

Minnesota Orchestra

Elias Grandy, conductor
Jon Kimura Parker, piano
BRKFST Dance Company

Friday, July 21, 2023, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Saturday, July 22, 2023, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall

Maurice Ravel	<i>La Valse</i>	ca. 13'
Sergei Rachmaninoff	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43 <i>Jon Kimura Parker, piano</i>	ca. 23'
I N T E R M I S S I O N		ca. 20'
Daniel Bernard Roumain	<i>Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents</i> Dancers Dreamers Presidents <i>BRKFST Dance Company</i>	ca. 21'
Igor Stravinsky	Suite from <i>The Firebird</i> (1919 revision) Introduction and Dance of the Firebird Dance of the Princesses Infernal Dance of King Kashchei Berceuse Finale	ca. 19'

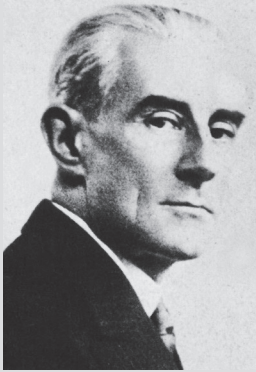
Elias Grandy's profile appears on page 45; Jon Kimura Parker's on page 10; and BRKFST Dance Company's on page 44.

pre- and post-concert

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Maurice Ravel
Born: March 7, 1875,
 Ciboure, France
Died: December 28, 1937,
 Paris, France

La Valse
Premiered: December 12, 1920

Maurice Ravel, like many French composers, was profoundly wary of German music. Yet there was one German form for which he felt undiluted affection: the waltz. As a young piano student in Paris, Ravel fell under the spell of Schubert’s waltzes for piano, and in 1911 he composed his own *Noble and Sentimental Waltzes*, a set of charming waltzes modeled on the Schubert dances he loved so much. Earlier, in 1906, he had planned a great orchestral waltz with the working title *Wien* (Vienna), but the piece was delayed and Ravel did not return to it until the fall of 1919. This was the year after the conclusion of World War I, and the French vision of the Germanic world was now quite different than it had been when he originally conceived the piece.

Nevertheless, Ravel still felt the appeal of the project, and by December he was madly at work. The orchestration was completed the following March, and the first performance took place in Paris on December 12, 1920. By this time, perhaps wary of wartime associations, Ravel had renamed the piece *La Valse*.

an opulent and troubling score

Ravel described exactly his original conception for the work: “Whirling clouds give glimpses, through rifts, of couples waltzing. The clouds scatter little by little. One sees an immense hall peopled with a twirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of chandeliers bursts forth fortissimo. An Imperial Court, about 1855.”

The music also gives us this scene. Out of the murky, misty beginning come bits of waltz rhythms; gradually these join together and plunge into an animated dance. This is dazzling writing for orchestra, some of which results from the music’s rhythmic energy, some from Ravel’s keen ear for instrumental color.

If *La Valse* concluded with all this elegant vitality, our sense of the music might be clear, but instead it drives to an ending full

of frenzied violence. We come away not so much exhilarated as shaken. Ravel made a telling comment about this conclusion: “I had intended this work to be a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which was associated in my imagination an impression of a fantastic and fatal sort of dervish’s dance.”

Is this music a celebration of the waltz—or an exploration of the darker spirit behind the culture that created it? Many have opted for the latter explanation, hearing in *La Valse* not a *Rosenkavalier*-like evocation of a more graceful era, but the snarling menace behind that elegance.

Ravel himself was evasive about the ending. Aware of its implications, he explained in a letter to a friend: “Some people have seen in this piece the expression of a tragic affair; some have said that it represented the end of the Second Empire, others that it was postwar Vienna. They are wrong. Certainly, *La Valse* is tragic, but in the Greek sense: it is a fatal spinning around, the expression of vertigo and the voluptuousness of the dance to the point of paroxysm.”

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, antique cymbals, castanets, tambourine, tamtam, triangle, bells, 2 harps and strings

Program note by *Eric Bromberger*.



Sergei Rachmaninoff
Born: April 1, 1873,
 Starorussky, Russia
Died: March 28, 1943,
 Beverly Hills, California

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43
Premiered: November 7, 1934

In the spring of 1934 Rachmaninoff, then 61, and his wife moved into a villa they had just built on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. They were delighted by the house, its opulent size and its view across the beautiful lake. Rachmaninoff was especially touched to find a surprise waiting for him there: the Steinway Company of New York had delivered a brand new piano to the villa.

a tune that beckons composers

Rachmaninoff spent the summer gardening and landscaping, and he also composed. Between July 3 and August 24 he wrote a set of variations for piano and orchestra on what is one of the most varied themes in the history of Western classical music, the last of Niccolò Paganini's Twenty-Four Caprices for Solo Violin. Paganini had written that devilish tune, full of rhythmic spring, chromatic tension and virtuoso writing, in 1820, and he himself had followed it with 12 variations. That same theme has haunted composers through each century since—resulting in variations on it by Liszt (*Transcendental Etudes*), Schumann (12 Concert Etudes) and Brahms (the two sets of Paganini Variations) in the 19th century, followed in the 20th century by Witold Lutosławski, Boris Blacher and George Rochberg. And there may be more to come.

After considering several titles for his new work, the composer settled on Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, a title that places the focus on melody and somewhat disguises the ingenious variation-technique at the center of this music. The first performance, with the composer as soloist, took place in Baltimore on November 7, 1934, with Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra. Pleased and somewhat surprised by the work's reception, Rachmaninoff observed dryly: "It somehow looks suspicious that the Rhapsody has had such an immediate success with everybody."

bravura solos, brilliant contrasts

The Rhapsody has a surprising beginning: a brief orchestral flourish containing hints of the theme leads to the first variation, which is presented *before* the theme itself is heard. This gruff and hard-edged variation, which Rachmaninoff marks *Precedente*, is in fact the bass line for Paganini's theme, which is then presented in its original form by both violin sections in unison. Some of the variations last a matter of minutes, while others whip past almost before we know it (several are as short as 19 seconds). The 24 variations contrast sharply in both character and tempo, and the fun of this music lies not just in the bravura writing for piano but in hearing Paganini's theme sound so different in each variation.

In three of them, Rachmaninoff incorporates the old plainsong tune *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) used by Berlioz, Saint-Saëns and many others, including Rachmaninoff, for whom this grim theme was a virtual obsession. Here it appears in the piano part in the seventh and tenth variations, and eventually it drives the work to its climax.

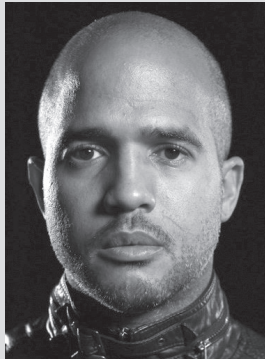
Perhaps the most famous of Rachmaninoff's variations, though, is the 18th, in which Paganini's theme is inverted and transformed into a moonlit lovesong. The piano states this variation in its simplest form, and then strings take it up and

turn it into a soaring nocturne. The 18th variation has haunted many Hollywood composers, and Rachmaninoff himself noted wryly that he had written it specifically as a gift "for my agent." From here on, the tempo picks up, and the final six variations accelerate to a monumental climax. The excitement builds, the *Dies Irae* is stamped out by the full orchestra, and suddenly, like a puff of smoke, the Rhapsody vanishes before us on two quick strokes of sound.

Instrumentation: solo piano with orchestra comprising 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel, harp and strings

Program note by **Eric Bromberger**.

The Creative Partner for Summer at Orchestra Hall position is supported by **Marilyn and Glen Nelson**.



Daniel Bernard Roumain
Born: May 3, 1971,
 Skokie, Illinois

Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents
Premiered: September 25, 2010

Sometimes, inspiration can come from the tiniest of moments.

Daniel Bernard Roumain's three-movement tone poem *Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents* was inspired by an impromptu dance that talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres and then-Senator Barack Obama shared together on her show in October 2007, early in his historic first presidential campaign. For Roumain, this moment of levity represented a sea change in American culture, suggesting a new openness in how we could think and talk about contentious issues of race, identity and sexual orientation. Maybe, Roumain thought, we *can* come together, despite our differences?

creating across genres

Roumain—an Illinois-born, Florida-raised composer whose parents are from Haiti—is known for his signature violin sounds infused with myriad electronic and African American musical influences. Roumain, who often goes by the moniker DBR, was a student of William Albright, Leslie Bassett and William Bolcom, graduated from Vanderbilt University, and earned his doctorate

in music composition from the University of Michigan. He is currently a tenured associate and Institute professor at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts.

Roumain has composed more than 300 works in a variety of genres, producing solo, chamber, orchestral and operatic works. He has collaborated with the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Kennedy Center, Lyric Opera of Chicago and Sydney Opera House, and served as artist in residence and Creative Chair at the Flynn in Burlington, Vermont. Among his major compositions is the 2017 opera *We Shall Not Be Moved*, a collaboration with librettist Marc Bamuthi Joseph addressing the Philadelphia Police Department's 1985 bombing of a residential building associated with the MOVE organization and the subsequent fire that destroyed 61 homes. Joseph is a familiar presence at Orchestra Hall as the librettist and spoken word artist who teamed with composer Carlos Simon to create *bread(th)*, which the Minnesota Orchestra premiered this past May.

a note from the composer

Roumain provided comments on *Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents* in his score, which are excerpted here:

“On October 29, 2007, Senator Barack Obama appeared on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*. Every guest of the show is invited to dance with DeGeneres, and as Obama made his way downstage to meet her, she met him halfway, and together, they danced.

“It was a moment full of obvious joy and humor, and the studio audience (and I imagine millions more around the world) enthusiastically cheered and shouted for them. I did too. But months later, while the debates on race, religion, identity and sexual orientation raged on, I thought back to those few moments and realized just how special, and meaningful, their dance was.

“Here was a young, mixed-race, heterosexual man dancing with a young, white, lesbian woman, all on national television. Could this scene have happened in the 1960s, 1970, or even 1980s? It all made for great television, and even greater theater, but as a composer, I was inspired by the total relevance of it all, that our future president had found yet another way to communicate the sharp wit of his intellectual prowess: through the comfortable ease of his hips and body...And if he could dance with anyone, what else could he do? Isn't dancing with someone just another way of talking with someone? Doesn't a great dance partner make for a great conversationalist?

“As a composer, it's always been challenging for me to find inspiration in purely musical ideas. I'm much more comfortable creatively responding to the hotbed issues of our daily news, the struggles within our communities, and the heated debates that

can happen in our homes....Watching Obama and DeGeneres dance might not save or change our world, but it certainly says many things about where we were, who we are, and how we all will get there as ‘one nation under God’ (or ‘under a groove,’ depending on who you are). Maybe the journey begins not by screaming at each other, but by dancing with one another.”

movement and music

Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents speaks to Roumain's love of composing music that crosses genres. The music is percussive, lyrical and at times soulful, drawing inspiration from the composer's Haitian roots and contemporary hip-hop music. True to his inspiration, Roumain has the musicians “dance” with each other by playfully throwing the key themes back and forth across the orchestra.

The title of the piece corresponds to the form—its three movements are titled *Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents*—and the number 21 is referenced twice in the score's title page: the 2007 dance between Obama and DeGeneres lasted 21 seconds, and Roumain's orchestral response to that joyful moment spans 21 minutes.

dancers. The first movement, *Dancers*, begins with an extended call for attention through solo drums and percussion. Immediately thereafter, Roumain presents a pair of musical elements that set the stage for the rest of the movement: a propulsive, syncopated motif heard first in the strings, and a riff-like main theme for the upper winds that climbs upwards before ending in a playful slide. The two main themes are tossed around by various instruments before appearing together in a brass-forward finale.

dreamers. *Dreamers* brings in new dissonance as musical ideas tussle and blend together. It begins with dark, brooding lines in the lower strings. Over this foundation, the music of the first movement returns, along with the drums, seeking to move the music forward. The somber music of the lower strings rises in intensity, providing a dramatic backdrop to the syncopated riffs and the drums.

presidents. Roumain begins the third movement, *Presidents*, with a synthesizer playing a minor-key pop-chord progression, setting up a gentle, expectant mood. The drums return, in what Roumain calls an “old-school hip-hop beat.” The strings enter with a lush, movie-soundtrack sound, while the horns play a series of rising chords, which are embraced by the full orchestra as the movement ends in an exultant shout.

Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents premiered on September 25, 2010, with the New World Symphony performing under the direction of Alasdair Neale.

about the choreography

BRKFST Dance Company, this year's Artist in Residence for Summer at Orchestra Hall, joins tonight's performance of *Dancers, Dreamers and Presidents* with its original choreography, which it describes in the following comments.

"In the creation of this piece, we are exploring our childhood dreams, aspirations as adults and the general hardships of life. To us, this composition is filled with hope, despair, joy, sadness and love. BRKFST will utilize partnering and 'signature moves' (original movement dancers are known for) within our choreography. Typically, these moves are not taught to others verbatim, since it is generally frowned upon to copy signature moves. What makes BRKFST special is that we openly share our signature moves in order to push our choreography and partnering even further—giving us a unique aesthetic. We want to be a voice and model for all those who value collaboration, negotiation and creative ingenuity."

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, piccolo snare drum, bass drum, bongos, brake drum, congas, large cowbell, tamtam, 2 tom-toms, medium triangle, wood block, drum set, marimba, vibraphone, chimes, piano (doubling synthesizer) and strings, joined in this performance by a breaking company

Program note by *Scott Chamberlain*.



Igor Stravinsky

Born: June 17, 1882,
St. Petersburg, Russia
Died: April 6, 1971,
New York City

Suite from *The Firebird* (1919 revision)

Premiered: June 25, 1910
(complete ballet)

In 1909, following a successful visit of the Ballets Russes to Paris, the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev and his choreographer Michel Fokine made plans for a new ballet to be presented in Paris the following season, based on the old Russian legend of the Firebird. They decided to take a chance on an unknown young composer named Igor Stravinsky.

Recognizing that this was his big chance, Stravinsky set to work in November 1909 and finished the score the following spring. The first performance, in Paris on June 25, 1910, was a huge success. Though Stravinsky would go on to write quite different

music over the remainder of his long career, the music from *The Firebird* remains his most popular creation. Of the three concert suites Stravinsky drew from the ballet score, the 1919 revision heard here is performed most often.

a tale of enchantment

The Firebird tells of a young prince, Ivan Tsarevich, who pursues the magic Firebird—part woman, part bird—into the garden of the ogre Kashchei, who imprisons maidens in the castle and turns all knights who come to rescue them to stone. Ivan captures the Firebird, who gives him a magic feather when he releases her. The prince sees 13 princesses playing with golden apples, and when at dawn they hurry back to Kashchei's castle, he follows them. The monsters there capture him and he is about to be turned to stone himself when he waves the magic feather—and the Firebird returns, puts the ogres to sleep and shows him where a magic egg is hidden. When Ivan smashes the egg, Kashchei and his fiends disappear, the petrified knights return to life, the maidens are freed, and Ivan marries the most beautiful of the princesses.

magical music

The *Introduction* brings one of Stravinsky's most striking orchestral effects: a series of rippling string arpeggios played entirely in harmonics. The composer wanted to create here a Catherine-wheel effect, that of fireworks spinning and throwing off light. The music proceeds into the shimmering, whirling *Dance of the Firebird*, Stravinsky's own favorite music from this score. In the *Dance of the Princesses* Stravinsky uses the old Russian folk tune "In the Garden." The *Infernal Dance of King Kashchei* begins with one of the most violent orchestral attacks ever written. Sharply syncopated rhythms and barbaric growls depict the fiends' efforts to resist the Firebird's spell.

In its aftermath, solo bassoon sings the gentle *Berceuse* with which the Firebird lulls Kashchei and his followers to sleep, and this leads through a magical passage for tremolo strings into the *Finale*. Here solo horn announces the main theme, based on another Russian folksong, "By the Gate." Beginning quietly, this noble tune drives *The Firebird* to a magnificent conclusion on music of general rejoicing.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, xylophone, harp, piano (doubling celesta) and strings

Program note by *Eric Bromberger*.

