

# MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

Thomas Søndergård, conductor

Sir Stephen Hough, piano

Angelica Cantanti Youth Choirs, Elizabeth Egger, director

Sunday, December 31, 2023, 7:30PM

Monday, January 1, 2024, 2PM

Orchestra Hall

## Sergei Prokofiev

*Winter Bonfire Suite, Opus 122*

CA. 20'

Departure

Snow Outside the Window

Waltz on the Ice

The Bonfire

Chorus of the Pioneers

Winter Evening

March

The Return

*Angelica Cantanti Youth Choirs*

## Sergei Rachmaninoff

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43

CA. 23'

*Sir Stephen Hough, piano*

## I N T E R M I S S I O N

CA. 20'

## Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Selections from *Nutcracker, Opus 71*

CA. 35'

Miniature Overture

March of the Toy Soldiers

Waltz of the Snowflakes

Kingdom of the Sweets

Dance of the Reed-Flutes (Mirlitons)

Waltz of the Flowers

Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy

Coda

Final Waltz and Apotheosis

*Angelica Cantanti Youth Choirs*

## POST-CONCERT

After the New Year's Eve concert, join us in the Roberta Mann Grand Foyer for a countdown to midnight, vintage jazz from Belle Amour and a complimentary Champagne toast.

## THANK YOU

The 2023–24 Classical Season is presented by Ameriprise Financial.

The January 1 concert will be broadcast live on stations of [YourClassical Minnesota Public Radio](#).



**THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD,**  
CONDUCTOR

Profile appears on page 8.

Thomas Søndergård shared these comments on the music selected for today's concert: "The season of winter, Christmas and New Year's has always been a magical time of year for my family, and I want the audience to celebrate in that same way with this program. Earlier this year I met kids attending a concert at Orchestra Hall, and I told them that I remember when I was that age, I felt all the things that music could do with emotions, inspiration and fantasy. This program really offers that. Prokofiev's *Winter Bonfire* begins with a train that takes off into the winter landscape, and there is a children's choir singing in one movement. When kids are in the Hall with their families, and they can see someone their own age on stage, they'll listen and experience in a different way. The Rachmaninoff Rhapsody played by Stephen Hough is famous for its beautiful tune, and then we head to a world of secrets and fantasy in *Nutcracker*. To round things off, we may be in for a little New Year's surprise!"



**SIR STEPHEN HOUGH,**  
PIANO

One of the most distinctive artists of his generation, Sir Stephen Hough combines a distinguished career as a pianist, composer and writer. Named by *The Economist* as one of "Twenty Living Polymaths," he holds the distinction of being the first classical performer to receive a MacArthur Fellowship in 2001. In 2014 he was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), and in 2022 he was knighted in the Queen's Birthday Honors. Since winning the 1983 Naumburg Competition in New York, Hough has performed with major orchestras and has given recitals in prestigious venues, from London's Royal Festival Hall to New York's Carnegie Hall. His discography of over 60 albums has earned international recognition, including a collaboration with the Minnesota Orchestra featuring Tchaikovsky's three piano concertos and Concert Fantasia, released in 2010. His compositions are published by Josef Weinberger, including music for orchestra, choir, chamber ensemble, organ and solo piano. He premieres his first piano concerto this season with the Utah Symphony. A noted writer, he has contributed articles for *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Times* (U.K.) and other publications. He has authored four books, most recently a memoir, *Enough: Scenes from Childhood*. More: [harrisonparrott.com](http://harrisonparrott.com), [stephenhough.com](http://stephenhough.com).

**ANGELICA CANTANTI**  
YOUTH CHOIRS

**ELIZABETH EGGER,**  
DIRECTOR

**AUDREY RIDDLE,**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**ANDREA DITTMER,**  
CHOIR MANAGER

The Angelica Cantanti Youth Choirs is one of the oldest children's choir programs in the Twin Cities. Founded in 1980, Angelica Cantanti is dedicated to providing consistent, high-quality choral music education with excellence in performance. Members include singers in kindergarten through grade 12, representing communities and schools across the Twin Cities metro area. Rehearsals are held weekly in Bloomington. Singers in ACYC performed at the 2018 Super Bowl at U.S. Bank Stadium and recorded Gustav Mahler's *Symphony of a Thousand* with the Minnesota Orchestra in June 2022. The organization was recently voted "Best Community Choir in Minnesota" by WCCO-TV. More: [angelicacantanti.org](http://angelicacantanti.org).

Sophia Bazakos	Susannah Houston
Evelyn Blessing	Kainalu Lazarus
William Catalano	Gabrielle Mackey
Merryn Cosgwell	Preston Rose
Sarah Conner	Berit Schulz
Elizabeth Couling	Naia Spoonheim
Julia Farah	Ella Spott
Jordin Floyd	Elodie Ursu
Elizabeth Hersey	Adalyn Western
Mamie Holm	Ingrid Wills



## SERGEI PROKOFIEV

**B:** April 23, 1891  
Sontsivka, Ukraine

**D:** March 5, 1953  
Moscow, Russia

### *Winter Bonfire Suite,* Opus 122

COMPOSED: 1949

*Winter Bonfire* was written during a uniquely challenging period for Sergei Prokofiev. Firstly, he was nearing the end of his life—there were only four years in between the composing of *Winter Bonfire* in 1949 and his death due to cerebral hemorrhage—and he had been chronically sick for eight years before his death. (In a historical irony, Prokofiev died on the same day as Joseph Stalin, whose regime tormented many Soviet composers.) In addition to those challenges, and in defiance of his doctor's orders as he recovered from a stroke that left him disabled for many months, Prokofiev continued to write a considerable amount of music during this time—almost as if his life depended on it. And as a composer living in Stalin's USSR, it very well might have.

In 1936, Prokofiev and his family moved back to Moscow for good. Since 1918, he had undertaken a cosmopolitan career mainly based in Paris—after a brief stint in San Francisco that nearly left him penniless—performing as a pianist and composing in both the U.S. and in his home country. He had left the USSR to escape the malaise in a post-Revolution and post-World War I society, and in a mirror image of the reason for his departure, the economic slump caused by the Great Depression in the U.S. (plus a healthy amount of homesickness) spurred him to return to his homeland.

But composing under Stalin's strict regime proved trying. In 1948, Prokofiev and other Soviet composers including Dmitri Shostakovich were officially denounced for adopting an aesthetic deemed too “modern.” To protect the safety of both himself and his wife, Prokofiev wrote to the General Assembly of Soviet Composers, admitting to “formalism” and spoke firmly in support of “a return to memorable melodies—turning away from atonality toward a simple harmonic language—and reinstatement of polyphony capable of incorporating Russian folk melodies.” Essentially, the regime mandated that art must be created in a style that praised Stalin and the so-called “oasis” he had created. Prokofiev knew that in order to spare him and his family from any retaliation for failure to comply, he had to bend—publicly, at least—to the will of the government.

### A COMMISSION FROM THE REGIME

*Winter Bonfire* was written in strict adherence to this style, known as socialist realism, on a commission from the All-Union Radio, which was the official radio broadcasting organization of the USSR. It is a symphonic suite for children that tells the story of a group of Young Pioneers (a Soviet youth program) enjoying an exciting winter's outing in the Russian countryside just outside Moscow. Like his famous *Peter and the Wolf*, *Winter Bonfire* features text narration and depicts colorful scenarios meant to delight young listeners. The well-known Soviet children's writer Samuil Marshak wrote the narration for *Winter Bonfire* (which is not heard on today's program).

Despite its dubious origins, *Winter Bonfire* demonstrates Prokofiev's unique skill of writing memorably melodic children's music that has a way of entertaining listeners of every age and follows firmly in the legacy of *Peter and the Wolf*. The suite is cast in eight movements, with a youth

## ONE-MINUTE NOTES

### Prokofiev: *Winter Bonfire*

Sergei Prokofiev's *Winter Bonfire* is a charming symphonic suite for children in the vein of the composer's famous *Peter and the Wolf*. It depicts vivid scenarios such as a train ride, falling snow, skating and the bonfire promised in the title, with a youth choir joining the fifth of eight movements.

### Rachmaninoff: Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

A twisting melody by Niccolò Paganini is the basis for Sergei Rachmaninoff's ingenious set of 24 variations for piano and orchestra. The famous 18th variation turns Paganini's theme upside down, transforming it into a gorgeous, moonlit lovesong.

### Tchaikovsky: Selections from *Nutcracker*

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's holiday classic *Nutcracker*, rich with colorful scoring and famous melodies, is condensed into a collection of nine movements selected by Thomas Søndergård. Among them are some of the ballet's signature moments, including *Waltz of the Flowers* and *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*.

choir used only in the fifth. Following is a brief description of the eight movements.

**DEPARTURE.** Unison horns open this movement with a declarative six-bar theme that sets us on our snowy musical journey. We hear the train tracks through repeated figures in the strings while winds and brass trade melodic material back and forth, loosely based on the opening theme. Fast, scalar passages in the strings provide some contrast in the middle, never losing sight of the movement’s driving energy.

**SNOW OUTSIDE THE WINDOW.** A graceful and homely melody is first presented by the oboe and supported by sustained notes in the strings. Prokofiev paints a sonic landscape of sparkly, snowy vistas through notable use of the strings and percussion throughout.

**WALTZ ON THE ICE.** A playful waltz features primary melodic material in the strings. The reprise of the theme after a slightly mysterious middle section is colored with low brass accompaniment.

**THE BONFIRE.** Trembling, shimmering strings provide the backdrop for this movement, capturing the beauty of a winter sunset and the flames of the bonfire. Horns open with a melody that invokes the grandeur of the vista, eventually joined by various woodwinds and the strings.

**CHORUS OF THE PIONEERS.** The fifth movement is the only one in the suite to use the choir, which sings two brief episodes; the orchestra then closes the movement.

Several versions of the choral text exist in Russian and English; the English version sung at these concerts follows.

Now the towering flames delight us  
While the freezing earth grows warm,  
And the country folks invite us  
Proudly to inspect their farm.

Gather wood from more than one tree,  
Throw on twigs and pile them high,  
While the folks from town and country  
Sit together warm and dry.

Bright and high the sparks are springing,  
Fast the hours speed along,  
Merrily we keep on singing  
And the bonfire leaps with song.  
Merrily we keep on singing  
And the bonfire leaps with song.

Now the towering flames delight us  
While the freezing earth grows warm,  
And the country folks invite us  
Proudly to inspect their farm.

We have hours and hours before us,  
So before the morning light,  
Let us sing a rousing chorus

Ringingly gaily through the night.  
Let us sing a rousing chorus  
Ringingly gaily through the night.

**WINTER EVENING.** A graceful, dreamlike song is passed between the violins and many solo woodwind instruments.

**MARCH.** A cheerful march prominently features the snare drum and trumpet, accompanied by playful figures in the strings and woodwinds.

**THE RETURN.** The adventure has ended, as the train music from the opening movement returns to guide listeners back home.

**Instrumentation:** children’s chorus with orchestra comprising 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), oboe, 2 clarinets, bassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, xylophone, glockenspiel, harp, piano, celesta and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY MICHAEL DIVINO.



**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

**B:** April 1, 1873  
Oneg, Novgorod, Russia  
**D:** March 28, 1943,  
Beverly Hills, California

**Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43**

**PREMIERED:** November 7, 1934

In the spring of 1934, Sergei Rachmaninoff, then 61, and his wife Natalia 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, suspended cymbal, triangle, glockenspiel, harp and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY ERIC BROMBERGER.



### PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

**B:** May 7, 1840  
Votkinsk, Russia

**D:** November 6, 1893  
St. Petersburg, Russia

### Selections from *Nutcracker*, Opus 71

**ORIGINAL BALLET PREMIERED:**  
December 18, 1892

Early in 1891, the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg approached Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky with a commission for a new ballet. They caught him at a bad moment. At age 50, Tchaikovsky was assailed by worries that he had written himself out as a composer. To make matters worse, the Theatre proposed a story line the composer found unappealing: they wanted to create a ballet on the old E.T.A. Hoffmann tale *Nussknacker und Mausekönig* (known in English as *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*), but in a version that had been retold by Alexandre Dumas as *Histoire d'un casse-noisette* and then further modified by the choreographer Marius Petipa. This sort of fairy tale full of imaginary creatures set in a confectionary dreamworld of childhood fantasies left Tchaikovsky cold, but he accepted the commission and grudgingly began work.

### AN UNEXPECTED SUCCESS

Things got still worse. Tchaikovsky had to interrupt work on the score to go on tour in America, where he was to conduct at the festivities marking the opening of Carnegie Hall in May 1891; just as he was leaving, his sister Alexandra died. The agonized composer considered abandoning the tour but went ahead (it was a huge success), and then returned to Russia in May to resume work on the ballet. He hated it and, probably more to the point, he hated the feeling that he had written himself out. To his brother, he wrote grimly: "This ballet is infinitely worse than *The Sleeping Beauty*—so much is certain."

The score was complete in the spring of 1892, and *Nutcracker* was produced at the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg that December, only 11 months before the composer's death at 53. At first, it had only a modest success, but then a strange thing happened. That success grew so steadily that Tchaikovsky had to reassess what he had created: "It is curious that all the time I was writing the ballet I thought it was rather poor, and then when I began my opera [*Iolanthe*] I would really do my best. But now it seems to me that the ballet is good, and the opera is mediocre."

Tchaikovsky’s premonition was quite correct: hardly anyone is interested in *Iolanthe* today, but the score for *Nutcracker* contains some of the best-loved classical orchestral music ever written. Why? What is the secret of this music’s perennial appeal—and how could the composer initially have so misjudged one of his creations?

To begin to answer these questions, we need to remember that Tchaikovsky was essentially a dramatic composer, and however much he may have claimed to dislike this tale—of magic mice, a nutcracker that turns into a prince, and vistas made up of jam and candy—he could still respond to the situations and actions of the ballet. Further, Tchaikovsky had a real melodic gift: he could create attractive and instantly recognizable tunes for characters or scenes. One need only think of how familiar the *Waltz of the Flowers* or *Trépak* have become—and they were famous long before Walt Disney’s 1940 animated film *Fantasia* cemented them into the public consciousness. Finally, Tchaikovsky had become by this point in his career a superb craftsman with the orchestra, and he uses his resources with great skill.

## A MAGICAL LANDSCAPE

*Nutcracker* is in two acts, and today’s performance features three movements from the first act and six from the second, presented in the order they are heard in the ballet.

Act I introduces members of the Stahlbaum (in some productions, Silberhaus) family, particularly the young Clara and her godfather, Herr Drosselmeyer, who produces the wooden nutcracker in the shape of a soldier. At midnight, Clara comes down to look at the Christmas tree and encounters a band of mice. Helped by the Nutcracker, who is transformed into a prince, she drives off the mice and goes on a sleigh-ride with the Prince to the land of the Sugar Plum Fairy. In today’s performance, we hear three selections from the first act—the *Miniature Overture* that opens the ballet, the *March* (also known as *March of the Toy Soldiers*) and the *Waltz of the Snowflakes* that draws the act to a close.

Act II takes place in the Land of Sweets. The opening scenes show us this magical landscape and Clara’s wonder, and in this concert we hear the music that introduces this wondrous land. The prince recounts Clara’s heroism and the battle with the mice, and in the couple’s honor, the Sugar Plum Fairy offers a series of dances—which include some of the most famous classical orchestral music ever written, although some selections have been criticized as reducing diverse traditions to clichés and reinforcing cultural biases, while many stagings of the ballet historically have perpetuated racism through choices in casting, costuming and makeup elements. Some of the dances are associated with specific beverages and nationalities; today we hear

one of those dances, the *Dance of the Reed-Flutes (Mirlitons)*, which is enlivened by the bright sound of three flutes.

The justly famous *Waltz of the Flowers* is next in today’s performance, followed by the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*, which deserves special note for its innovative instrumentation. In Paris while on his way to America, Tchaikovsky heard the recently invented celesta and fell in love with its delicate ringing sound. He had one shipped to St. Petersburg and was desperate that he be the first to use it, warning his publishers that “no one there must know about it. I am afraid that Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov might hear of it and use it before I do. I expect it will make a tremendous impression.” And it *does* make that “tremendous impression” in the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*. The *Nutcracker* ballet—and today’s condensed version of it—then concludes with a *Coda* and *Final Waltz* and *Apotheosis*, as all in the Land of the Sweets pay homage to Clara, who has rescued their prince.

**Instrumentation:** children’s chorus with orchestra comprising 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, castanet, nipple gong, ratchet, tambourine, triangle, glockenspiel, 2 harps, celesta and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY ERIC BROMBERGER.