

# MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

Thomas Søndergård, conductor  
Kirill Gerstein, piano

Thursday, May 2, 2024, 11AM  
Friday, May 3, 2024, 8PM

Orchestra Hall

<b>Qigang Chen</b>	<i>The Five Elements</i> Water Wood Fire Earth Metal	CA. 10'
<b>Sergei Rachmaninoff</b>	Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 1 Vivace Andante Allegro vivace <i>Kirill Gerstein, piano</i>	CA. 26'
	<b>I N T E R M I S S I O N</b>	CA. 20'
<b>Richard Strauss</b>	<i>Also sprach Zarathustra</i> , Opus 30	CA. 32'

## PRE-CONCERT

Concert Preview with Phillip Gainsley

Thursday, May 2, 10:15am, Auditorium | Friday, May 3, 7:15pm, N. Bud Grossman Mezzanine

## THANK YOU

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

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of **YourClassical Minnesota Public Radio**, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.



**THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD,**  
CONDUCTOR

Profile appears on page 8.



**KIRILL GERSTEIN,**  
PIANO

Kirill Gerstein's playing is distinguished by a ferocious technique and discernment, matched with an energetic, imaginative musical presence. His solo and concerto engagements take him from Europe to the U.S., East Asia and Australia. In the current season, he is a Spotlight Artist with the London Symphony, performing in London and on tour. Elsewhere he returns to orchestras such as the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Boston Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic, among many others. He also appears in recital with violinist Christian Tetzlaff, performing a Thomas Adès suite written for them. In recent seasons he has premiered concertos by Adès and Thomas Larcher, and his 2020 recording of Adès' concerto with the Boston Symphony was nominated for three Grammy Awards. His newest recording will pair music by Debussy with that of Armenian priest, musicologist and composer Komitas. In 2023 he released a Rachmaninoff album in honor of the composer's 150th birthday. An avid educator, he is professor of piano at Berlin's Hanns Eisler Hochschule and serves on the faculty of Kronberg Academy. In 2021 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Manhattan School of Music. Born in Russia, he is now an American citizen based in Germany. More: [enticottmusicmanagement.com](http://enticottmusicmanagement.com), [imgartists.com](http://imgartists.com), [kirillgerstein.com](http://kirillgerstein.com).

## ONE-MINUTE NOTES

### Chen: *The Five Elements*

In depicting water, wood, fire, earth and metal, Qigang Chen's *The Five Elements* explores this core quintet of elements and their relationship to one another through a series of short tone poems, ranging from tranquil water to the strength of metal.

### Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 1

This youthful, exuberant work is filled with heroic gestures and solo virtuosity. An expressive opening gives way to a nocturnal slow movement, which leads to a wild, capricious *Allegro vivace*.

### Strauss: *Also sprach Zarathustra*

Throughout this mighty tone poem, the striving theme of humans—presented first by low woodwinds—opposes that of nature, heard in the trumpets' rising three-note figure that famously heralds the dawn of time in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. We hear eight stages of human development, climaxing in an exuberant waltz, before a mysterious fade into silence.

**QIGANG CHEN**

**B:** August 8, 1951  
Shanghai, China

***The Five Elements***

**PREMIERED:** May 21, 1999

— What are the forces that make up nature, the tools that make life possible and the elements that comprise the universe at the chemical level? Science, religion and art offer various lenses with which to view these fundamental questions, from the periodic table to films such as *The Fifth Element*—and a late 20th-century entry in this list is contemporary Chinese-French composer Qigang Chen’s orchestral work *The Five Elements*. Composed in 1998 and 1999, this 10-minute composition illustrates what ancient Chinese philosophers recognized as our world’s building blocks: water, wood, fire, earth and metal.

Appropriately broken into five brief movements, *The Five Elements* was chosen as one of five finalists out of over 1,000 entrants for the 2001 Masterprize Award administered by several organizations, including the BBC. It was commissioned by a different European broadcasting service—Radio France—and received its premiere on May 21, 1999, by the Orchestre National de France under the direction of Didier Benetti.

**WORDS FROM THE COMPOSER**

Chen has provided the following comments on his piece:

“The ‘Five Elements’ describes a system of thought originating in ancient Chinese Daoist philosophy. These elements represent five basic stages along the Yin-Yang developmental process: water, fire, metal, wood and earth. Ancient Chinese philosophers used this concept to explain the form of everything on earth and the mutually interdependent relationship between all objects and beings. This way of seeing the world emphasized unity and described the changeable quality of matter as well as the transformations it could undergo. This is China’s oldest theoretical system.

“In this work, I wanted not only to express the individual character of each element, but also the logical series of transformations that connects them. I sought to use music to explore the interdependent evolution that connects human beings to the physical world. These two domains at times seem completely separate, while at other times they seem to complement one another. Finally, they coalesce into

a unified vision of the world, boundless and encompassing both domains of existence.

“I also decided to express my personal view of the relationship between these elements, to propose a musical interpretation of what I consider each element’s symbolic meaning, and thus to suggest an ordering of the five elements based on their successive generation. I decided on the order of water, wood, fire, earth and, finally, metal. For me, water is the strongest element, but it is also characterized by tranquility. Wood is the richest element, and the most varied. Fire represents life and warmth, but it is not aggressive. Earth is the basic substance, a starting point, a generative principle. Metal refers to strength and light.”

**FROM BEIJING TO PARIS**

Chen’s early life was shaped by major political forces in his native China, as his early studies in music were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. For three years he underwent “ideological re-education” in a locked-up barracks. In spite of these restrictions, he found a path to an international career when, after studying composition at the Beijing Central Conservatory, he won a national competition and was allowed special dispensation to travel abroad for graduate studies. In 1984 he moved to France, where he studied with the renowned composer Olivier Messiaen for five years. In 1992 he attained French citizenship.

Chen has kept up ties with his native country through the use of traditional Chinese musical elements in his compositions and through initiatives such as working as music director of the 2008 Olympic Games’ Opening Ceremony in Beijing, which was seen by an estimated two billion viewers around the world. In 2015 he established a composition workshop for young musicians at Gonggen College in China. His other major projects include music for the ballet *Raise the Red Lantern*, which was toured internationally by the National Ballet of China, and a 2016 album of his music recorded by the Taiwan Symphony. Forthcoming projects including a double concerto for violin and cello set for premiere in 2025. After hearing *The Five Elements* today, Minnesota audiences can hope that the wait is not long for more from Chen’s musical voice.

**Instrumentation:** 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (1 doubling E-flat clarinet and 1 doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, bamboo chimes, metal chimes, suspended cymbal, log drum, tamtam, temple blocks, triangle, tubular bells, wood blocks, xylophone, marimba, vibraphone, glockenspiel, harp, piano (doubling celesta) and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY CARL SCHROEDER.



## SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

**B:** April 1, 1873  
Semyonovo, district of  
Starorussky, Russia

**D:** March 28, 1943  
Beverly Hills, California

### Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 1

**PREMIERED:** 1891 (original  
version); 1917 (revised version)

Sergei Rachmaninoff was an 18-year-old student of piano and composition when he completed the first version of this concerto in 1891. But in 1917 he reworked it, tightening the design, making the textures more transparent and the piano writing less cumbersome. Thus, in spite of the “Opus 1” designation, this is not an apprentice work. In its final form, though it uses material invented by a prodigiously gifted teenager, it is a composition by a man of 44, a musician of fully achieved maturity.

Rachmaninoff’s first important teacher was Nikolai Sergeyeovich Zverev, who ran a sort of pianists’ hothouse in his Moscow apartment. Rachmaninoff stretched his horizons by taking some lessons with his cousin Alexander Siloti; as he became increasingly interested in writing music, he studied composition at the Moscow Conservatory. The completion of the Piano Concerto No. 1 and the tone poem *Prince Rostislav*, also in 1891, made it clear that the young man had a future as a composer.

Rachmaninoff wrote prolifically during the next few years, completing, among many other works, the Symphony No. 1. The brutal reception accorded that work in 1897, when it was horrendously conducted by Alexander Glazunov at its premiere, threatened to silence Rachmaninoff for good, but after a long course of psychotherapy and hypnosis with a wonderfully empathetic physician, the composer could once again face the sight of blank manuscript paper.

### A FAREWELL TO RUSSIA

By 1917, when he wrote the version of the Concerto No. 1 we hear today, Rachmaninoff had composed another symphony, two concertos, major choral works and a treasury of piano pieces and songs. He had made a reputation as one of the great pianists of the day and was regarded as a conductor of great importance. The revision of the Concerto No. 1 was the last compositional task Rachmaninoff undertook before leaving Russia in the aftermath of the Revolution.

He went to the United States, lived in Switzerland for a time, then returned to America. He composed less, and, except for the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, with less immediate success—although his later works, notably the Symphony No. 3 and the Symphonic Dances, have come to be highly regarded. To support his family, he became a pianist nearly full-time, but except for occasional performances of his own works he gave up conducting, even though he had been offered permanent posts with the Boston and Cincinnati symphonies soon after his arrival here.

Rachmaninoff appeared as soloist with the Minnesota Orchestra, then known as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, seven times between 1920 and 1942. In December 1938 he took center stage in his First Piano Concerto under the direction of Dimitri Mitropoulos.

### THE MOST EXCITING OPENING OF ALL

Rachmaninoff certainly knew how to find arresting beginnings for his works for piano and orchestra: the solemn series of sonorous piano chords that lead to the entry of the orchestra in the Second Concerto; in the Third, a haunting chant, presented with utter simplicity; the firestorm orchestral crescendo in No. 4; the diabolic spring-loaded mechanism that sets the Paganini Rhapsody in motion.

**VIVACE.** The Concerto No. 1 has the most exciting opening of all, a stern fanfare for the brass introducing the soloist in a cascade of double octaves, crashing chords and tumbling arpeggios. If we want to look for models, we could say that here is the opening of Schumann’s Piano Concerto, and Grieg’s, but raised to the nth power in exuberant post-Lisztian virtuosity and flamboyance. The tempo slows to *moderato*, and the violins introduce an intense melody instantly recognizable as Rachmaninoff and soon taken up by the piano. A second theme is more capricious. The brass fanfare returns near the end of the movement to announce a grand cadenza.

**ANDANTE.** The second movement is a lovely nocturne, almost startlingly brief, and beautifully scored both for the piano and the orchestra. Like the first movement, the finale is based on two contrasting themes. The big departure here is a sweetly melancholic episode in the middle of the movement, set apart from its surroundings not only in mood but harmonically.

**ALLEGRO VIVACE.** In the finales of his Second and Third piano concertos, Rachmaninoff creates an exciting climax by bringing back the lyric second theme in a huge apotheosis. That was his original plan in this concerto, too, but in the leaner 1917 revision he resists the temptation to repeat himself; instead, the pianist seizes the reins and leads the music to a barn-burner of a conclusion.

**Instrumentation:** solo piano with orchestra comprising 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, cymbals, triangle and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY THE LATE MICHAEL STEINBERG; USED WITH PERMISSION.



## RICHARD STRAUSS

**B:** June 11, 1864  
Munich, Germany  
**D:** September 8, 1949  
Garmisch, Germany

*Also sprach Zarathustra*,  
Opus 30

**PREMIERED:** November 27, 1896

— “Abstruse” used to be the favorite adjective of critics trying to characterize *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Then, in 1968, Stanley Kubrick co-opted its opening to serve as part of the brilliantly chosen sonic landscape in his *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and ever since, *Zarathustra* has been a big box-office piece in the symphonic repertoire. I imagine the surprise of the people who first encountered the piece in that movie, bought a recording, and discovered that it went on for another half hour after the magnificent sunrise that had sent them to the record store in the first place. I imagine too, that seeing the name of Friedrich Nietzsche must have caused some rolling of eyes.

Like many Strauss tone poems, *Also sprach Zarathustra* sprang from a literary source. In 1896, when Strauss introduced his *Zarathustra* to the world, Nietzsche’s book *Also sprach Zarathustra* was hardly more than ten years old. Strauss had at first been overwhelmed by Nietzsche’s book: it was full of new ideas and even new words, and Strauss let it sink in slowly. In a long prose poem, Nietzsche uses the figure of the ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster to speak for him on an immense range of subjects. The book consists of 82 short sections with such titles as “On the Pale Criminal,” “On the Flies of the Market Place,” “On Chastity” and “At Noon,” and each section ends with the phrase “Also sprach Zarathustra” (Thus Spake Zarathustra).

### A FAMOUS BEGINNING

Strauss had an extraordinary knack when it came to figuring out how to begin pieces. Here he begins with the famous sunrise. In Nietzsche, Zarathustra, who has dwelled on a mountaintop for ten years, watches a new day begin. Strauss first gives us a long suspended moment of indeterminate rumble on C, but so low that we hardly register a specific pitch. From this emerges the simplest three-note trumpet call. Immediately this gives way to

muttering low strings. These are the *Hinterweltler*—the After-Worldly or Backworldsmen—humankind in its most undeveloped stage, which to Nietzsche is exemplified by those whose goal is the afterlife rather than a richly fulfilled here and now.

When the music gets faster, we are in a section Strauss heads *On the Great Longing*—longing, that is to rise beyond the limitations of the *Hinterweltler*. “Inquiring” arpeggios in the key of B minor combine with the rising three-note motif in C that the trumpets played at the opening. This combination brings about the juxtaposition—and sometimes collision—of the two keys.

A great sweeping glissando for both harps propels the music into *On Joys and Passions*, a conflict between sensual and spiritual elements. A darker variant of this music is marked *Funeral Song*. The music then slows to a halt and fades to the edge of inaudibility. Cellos and basses proffer a strangely groping theme, encompassing all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. This is *On Science*. Nietzsche’s word is *Wissenschaft*, which carries broad meanings of learning, scholarship, erudition and knowledge. Strauss does the most “wissenschaftlich” possible thing: he writes a fugue. It is one of my favorite pages in all of Strauss—mysterious, visionary, dissonant in rhythm as well as in harmony. Again the music comes to a halt, and some hesitantly exploring sounds leads to an energetic, thrusting passage, *The Convalescent*. *Zarathustra* has a kind of breakdown.

### SONGS AND A MAGICAL CLOSE

Next, Strauss evokes Nietzsche’s *Dance Song*, a kind of rivalry of life and wisdom, which Strauss expresses as a waltz. The solo violin is prominent here. It is well known that Strauss loved sopranos, but sometimes he appeared to love concertmasters almost as much. In Nietzsche’s “Other Dance Song,” which Strauss titles *Sleepwalker’s Song*, a bell tolls 12 times, with a line of the poem “O Mensch, gib Acht” (Oh Man, Take Heed) inserted after each peal.

In the course of its 12 strokes, Strauss’ bell describes a long decrescendo from *fff* to *ppp*. Everything seems settled in C major, but then the violins, backed by horns and harp, with infinite gentleness begin the coda—in B major. The two tonalities rock back and forth.

The last word is uttered by the cellos and basses with their pizzicato C-natural. It is one of the most magical closes ever devised by Richard Strauss, that master of great endings.

**Instrumentation:** piccolo, 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tubular bells, glockenspiel, 2 harps, organ and strings

EXCERPTED FROM A PROGRAM NOTE BY THE LATE MICHAEL STEINBERG; USED WITH PERMISSION.