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Ari Pelto, Conductor

Thursday, November 21, 2019 | 7:30 PM
Neidorff-Karpati Hall

PROGRAM NOTES

Overture to *La forza del destino* Giuseppe Verdi

Commissioned by the Russian Imperial Theater in 1860, Verdi eventually settled on his subject, a Spanish play by Ángel de Saavedra: *Don Alvaro, la fuerza del sino*. Francesco Maria Piave, a frequent collaborator with the composer, became the librettist, enduring Verdi's typically harsh criticisms of his work in progress. Verdi completed the opera, *La forza del destino*, in time for its scheduled first performance in early 1862, but it was postponed until November 10 of that year, owing to a singer's illness. Despite its success, Verdi was not completely satisfied and made revisions to the music, which in certain cases also involved changes in the libretto with the help of Antonio Ghislanzoni. The new version premiered on February 27, 1869, at La Scala, where it was most favorably received.

The plot involves Leonora and her lover, Don Alvaro, who plan an elopement but are stopped by her father. As Don Alvaro throws down his gun in surrender, her father is accidentally killed. The remainder of the action involves Leonora's brother Don Carlo's crusade for revenge and Leonora's exile as a penitent in a cave; Don Carlo and Don Alvaro in disguise becoming comrades in arms and their eventual duel; Don Alvaro's discovery of Leonora as he seeks help for the mortally wounded Don Carlo; and Don Carlo's dying revenge—the killing of Leonora.

The Overture weaves themes from the opera together in such an effective manner that the piece has become the most frequently performed of Verdi's overtures. Unison "E"s are intoned by brass in sets of "fateful" threes to open the work. Immediately following is the agitated theme most associated with the character Leonora. Following two more brass declamations comes a lyrical melody (in the opera a duet between Don Carlo and Don Alvaro), with the agitated motive serving as countermelody. The music from one of Leonora's ethereal arias follows, soon giving way to another impetuous climax. The clarinet solo above harp accompaniment comes from a scene with Leonora and a religious figure, Padre Guardiano; the chorale-like brass passages that occur later are tied to the same idea. Much of the rest of the Overture employs melodic ideas that are not directly derived from the opera. In contrast to the Prelude of 1862, which ended softly and led directly into the main opera, the now definitive Overture mounts in intensity and closes brilliantly.

Karelia Suite, Op. 11 **Jean Sibelius**

Often considered the quintessential voice of Finland, Sibelius had nevertheless grown up speaking Swedish and, after graduating from the Helsinki Music Institute, had continued his studies in Berlin and Vienna. While in Vienna he began rejecting Austro-Germanic musical heritage in favor of finding his own creative voice, which meant embracing his Finnish heritage. He also gained impetus from his relationship with Finnish-speaking Aino Järnefelt, to whom he had become secretly engaged in 1890. He studied the Kalevala folk epic and became enamored of its characters and the repetitive style of its incantatory poetry. He began to plan his massive five-movement *Kullervo* in his new “modern” Finnish style, inspired by this epic.

Simultaneously Sibelius was immersing himself in “Karelianism,” part of the nationalistic Romanticism that swept Finland in the 1890s. Karelia, though under Russian rule, was revered for its authentic Finnish traditions, and Sibelius began seeking out authentic performers of folk songs from the region. Further, after marrying Aino in 1892 he extended his honeymoon to spend several months in Karelia. In 1893, with the success of *Kullervo*, coupled with announced plans for a Finnish opera (though abandoned) and a symphonic poem *Lemminkäinen*, Sibelius was the perfect choice when the Viipuri Student Association of the University of Helsinki wanted Finnish-sounding music for their dramatic tableaux depicting the history of Karelia.

Sibelius worked quickly to produce thirteen numbers, some sung, and the tableaux were presented on November 13, 1893, at a gala event whose proceeds went toward “improving the social and cultural life of the Eastern border districts.” Accompanied by an orchestra that Sibelius himself conducted, the tableaux were so successful that, as he complained to his brother, “You couldn’t hear a single note of the music—everyone was on their feet cheering and clapping.” Other successful performances ensued, but Sibelius worried that, separated from the staging, the music would not work in the concert hall. So he extracted at first an eight-number suite and finally settled on the three-number *Karelia* Suite, which has remained popular to this day.

The Intermezzo originally accompanied the third tableau, “Narimont, the Duke of Lithuania, levying taxes in the Province of Käkös, 1333.” Sibelius’s march grows out of distant fanfares to depict Karelian woodsmen on their way to pay their taxes. The Ballade from the fourth tableau, “Karl Knutsson in Viipuri Castle, 1446,” refers to the deposed king who finds solace at the castle in a minstrel’s song. Sibelius tells the king’s story in several episodes: a Scandinavian-sounding tune that dies away, a solemn section perhaps remembering past glory, and a

meditative ballad (originally sung, but given to English horn in the concert suite) about a swain who comes upon maidens dancing as he rides through rose-laden groves. The *Alla marcia* stems from the fifth tableau, “Pontus de la Gardie at the Gates of Käkisalme,” which depicted a siege. Here a march replete with fanfares makes a jubilant conclusion to the *Suite*.

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 **Sergei Rachmaninoff**

While recovering from an operation on Long Island in May 1940, Rachmaninoff somehow found the energy to compose what turned out to be his last work. In August he wrote to Eugene Ormandy—conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, with whom he had had a long and rewarding association—that he had completed a new orchestral piece, “which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra. It is called *Fantastic Dances*.” Ormandy replied immediately that he would be delighted to perform the work that season. A week later Rachmaninoff was calling the piece *Symphonic Dances*, though he later said he would have called it simply *Dances* had he not been worried that people would associate it with jazz orchestras. Working with extraordinary determination on the orchestration amid practicing the piano for the upcoming concert season, he prepared proofs before and after concerts once the season had begun and had the piece ready for the January 3, 1941 premiere.

According to his sister-in-law, Sofiya Satina, Rachmaninoff had once given the three movements programmatic titles, “Noon,” “Twilight,” and “Midnight,” which he later replaced with noncommittal Italian tempo designations. Whether or not he intended them to represent different phases of life, as he had in *The Bells*, the *Symphonic Dances* sound programmatic. Rachmaninoff, in fact, hoped they would serve as the basis for a ballet and played through the score for choreographer Mikhail Fokine, who had earlier produced a successful ballet to his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Fokine’s death in 1942 ended those hopes.

The three dances are each constructed in a basic A-B-A form in which the final “A” section is wonderfully varied and extended. Rachmaninoff’s harmonic language is firmly rooted in the 19th century, ignoring the avant-garde developments of the early 20th century. His own late style is evident, nevertheless, in the shifting harmonies of the second movement and the energetic rhythmic patterns and “grotesqueries” à la Prokofiev of the outer movements.

The *Symphonic Dances* show Rachmaninoff's interest in varied instrumental tone qualities. In the first movement he makes special use of the timbral qualities of the alto saxophone in combination with other winds and uses the piano in effective combinations with the strings and harp. (It should be noted in connection with the first movement that the tempo marking "*Non allegro*" [Not fast], which the composer seldom used, was somehow attached in error. In 1942 he told conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos, who was taking the movement too slowly, that it should have been marked simply "*Allegro*.")

The opening of the second dance, a mournful waltz, is notable for the tone quality of the stopped horns and muted trumpets. In the finale the chimes and xylophone are employed for coloristic purposes, the former sometimes reminiscent of Berlioz's bells in the Witches' Sabbath from *Symphonie fantastique*, which also incorporates the *Dies irae* chant from the Requiem Mass.

Rachmaninoff was fascinated all his life by ecclesiastical chants, an interest that he summarizes in the *Symphonic Dances*. At the end of the first movement he refers—according to some commentators—to the main theme of the opening movement of his First Symphony (still unpublished at the time), which itself had been based on Russian church music. Others hear this as another form of the *Dies irae*, which had figured in so many of his compositions, particularly in the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. The *Dies irae* becomes particularly pronounced in the finale, which also makes use of the chant *Blagosloven esi, Gospodi* (Blessed be the Lord) from his 1915 choral work *All Night Vigil*. Rachmaninoff wrote the word "Alliluya" in the orchestral score at the corresponding point where in the choral work the "alleluias" praise God following the resurrection of Christ.

At the end of the score he wrote, "I thank thee, Lord," which here may have signified more than a composer's traditional end-of-work utterance. Having become more pious toward the end of his life, Rachmaninoff might also have been referring to God's victory over death, represented musically by the Russian chant's banishing of the *Dies irae*. It seems entirely likely that Rachmaninoff contemplated his own death as he composed the *Symphonic Dances*, perhaps aware that it would be his last work. Though he revised the Fourth Piano Concerto in 1941, he wrote no more new works. He had decided that the 1942–43 season would be his last as a performing pianist and he bought and furnished a house in Beverly Hills for his retirement. He died there on March 28, 1943, having played what would be his last concert six weeks before in Tennessee. Lest the reader expect a dark work, it should be said that the *Symphonic Dances*, which Rachmaninoff considered his best work, express an exuberant approach to life, particularly in the outer movements.

ABOUT THE CONDUCTOR

Ari Pelto, Music Director at Opera Colorado, is widely known for performances that have been called “poetic, earthy, vigorous” and “highly individual.” In demand in opera houses and with symphony orchestras throughout the United States, he was appointed to Opera Colorado in 2015 and has conducted acclaimed performances of *La Traviata*, *Don Giovanni*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Aida*, *La Bobème*, *Falstaff*, *La Fanciulla del West*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. In contemporary repertoire, the company recently premiered Lori Laitman’s long-awaited work, *The Scarlet Letter*, a recording of which was released on the Naxos label, and the world premiere of Gerald Cohen’s new opera, *Steal a Pencil for Me*, based on a true love story set in a concentration camp during World War II. This season he conducts *The Barber of Seville*, *I Pagliacci*, and *Tosca* for the company, travels to San Diego Opera to conduct *Hänsel und Gretel*, and joins Atlanta Ballet for performances of *The Nutcracker*.

Recent highlights as a guest conductor include *Eugene Onegin* in a new production at Atlanta Opera and Lyric Opera Kansas City, *Salome* and *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Virginia Opera, a new *Nutcracker* and *Carmina Burana* at Atlanta Ballet, and *L’enfant et les sortilèges* at Chicago College of Performing Arts. Past successes include *Aida* at Utah Symphony and Opera and a double bill of *La voix humaine*, starring Patricia Racette, and *Gianni Schicchi* at Chicago Opera Theater. He conducted a variety of symphonic programs with orchestras in the U.S., including Omaha Symphony and the NYU Symphony. Other engagements include *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Virginia Opera; *The Rake’s Progress* at Portland Opera; *Rigoletto*, *Don Pasquale*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and *Don Giovanni* at Opera Memphis; *La Bobème* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis; *The Cunning Little Vixen* at Chautauqua; *Rusalka* and *La Bobème* at Boston Lyric Opera; *Romeo et Juliette* at Minnesota Opera; *The Magic Flute*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Hansel and Gretel* at Portland Opera; and *Hansel and Gretel* at Utah Opera.

Appointed Assistant Conductor at the Spoleto Festival at age 24, Pelto has gone on to conduct on stages worldwide. His international appearances include symphonic performances with the Bochumer Philharmoniker, productions of *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Falstaff* at New National Theatre of Tokyo, and *Faust* at the Teatro Nacional Sucre in Quito, Ecuador. From 2000 to 2002 he was Assistant Conductor of the Florida West Coast Symphony. In addition to conducting over 30 concerts in Sarasota, Pelto was also a frequent guest with the Florida Orchestra and the Toledo Symphony and led tours of the Western Opera Theatre (the touring company of San Francisco Opera) conducting *La Bobème*

and *Così fan tutte* in over 20 states. In 2004 he made his highly praised debut with New York City Opera conducting *La Traviata*, returning for productions of *Madama Butterfly*, *La Bohème*, and *Carmen*.

Ari Pelto regularly works with leading conservatories and young artist programs, including the Juilliard School, the Curtis Institute, Manhattan School of Music, and Oberlin Conservatory and the Young Artist Programme at Covent Garden's Royal Opera House. With San Francisco Opera's Merola Program, he conducted the 2014 Grand Finale as well as productions of *Così fan tutte* and *The Rape of Lucretia*. At Wolf Trap Opera, he inaugurated a new production of *Le nozze di Figaro* and led *Don Giovanni*.

A masterful collaborator with dancers, Maestro Pelto has enjoyed a longstanding relationship with the Atlanta Ballet. He led the company in world premieres of Twyla Tharp's first story ballet, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and Helen Pickett's *Camino Real*. Previously, he conducted Jean-Christophe Maillot's groundbreaking production of *Romeo et Juliette*, as well as the Atlanta Ballet's production of Prokofiev's *Cinderella*.

After earning his Bachelor of Music degree in violin performance at Oberlin Conservatory, Ari Pelto studied conducting at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem, and with Imre Pallo at Indiana University.

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In the tradition of the classical music conservatory, the orchestral studies program at MSM forms the heart of the performing experience for classical instrumentalists. All students, placed by competitive audition, participate in a variety of orchestral projects under the guidance of George Manahan, Director of Orchestral Activities. Students play in a variety of orchestral formats, giving them ample opportunity to develop their audition and ensemble technique, broaden their knowledge of orchestral repertoire, and perform at New York City venues such as Carnegie Hall, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and Merkin Concert Hall. Winners of the School's annual Eisenberg–Fried Concerto Competition perform with the orchestras as soloists.

In addition to Maestro Manahan, the orchestras work regularly with Leonard Slatkin, Distinguished Visiting Artist in Conducting and Orchestral Studies, and guest conductors such as Jane Glover and Perry So.

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Symphonic Dances

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Founded as a community music school by Janet Daniels Schenck in 1918, today MSM is recognized for its 970 superbly talented undergraduate and graduate students who come from more than 50 countries and nearly all 50 states; its innovative curricula and world-renowned artist-teacher faculty that includes musicians from the New York Philharmonic, the Met Orchestra, and the top ranks of the jazz and Broadway communities; and a distinguished community of accomplished, award-winning alumni working at the highest levels of the musical, educational, cultural, and professional worlds.

The School is dedicated to the personal, artistic, and intellectual development of aspiring musicians, from its Precollege students through those pursuing doctoral studies. Offering classical, jazz, and musical theatre training, MSM grants a range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. True to MSM's origins as a music school for children, the Precollege program continues to offer superior music instruction to 475 young musicians between the ages of 5 and 18. The School also serves some 2,000 New York City schoolchildren through its Arts-in-Education Program, and another 2,000 students through its critically acclaimed Distance Learning Program.

Your gift helps a young artist reach for the stars!

To enable Manhattan School of Music to continue educating and inspiring generations of talented students and audiences alike, please consider making a charitable contribution today.

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