

RACHMANINOFF & DANCE

May 17, 2024 • 8:00 PM

ESO Pairings presented by Tumbler & Rocks

Featuring:

Michael Stern, conductor – see bio on page 4.

To read the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra roster, see page 5.

This performance does not include an intermission.

Please hold your applause until the end of each piece.

RAVEL

La valse

(12')*

RACHMANINOFF

Symphonic Dances, Op.45

(38')*

I - Non allegro

II - Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)

III - Lento assai – Allegro vivace

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

La valse

Maurice Ravel

(b. Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, 1875 / d. Paris, 1937)

First performed: December 12, 1920, in Paris

Last ESO performance: September 2006

Few works in music have undergone the profound change from original intent and conception to final result as Maurice Ravel's "choreographic poem," *La valse*. As far back as 1906, Ravel had told his friend, and noted French musician and arts patron Misia Edwards, that he wanted to create a waltz in the style of Johann Strauss (whom Ravel admired), to be called *Wien* ("Vienna"), "... a grand waltz, a kind of homage to the memory of the great Strauss," Ravel wrote to Edwards. But by the time the work was completed in 1920, France (and its allies) had been through World War One, with Austria-Hungary on the opposing side, changing the nature of French perception of Austria and its capital.

Added to that was Ravel's work with the Ballets russes, the ballet troupe founded by impresario Sergei Diaghilev with the intention of bringing Russian dance to French audiences. Diaghilev commissioned new ballets from many prominent Russian and French composers, including Ravel. *Daphnis et Chloé* had premiered to great acclaim in 1912, and Ravel was eager to continue the collaboration.

So *Wien* became *La valse*, and by 1919, Ravel was fashioning the work into a score he wanted to present to Diaghilev. In April of 1920, he did so, with a number of notables present, including choreographer Léonide Massine, and composers Igor Stravinsky and Francis Poulenc. "When Ravel had finished (playing), Diaghilev said to him something which I thought was very true," Poulenc wrote of the evening's events. "He said, 'Ravel, it's a masterpiece, but it isn't a ballet. It's a portrait of a ballet, a painting of a ballet'."

It would be the last time Ravel and Diaghilev would even try to collaborate. As an orchestral work however, *La valse* proved popular. Diaghilev's assessment of the work, however hurtful it may have been to Ravel in 1920, is perceptive. Out of rumblings in the basses, a Strauss-inspired waltz does emerge, with a number of melodic ideas introduced, but none establishing itself as a dominant theme. This section builds to a climax, and then is swept aside as the basses return to restart the music – but now even more fragmented, leading to a shattering conclusion. Ravel always insisted that his work was not intended to be interpreted in geopolitical terms, insisting that the work was absolute music. His own scenario reads: "Clouds whirl about. Occasionally they part to allow a glimpse of waltzing couples. As they gradually evaporate one can discern a gigantic hall, filled by a crowd of dancers in motion. The stage gradually brightens. The glow of the chandeliers breaks out fortissimo. An Imperial Court about 1855."

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

Sergei Rachmaninoff

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

First performed: January 3, 1941, in Philadelphia

Last ESO performance: September 2006

Famous Russian choreographer Mikhail (Michel) Fokine became enamoured with Rachmaninoff's final work for piano and orchestra, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and turned it into a ballet that premiered in June of 1939. Its success, and the pleasant experience of collaborating with Fokine stimulated the now 66-year-old Rachmaninoff, and he began sketches soon after for what he hoped would be another partnership.

Unfortunately, as Diaghilev had done with Ravel's *La Valse* (see above), Fokine kindly demurred, suggesting that the three-movement orchestral work, tentatively titled *Fantastic Dances*, wouldn't work as Rachmaninoff had hoped. "I'm not able to speak of music, and even less to write of it," Fokine wrote Rachmaninoff after the composer had played him the score. "But I am now writing because it seems to me that you are binding yourself to dance requirements."

Abandoning the ballet idea entirely, and also the initial titles Rachmaninoff gave the work's three movements: "Midday," "Twilight," and "Midnight," Rachmaninoff instead reworked his music into an orchestra-only work – his first multi-movement purely orchestral score since his *Third Symphony* of 1936. He offered the score to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and he bestowed high praise on them following the work's premiere in the fall of 1941.

Now known as *Symphonic Dances*, with more standard tempo markings for the three movements, the work proved to be Rachmaninoff's last for orchestra. A pulsing march begins the opening movement rather dramatically. In the quieter central section, a notable solo line is given to alto saxophone – and Rachmaninoff's unfamiliarity with the instrument led him to seek advice from legendary Broadway arranger Robert Russell Bennett. The passion of the opening flares up again in the final section; the march theme is heard again and, just as the movement concludes, there is a brief quote from the Russian orthodox hymn "Blessed be the Lord."

A brief and brittle brass fanfare yields to a waltz in the second movement, though its melody is intruded upon more than once. That melody is given out first on solo viola, and the net effect of Rachmaninoff's moody score is more of remembered echoes of a ball, emanating from a haunted ballroom.

After a few tentative steps, the finale barges in, as if marshaling the orchestral forces together before launching the movement proper. There is more than a hint of doom and eerie finality in the music, even to the point of Rachmaninoff's use of the "Dies irae" from the plainchant Mass for the Dead – a melody Rachmaninoff quoted in several of his works, particularly those toward the latter part of his life. The coda is rich with implication, as the "Dies irae" alternates with another quote – this one from the Alleluia Rachmaninoff wrote for his *Vespers* nearly 30 years before.

Program notes © 2024 by D.T. Baker, except as noted

Biographies

Michael Stern

Conductor

Conductor Michael Stern is Music Director of the Kansas City Symphony and the Stamford Symphony; Founding Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of the IRIS Orchestra; and the Music Director of the National Repertory Orchestra.

Michael Stern and Kansas City have been hailed for their remarkable artistic ascent, original programming, organizational development and stability, and the extraordinary growth of its varied audiences since his tenure began. Stern and the orchestra have partnered with Grammy® Award-winning Reference Recordings for a series of very well-received CDs, including a new recording of works by American composer Adam Schoenberg, Gustav Holst's "The Planets," and albums of Elgar, Sibelius, and Saint-Saens.

IRIS Orchestra in Germantown, Tennessee is known for the virtuosity of its playing, and the depth and variety of its programming, with special emphasis on American contemporary music. Under Stern's direction, IRIS has commissioned and premiered works by William Bolcom, Chris Brubeck, Richard Danielpour, Stephen Hartke, Edgar Meyer, Jonathan Leshnoff, Ned Rorem, Huang Ruo, amongst others, and has released recordings on the Naxos and Arabesque labels.

Recent guest engagements have included the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, the Chicago Symphony at Ravinia, the Atlanta Symphony, the Minnesota Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic in the film score to *The Red Violin* with Joshua Bell as soloist; also, with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Ravinia, and the Napa Valley Festival del Sole, as well as concerts at the Stern Violin Competition in Shanghai.

Annually he conducts the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra as part of the Youth Music Culture Guangdong with Yo-Yo Ma and regularly appears at the Aspen Music Festival and School. He has led the major orchestras in London, Stockholm, Paris, Helsinki, Budapest, Israel, and Moscow, Taiwan, and Tokyo, et al. Stern has been Chief Conductor of Germany's Saarbrücken Radio Symphony Orchestra (the first American chief conductor in the orchestra's history), Permanent Guest Conductor of the Orchestre National de Lyon in France, and Principal Guest Conductor of the Orchestre National de Lille, France.

Meet the Musicians

Michael Stern, Artistic Advisor

Cosette Justo Valdés, Resident Conductor and Community Ambassador

William Eddins, Music Director Emeritus, Conductor

Violin I

Robert Uchida, Concertmaster

The John & Barbara Poole Family Concertmaster Chair

Eric Buchmann, Associate Concertmaster

Broderick Olson

Ewald Cheung

Joanna Ciapka-Sangster

Laura Veeze

Anna Kozak

Aiyana Anderson-Howatt

Anita Walsh

Violin II

Dianne New – Principal

Susan Flook – Assistant Principal

Heather Bergen

Yue Deng

Danielle Greene

Buon Park

Yeeun Ha

Zoë Sellers (on leave)

Viola

Keith Hamm – Principal

Ethan Filner – Assistant Principal

Clayton Leung

Rhonda Henshaw

Stefan Jungkind

Cello

Rafael Hoekman – Principal

The Stuart & Winona Davis Principal Cello Chair

Julie Hereish – Assistant Principal

Ronda Metzies

Meran Currie-Roberts

Victor Pipkin

Bass

Hilda Cowie – Principal

Chris Jones – Acting Assistant Principal

Janice Quinn

Rob Aldridge

Chantel Leung

Douglas Ohashi (on leave)

*The ESO works in proud partnership with the AF of M
(American Federation of Musicians of the United States
and Canada) Local 390.*

Flute

Elizabeth Koch – Principal

Sarah Pollard – Assistant Principal

Oboe

June Kim – Principal

Paul Schieman – Assistant Principal

The Steven & Day LePoole Assistant Principal Oboe Chair

Clarinet

Julianne Scott – Principal

David Quinn – Assistant Principal

Bassoon

Bianca Chambul – Principal

Edith Stacey – Assistant Principal

Horn

Allene Hackleman – Principal

Megan Evans – Assistant Principal

Ryan Garbett – Assistant Principal

Donald Plumb – Assistant Principal

Trumpet

Robin Doyon – Principal

Frédéric Payant – Assistant Principal

Trombone

John McPherson – Principal

Kathryn Macintosh – Assistant Principal

Bass Trombone

Tyler Cairns – Principal

Tuba

Scott Whetham – Principal

Timpani

Barry Nemish – Principal

Percussion

Martin Bui – Principal

Harp

Nora Bumanis – Principal