

Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich

Friday, November 1 – 7:30 pm

Saturday, November 2 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Boris Giltburg, piano

Afterthoughts, Friday post performance in the Main Lobby with Alexander Prior & Boris Giltburg

Sunday Prelude, 1:15 pm Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with Alexander Prior & D.T. Baker

MAZZOLI

River Rouge Transfiguration

(10')*

RACHMANINOFF

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op.40 (1941 version)

(27')*

Allegro vivace

Largo

Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 11 in G minor, Op.103 "The Year 1905"

(66')*

The Palace Square (Adagio)

The Ninth of January (Allegro)

In Memoriam (Adagio)

The Tocsin (Allegro non troppo)

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

River Rouge Transfiguration

Missy Mazzoli

(b. Lansdale, Pennsylvania, 1980)

First performed: May 31, 2013 by the Detroit Symphony

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

program note by the composer:

"...all around me and above me as far as the sky, the heavy, composite, muffled roar of torrents of machines, hard wheels obstinately turning, grinding, groaning, always on the point of breaking down but never breaking down."

— Louis-Ferdinand Céline, from *Journey to the End of the Night*

I first fell in love with Detroit while on tour with my band, Victoire, in 2010. When I returned home to New York I dove into early Detroit techno from the late eighties, Céline's novel *Journey to the End of the Night*, and early 20th century photographs by Charles Sheeler, who documented Detroit's River Rouge Plant in 1927 through a beautiful, angular photo series. In my research I was struck by how often the landscape of Detroit inspired a kind of religious awe, with writers from every decade of the last century comparing the city's factories to cathedrals and altars, and *Vanity Fair* even dubbing Detroit "America's Mecca" in 1928. In Mark Binelli's recent book *Detroit City Is the Place to Be*, he even describes a particular Sheeler photograph, *Criss-Crossed Conveyors*, as evoking "neither grit nor noise but instead an almost tabernacular grace. The smokestacks in the background look like the pipes of a massive church organ, the titular conveyor belts forming the shape of what is unmistakably a giant cross." This image, of the River Rouge Plant as a massive pipe organ, was the initial inspiration for *River Rouge Transfiguration*. This is music about the transformation of grit and noise (here represented by the percussion, piano, harp and pizzicato strings) into something massive, resonant and unexpected. The "grit" is again and again folded into string and brass chorales that collide with each other, collapse, and rise over and over again.

River Rouge Transfiguration was commissioned by the Detroit Symphony in honor of Elaine Lebenbom. Thank you to the Detroit Symphony, Leonard Slatkin, Erik Ronmark, Rebecca Zook, Farnoosh Fathi, Katy Tucker, and Mark Binelli.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor, Op.40 (1941 version)

Sergei Rachmaninoff

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

First version premiered: March 18, 1927 in Philadelphia

Second version published in 1928

Third version premiered: October 12, 1941 in Philadelphia

Last ESO performance: March 2002

It's a tempting over-simplification to chart Sergei Rachmaninoff's composing career through his works for piano and orchestra. The *First Concerto*, written in the flush of youthful abandon, was poorly received, resulting in a long downward spiral of depression and writer's block. His *Second Concerto* was a triumphant return to public acceptance, and his *Third* was a daunting, virtuosic showpiece. His *Fourth*

was the closest he likely got to writing a “modern” concerto, and it had a troubled performance history, and is much less performed than either his *Second* or *Third*. His final work, the *Paganini Rhapsody*, was written with a deliberate intent of writing a popular crowd-pleaser – and it has been so since its debut.

Listening now, it’s hard to hear why the *Fourth Piano Concerto* is regarded as in any way troublesome. This is Rachmaninoff, after all, and his pianistic skill and ear for melody is still very much in evidence in this concerto. Nevertheless, the (at best) tepid reviews of the original version of the concerto led him to withdraw the work until he could revise it – which was not for over a decade. Despite what many regarded as improvements to the work, the concerto has still not established itself alongside the *Second*, *Third*, and *Paganini Rhapsody*.

The concerto retains Rachmaninoff’s unfailing flair for romantic exploration; yet here, it is in the service of music which is decidedly more austere and less heart-tuggingly emotional. A brief orchestral introduction brings the piano in, presenting the main theme straightforwardly, until a series of ruminative passages in both orchestra and piano lead to the more rhapsodic second theme. The Development whips both of them up to a grandly-stated climax – one that seems to rise with unexpected emotional intensity, ebbing away as the piano leads us into the *Largo* second movement.

This is a fragrant and haunting movement, more chromatic and impressionist than might have been expected from Rachmaninoff, with a central section troubled and forceful, returning to the moody and mysterious texture of the beginning, and proceeding without a pause into the finale, an *Allegro vivace* which begins with an orchestral snap to attention, ushering a dexterous and decorative dash on the piano. This movement does not quite have the same combination of a dancing main subject with a lushly romantic secondary one that the two previous concertos’ finales do – there are more melodic ideas here, snippets which rise and fall, varying the mood of this searching finale - and there are touches here that certainly reveal that Rachmaninoff was aware of the more definitively modern music being written at the time.

Symphony No. 11 in G minor, Op.103 “The Year 1905”

Dmitri Shostakovich

(b. St. Petersburg, 1906 / d. Moscow, 1975)

First performed: October 30, 1957 in Leningrad

Last ESO performance: February 1992

The effort made by many to turn biography into hagiography when it comes to Dmitri Shostakovich has served mainly to muddy the waters of actual events. On the surface, his *Eleventh Symphony*, begun in 1955 – the 50th anniversary of an abortive early attempt at overthrowing the Tsarist regime by the common people – was inspired by those events. In the wake of the Bolshevik overthrow a dozen years later and the subsequent creation of the U.S.S.R., a work dedicated to the sacrifice made by others before seemed both honorable and politically astute on the part of Shostakovich.

"I love this period in the history of our Motherland, which found clear expression in workers' revolutionary songs," Shostakovich stated publicly as he worked on the symphony. Stalin was dead by this time, and the cataclysmic crackdown on artistic freedom of the previous decade was easing. Nevertheless, it was never a bad idea to write a work which so clearly adhered to Soviet principles.

And yet, those who see in many of Shostakovich's pieces covert protests against that very political climate hear in this symphony something more. In 1956, Soviet tanks ploughed through the streets of Budapest, crushing an uprising that had been started by students, but which had become a popular revolt against the Soviet-controlled puppet regime then in power. Similarities between the Hungarian uprising and that of the Russian peasants in 1905 were unmistakable, and Shostakovich was certainly not unmindful that paying homage to one people's revolt was paying homage to the other.

But both the general public and the government were ecstatic in their reception of Shostakovich's symphony, unveiled later than hoped for, due in part to both the composer's own struggles with the work, and the fact that he was sidetracked with work on the *Second Piano Concerto*. It is a very accessible work, in spite of its vast canvas, and while Shostakovich alludes to several revolutionary songs of the early 20th century, direct quotations of them are rare.

The first movement is subtitled "The Palace Square," and depicts the Russian people: cold, hungry, impoverished, near the end of hope. The first theme, stated in an atmosphere of unease, becomes an *idée fixe* (a motif with an extra-musical association, which recurs throughout the work, each time a reminder of that association). A harp tolls time, a distant trumpet call (Hope?) is heard, flutes intone a reference to the worker's song "Listen." The central melody is repeated, and leads to another revolutionary song, "The Convict." As the movement closes, the *idée fixe* theme returns.

The second movement, "The Ninth of January," is a powerful description of "Bloody Sunday," the day that the guards of the Tsar's palace in St. Petersburg panicked and fired on the assembled, unarmed peasants, leaving nearly a thousand dead in the palace square. There is a central theme to this movement as well: Shostakovich's own song "Bare Your Heads," from his song cycle *Ten Poems on Texts by Revolutionary Poets*, written in 1951. This theme begins in an air of uncertainty, but soon rises up through the entire orchestra. The trumpet call heard distantly in the first movement shines out as the entire brass take it up. Violins restate "Bare Your Heads," and then the *idée fixe* is heard again. Drums announce the Cossack guards, and the graphic description of their cavalry charge into the mob is emotionally raw. When all is done, the *idée fixe* hangs in the air, as if hovering in disbelief.

The third movement, "Eternal Memory," begins without a pause from the mists of the previous movement. A song, "You Fell as Victims," is heard in the violas, and while the entire movement is a slow lament to the sacrifice of the common folk, a rising sense of indignation is discernible in the music.

The final movement begins with a fanfare, and from there, the movement is a promise of firm resolve. A march begins in staccato cellos and basses, and its emotion is heightened as the rest of the orchestra

joins in. For an astounding 200 bars of music, Shostakovich displays his mastery of musical and emotional control in its measured but unrelenting increase in intensity. Fleeting references to themes already heard return, including the bass clarinet bringing back “Bare Your Heads” from the second movement. Winds, strings, and finally percussion usher in the coda, and the conclusion of the work is one, not of finality, but more of exhaustion – suiting a work depicting a struggle which, in 1905, had not been resolved.

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