found its way into Hollywood as background music to the World War II movie *Brief Encounter*.

The first movement opens with dark, plodding unaccompanied chords on the piano that increase in intensity and volume, gradually joined by the orchestra and leading to the first theme. The effect is like the tolling of the giant low-pitched bells common in Russian churches. The second broadly romantic theme is a Rachmaninov signature. The lyrical mood is sustained throughout until the coda with its sudden conclusion in a dramatic burst of energy.

In the *Adagio sostenuto*, muted strings, followed by the piano left hand hesitantly accompany the high woodwinds. The right hand then joins the woodwinds in dreamy interplay. After a brief energetic cadenza, the atmosphere of the beginning returns.

The beginning of the third movement in the lower range of the orchestra is deceptively gentle, enhancing the surprise of the sudden sparkling piano cadenza. The main theme, introduced by the violas and oboes, is intensely passionate – in the same vein as the second theme of the opening movement. After a surprisingly calm episode, the tempo increases to *presto*, culminating in a glittering climax.

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840-1893

Throughout Tchaikovsky's creative career, his inspiration went through extreme cycles tied to his frequent bouts of deep depression and self-doubt. The composition of this symphony in 1877 was strongly influenced by the events in his life that year.

Things were actually looking up for Tchaikovsky during the early part of 1877. He had his first contact with Nadezhda von Meck, the wealthy widow of a railroad builder, who adored Tchaikovsky's music and arranged to pay him a large annual stipend. The only stipulation she attached to her generous help was that they never meet in person, although they corresponded voluminously. In May he started work on the Fourth Symphony, but in July came his disastrous marriage to one of his students, Antonina Milyukova, who had fallen madly in love with him and had written to him confessing her devotion. Although Tchaikovsky, who was homosexual, didn't even remember the girl, he hoped the marriage would still the rumors about his sexual preference. Instead he fled Antonina after two weeks. In total despair, he made a pathetic attempt at suicide (walking into the Moskva River, hoping to die of pneumonia) and ended up in complete mental collapse. To recuperate, his brother Modest took him to Switzerland and Italy, where he picked up work on the symphony, finishing it in January 1878.

Tchaikovsky dedicated the work to Mme. von Meck, expressing his confidence in the new work: "I feel in my heart that this work is the best I have ever written." He did not return from abroad for the February 1878 premiere in Moscow, which was only a lukewarm success. Tchaikovsky himself contributed to the notion that the Symphony was programmatic. He wrote to his patroness:

Of course my symphony is programmatic, but this program is such that it cannot be formulated in words. That would excite ridicule and appear comic. Ought not a symphony—that is, the most lyrical of all forms—to be such a work? Should it not express everything for which there are no words, but which the soul wishes to express, and which requires to be expressed?

The Symphony opens with a sinister fanfare theme for the brass, which recurs several times as the movement unfolds and which Tchaikovsky associated with the cruel exigencies of fate. The anxiety-laden main theme strives towards a resolution that continually seems to elude it. The relief comes with the second theme, one of Tchaikovsky's inimitable melodies for solo clarinet, and a third played in counterpoint with the clarinet theme by the strings and timpani. The development is based exclusively on the main theme and the fanfare.

A plaintive melody on the oboe, accompanied by pizzicato strings opens the second movement. The pace picks up in the middle section where the composer adds a dance-like melody that becomes

increasingly intense until he returns to the gentle oboe theme now in the violins with the woodwinds adding feathery ornaments.

The third movement, Pizzicato ostinato (a persistently repeated phrase, here provided by the plucked strings), is a playful diversion. It is a typical scherzo and trio. Within the Trio is a medley of tunes, the first for a pair of oboes, the second, a slightly mournful Russian folk tune, also for the upper winds, the third a playful staccato brass riff. The movement ends with a medley of the various themes and instrumental combinations.

In Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, motivic unity among the movements was to take an increasingly prominent role. The finale of the Fourth is the most "Russian" of Tchaikovsky's symphonic movements. It is something of a musical battle between the festive and the melancholy, authentic Russian boisterousness set against the angst of the first movement. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the movement is brought up short towards the end by the reappearance of the fanfare from the opening movement – the specter at the feast. An energetic coda, however, tips the balance into positive territory – or triumph over adversity.

Program notes by:

Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn

Wordpros@mindspring.com

www.wordprosmusic.com