

SARA DAVIS BUECHNER PLAYS RACHMANINOFF 2

April 28* & 29, 2023 • 7:30 PM

*Friday Classics presented by Lexus of Edmonton

Featuring:

Jean-Marie Zeitouni, conductor

Sara Davis Buechner, piano

Please hold your applause until the end of each piece.

FRANCK

Symphony in D minor

(41')*

I - Lento – Allegro ma non troppo

II - Allegretto

III - Finale : Allegro non troppo

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

LISZT

Légendes: St. Francis of Assisi – Sermon to the Birds

(12')*

RACHMANINOFF

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op.18

(32')*

I - Moderato

II - Adagio sostenuto

III - Allegro scherzando

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

Symphony in D minor

César Franck

(b. Liège, Belgium, 1822 / d. Paris, 1890)

First performed: February 17, 1889, in Paris

Last ESO performance: October 2011

César Franck was 65 years old when he composed his *Symphony in D minor*, and had only 20 months to live following its premiere. So unfortunately, he didn't live long enough to see his revolutionary work gain widespread acceptance. "... majestic, plastic, and beautiful symphony," wrote Franck devotee Vincent d'Indy – one of the lone voices of support following the work's first performances. Franck, widely regarded as a conservative among French composers of his day, crafted a work that adopted several progressive ideas, which raised many reactionary eyebrows.

Franck wrote his symphony in the unusual three-movement mold. "Lenten" is certainly an apt word for the achingly slow introduction, but it does contain the fundamental motivic unit of the first movement: a three-note dotted figure reminiscent of the opening phrase from Liszt's *Les Préludes*, that moves down by semitone and then moves back up again by a minor third. The Allegro non troppo main section of the movement takes off with a strident, loud presentation of that same basic three note idea and its answer. An angry descending figure, and a more searching, melodic idea also feature in the movement, but Franck, almost defying traditional symphonic form, cuts off the Allegro and brings back the introduction, this time in F minor. The Allegro non troppo returns, this time to the end of the movement.

The B flat minor Allegretto contains within it both the slow movement and scherzo of a conventional four-movement layout. The main theme is a gentle dance tune given to the English horn (an instrument whose inclusion in a symphonic work was strongly objected to by the Parisian critics of the day), and has something of the medieval about it. The harp and pizzicato string accompaniment leads to a more contemporary presentation, chromatic in its colouring. The middle section of the movement is the Scherzo, offering a delightful, contrasting dotted melody in E-flat Major.

In contrast to the gentility of the preceding movement, the finale is a tempestuous, exuberant movement, begun by the winds against the strings in octaves. The main theme is presented very quietly at first, a gently rocking theme in cellos and bassoons. Again, Franck subjects this theme to a chromatic series of transitions, and ingeniously brings back main themes from both the first two movements which, while not in strict cyclic form, does unify the work. Listen particularly for how Franck gives a whole new colour to the Allegretto theme which, upon its second iteration in the finale, is given a surprisingly strong and dramatic presentation. The main theme returns to bring the work to its affirmative, happy ending.

Légende: St. François d'Assise: La prédication aux oiseaux

Franz Liszt

(b. Raiding, Hungary, 1811 / d. Bayreuth, 1886)

First performance of the solo piano version: August 29, 1865, in Budapest. Work arranged for orchestra by Liszt in 1863.

This is the ESO premiere of the piece.

It can be fairly said that Franz Liszt thought orchestrally as a pianist. One of the great innovators of piano performance, Liszt often made piano transcriptions of even the densest orchestral works (including Beethoven symphonies and Wagner opera excerpts), and when he composed for piano, he used every aspect of the instrument to create as vast a canvas of sound as he could. And yet, tonight's work, written for piano and later orchestrated by Liszt, is one of the very few examples of direct musical onomatopoeia in his piano works.

During the first half of the 1860s, Liszt dedicated much of his efforts to composing religious music. Liszt was named for St. Francis of Assisi and St. François de Paule, and wrote *Two Legends* based on miracles attributed to the saints. The first concerns the story of St. Francis of Assisi coming upon a bit of road in which birds filled the trees on both sides. Leaving his companions behind, St. Francis "preached" to the birds, which flocked to listen to his words. Birdsong can be heard imitated in the piano version, as well as in the orchestration of the piece. The serene chorale in the central section depicts the sermon St. Francis preached.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op.18

Sergei Rachmaninoff

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

First performed: October 27, 1901, in Moscow

Last ESO performance: November 2015

Sergei Rachmaninoff could easily have made a fine living as a concert pianist. Considered one of the most virtuosic who ever lived, precious few recordings of his mastery were made. It was said that his hands could span an eleventh on the keyboard (an octave, plus three semi-tones more), while his fluid playing was the stuff of legend. Yet while his greatest source of fulfillment was as a composer, his delicate nature and early struggles made that career path a precarious one at the beginning.

Following the spectacular failures of both his *First Piano Concerto* (1892) and his *First Symphony* (1897), the already highly sensitive Rachmaninoff was a wreck. He was devastated, and while he continued to perform, he did not even attempt to compose. Friends and family, equally at their wits' end, took the drastic step, in 1900, of taking him to Dr. Nicolai Dahl, who specialized in motivation through a sort of hypnotic suggestion. Over and over, Dr. Dahl told Rachmaninoff, "You will begin to write your concerto," "You will write with ease," and "Your concerto will be a fine work."

Bizarre though the treatment may seem to be, it worked. In Moscow on October 14, 1901, Rachmaninoff premiered his *Second Piano Concerto*, and it became the most popular piano

concerto of the 20th century – and its popularity has not diminished into this century either. It was dedicated, appropriately enough, to Dr. Dahl. Awash with strong melodies, several pop songs have been drawn from its rich soil.

Piano chords, from soft to loud, begin the work, ushering the first sweeping melody on the strings. The entire movement is Moderato, never rushed, its piano passages running a gamut from brilliant to introspective. The cadenza is not a typical soloist's flourish that one might have expected from so sensational a pianist. While it is supremely difficult, it does not sound that way.

The beautiful second movement is a serene nocturne. The finale is one of the most recognizable in music. It consists of two dominant, contrasting themes. One is sweepingly romantic, while the other is a lively, thoroughly Russian Allegro, rhythmic and dashing.

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