

**Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff & Rimsky-Korsakov**

**Friday, June 14 – 7:30 pm**

**Saturday, June 15 – 8 pm**

**Alexander Prior**, conductor

**Sara Davis Buechner**, piano

Afterthoughts, Friday post-performance, Main Lobby with Alexander Prior & Sara Davis Buechner

Symphony Prelude, Saturday 7 pm, Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with D.T. Baker

**TCHAIKOVSKY**

***Swan Lake, Op.20***: excerpts

(29')\*

Introduction

Act I, No. 1 Scène

Act I, No. 4 Pas-de-trois

Act I, No. 5 Pas de deux Finale

Act II, No. 10 Scène

Act II, No. 13, Part 4 (Dance of the Little Swans)

Act II, No. 13, Part 7

Act III, No. 19, Part 3

Act IV – Entr'acte

Act II, No. 28 Scène

Act IV, No. 29 Finale

**RACHMANINOFF**

***Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43***

(22')\*

**INTERMISSION** (20 minutes)

**RIMSKY-KORSAKOV**

***Scheherazade, Op.35***

(45')\*

The Sea and Sinbad's Ship (Largo e maestoso)

The Kalendar Prince (Lento)

The Young Prince and the Young Princess (Andantino quasi allegretto)

Festival at Baghdad – The Sea (Allegro molto)

program subject to change

\*indicates approximate performance duration

***Swan Lake, Op.20***: excerpts

**Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky**

(b. Kamsko-Votinsk, 1840 / d. St. Petersburg, 1893)

Ballet first performed: March 4, 1877 in Moscow

The ESO last played selections from *Swan Lake* in March 2003

Of Tchaikovsky's three ballets (the others being *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*), *Swan Lake* was the first, and written by a composer somewhat reluctant to take on such a score. But he needed the money, and was eager to try his hand at a form which, for the most part, had music composed by ballet staff more to suit the needs of the choreography than for any true artistic value. Based on a tale of German/ Scandinavian origins, its story fits in well with the Romantic age – a man's quest for an unattainable love. The four-act ballet was tepidly received, to be kind, with Tchaikovsky's score singled out as being "too symphonic," and even "too Wagnerian." But the choreography, story, and the dancing itself were also not considered successful either.

Yet *Swan Lake* has gone on to become one of the most popular ballets ever written. Subsequent productions saw revisions and improvements regularly added. Still, it took decades for the ballet to take hold – it was not performed in the United States, for example, until 1911, and many hands had their way with nearly every aspect of the work – including Tchaikovsky's music – during that time. Tonight, we will hear several key excerpts from the entire work – not the suite culled from the score, but a sequence Mr. Prior has chosen for tonight's concert. Chronologically, the excerpts will proceed in the order in which they would have been heard in the production, but will not encapsulate the entire story which, in a nutshell, is as follows:

Princess Odette has been turned into a swan by the evil magician Rothbart. She and her companions are able to resume their human form for a few hours at midnight, and during one of these intervals, Prince Siegfried sees her and they fall in love. They pledge their love, but Rothbart determines to thwart their plans. At a ball at which Siegfried is to announce his betrothed, Rothbart appears with Odile, his daughter, who he disguises to appear to be Odette. Siegfried pledges his love to her, then discovers the deception. He returns to the lake to beg Odette's forgiveness for promising himself to another. She forgives him, but dies of heartache in his arms. The water rises and engulfs the lovers.

***Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43***

**Sergei Rachmaninoff**

(b. Oneg, Novgorod, 1873 / d. Beverly Hills, 1943)

First performed: November 7, 1934 in Baltimore

Last ESO performance of the complete rhapsody: March 2014

Sergei Rachmaninoff and Nicolò Paganini (1782-1840) had only one thing in common: both were outstanding virtuosos on their chosen instruments. While the Italian violinist was a consummate showman, deliberately dazzling his audiences with flash and fire to match his musical skills, the taciturn Russian was as insecure as he was talented.

Following the indifferent reception accorded his *Fourth Piano Concerto*, Rachmaninoff quite deliberately decided his next work for piano and orchestra would be populist. For inspiration, he turned to an excerpt from a piece by his virtuosic predecessor Paganini – an excerpt, moreover, that has served as an inspiration to many other composers, from Brahms to Lutoslawski.

Rachmaninoff took the final caprice from Paganini's Op.1 set of *24 Caprices* and, after having orchestral violins present the theme, fashioned a mesmerizing set of 24 variations to it, in one of his most lavishly orchestrated works. The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, written in 1934, did exactly what Rachmaninoff hoped – it won great acclaim, and became a mainstay of his performing career from then on. The variations vary widely from each other, and yet another famous melody works its way in to the score as well – the imposing *Dies irae* from the medieval Mass for the Dead. The most famous of the variations is the 18th. Rachmaninoff was always one capable of a heart-melting romantic theme, and the 18th variation is exactly that; it is often presented all on its own. Knowing full well its commercial appeal, Rachmaninoff once said, with wry humour, "I wrote that one for my publisher."

### ***Scheherazade, Op.35***

**Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov**

(b. Tikhvin, Novgorod, 1844 / d. St. Petersburg, 1908)

First performed: November 3, 1888 in St. Petersburg

Last ESO performance: January 2017

Based on the *Thousand and One Nights*, Rimsky-Korsakov's sweeping four-movement suite was one of many Russian works inspired by the exotic East. The composer himself vacillated as to whether or not he wished for specific stories to be suggested by the music; at one point, he considered publishing the four movements simply as Prelude, Ballade, Adagio, and Finale. In the end, he decided on more colourful descriptors, but more as suggestion than story-telling.

Two recurring themes are central to the work. The strong opening chords form the basis of the theme of the stern and draconian Sultan, who condemns each of his wives to death following their wedding night. The second theme, an extended and beautiful solo for violin (Robert Uchida) accompanied by harp (Nora Bumanis) is that of Scheherazade herself – the latest wife of the Sultan, who would have surely have shared her predecessors' fate, had she not staved off her execution night after night by spinning wonderful tales for her husband. After a thousand and one nights of stories, the Sultan was so in love with Scheherazade, he abandoned his deadly practice.

The first movement begins with the two thematic ideas stated above, then transitions into its tale, titled “The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship.” The voyage undertaken is sweeping and not without drama, with grand climaxes evoking waves and strong winds – but all built around a relatively simple melodic idea that takes flight from Scheherazade’s theme. The second movement brings us the Kalendar Prince, who disguises himself as a beggar in order to seek knowledge. An oboe takes the lead in introducing the Kalendar theme, which is presented in a number of orchestral guises and moods. A dark, central section illustrates a threatening episode, but following this brief tempest, we are swept along once again on the Prince’s journey for enlightenment.

The third movement, “The Young Prince and the Young Princess,” is a lush, romantic idyll. Their theme is a languorous unison melody in the strings, answered by undulating woodwinds. A central section brings back the Scheherazade theme for solo violin. The finale is an exciting whirlwind of events, and an orchestral tour de force that begins with the strongly stated Sultan theme, answered by Scheherazade’s theme, this time in double stops. Next comes a glittering and vibrant festival in Baghdad, which transitions to one of the most powerfully depicted storms at sea ever given to an orchestra. Finally, Scheherazade is given the final say, with the violin reaching its topmost register and most delicate pianissimo, disappearing on a whisper.

Program notes © 2019 by D.T. Baker