October 31, November 1 and 2, 2014

JURAJ VALCUHA, CONDUCTOR
NICOLA BENEDETTI, VIOLIN

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF  
*The Isle of the Dead, Opus 29*

KAROL SZYMANOWSKI  
Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 35
*Ms. Benedetti*

Intermission

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF  
Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Opus 44
I. Lento — Allegro moderato
II. Adagio ma non troppo — Allegro vivace —
    Tempo come prima
III. Allegro
SERGEI RACHMANINOFF
Born 1 April 1873 in Oneg (near Novgorod), Russia; died 28 March 1943 in Beverly Hills, California

The Isle of the Dead, Opus 29 (1909)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, 18 April 1909; Moscow Philharmonic Society; Sergei Rachmaninoff, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 21 October 2005; Heinz Hall; Vladimir Jurowski, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 21 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Rachmaninoff’s closest friend and most frequent companion after he settled for a time Dresden beginning in 1906 was Nicolas von Struve, a student of German-Russian extraction at the city’s university and an amateur composer of songs; their friendship was terminated only by von Struve’s sudden death in an accident in Paris in 1921. It was apparently von Struve who first stirred Rachmaninoff’s interest in creating a musical realization of Arnold Böcklin’s haunting painting The Isle of the Dead. Böcklin (1827-1901), a Swiss artist then much admired for the brooding Romanticism of his canvases, was said to have found inspiration for his subject during a visit to the Ponza Islands, located in the Tyrrhenian Sea north of the Bay of Naples. The painting shows a volcanic island rising straight out of the becalmed ocean; a large cleft in the rock holds a grotto filled with cypresses. An opening marked by short, square pillars topped with small leonine sculptures provides access to the grotto through the center of a breakwater made of boulders. Carved into the rocky walls that tower above are the rugged post-and-lintel entrances to the tombs. In the front of a small boat sailing toward the gloomy site, a white-robed and hooded figure stands, back to the viewer, above a coffin draped with white crepe and red garlands. Böcklin said that his Isle of the Dead was “a dream picture; it must produce such an effect of stillness that anyone would be frightened to hear a knock at the door.”

Rachmaninoff composed his Isle of the Dead during the early months of 1909, at the same time that he accepted an invitation to make his first tour of the United States later that year. He left Dresden in April, and conducted the premiere of his new tone poem with the Moscow Philharmonic Society on April 18th; he introduced the work to America at a concert in Chicago on December 3rd. The score was dedicated to von Struve upon its publication that same year.

Isle of the Dead begins with a mournfully rocking ostinato figure in uneven 5/8 meter depicting the ferryman Charon dipping his oars into the lifeless sea. This motive, somehow tragic and consoling at the same time, courses inexorably through the composition and serves as the ground upon which fragmentary themes of somber cast are strewn. The ostinato subsides as the boat enters the grotto. A long melody is then drawn from the orchestra, hesitant and unclear of its direction at first but gradually increasing in its expressive power. As the mourner turns away from the tomb, the solemn strains of the Dies Irae (“Day of Wrath”), the ancient chant from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass for the Dead that later coursed like a grim musical marker through Rachmaninoff’s Paganini Rhapsody (1934), Third Symphony (1936) and Symphonic Dances (1940), become the subject of a free development. The ostinato resumes, and the tiny boat, delivered of its sad cargo, slides into the mist. The island is again cloaked in undisturbed eternal peace.

KAROL SZYMANOWSKI
Born 6 October 1882 in Timoshovka, Ukraine; died 28 March 1937 in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 35 (1916)
PREMIERE OF WORK: Warsaw, 1 November 1922; Moscow Philharmonic Society; Gregor Fitelberg, conductor; Jósef Oziminski, soloist
THESE PERFORMANCES MARK THE PSO PREMIERE
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 27 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, piano, two harps and strings.

Karol Szymanowski was the preeminent Polish composer of the first half of the 20th century. His father was an ardent connoisseur of the arts, and Karol grew up in a household rich in culture. Szymanowski (shee-man-OV-skee) showed exceptional musical talent early in life, and he began his professional studies in Warsaw in 1901. In 1905, he and three of his student colleagues founded the Association of Young Polish Composers, a group, analogous to the Young Poland movement in literature, dedicated to the publication and performance of works from Poland. He made frequent trips to Berlin and Leipzig during the following years to arrange concerts of Polish music and oversee the publication of his music, which was then heavily influenced by that of Wagner and Richard Strauss.

In 1911, Szymanowski settled in Vienna, where he signed a ten-year publishing contract with Universal Edition and achieved notable successes with performances of his Second Piano Sonata and Symphony No. 2. In 1914 and after World War I ended, he made several trips to the European Mediterranean and North Africa, and his direct contact with the ancient, early Christian and Arab cultures of Italy, Constantinople, Tunis and Algiers profoundly altered his artistic temperament. He abandoned the Germanic Post-Romanticism of his earlier works, and turned instead to the music of Debussy and Ravel, Stravinsky and the Russian mystic Scriabin to help in defining an idiom suitable to his new creative direction. During the years of World War I, when travel was restricted, Szymanowski, back in Poland, occupied his time with an intense investigation of ancient and Oriental cultures, and became an authority on those subjects; his music of that period reached its zenith with the Third Symphony (Song of the Night) and the opulent opera King Roger.

The early 1920s saw Szymanowski resuming the travels that had been interrupted by the war. Those years also saw another reconsideration of his compositional style. Having absorbed the influences of Strauss, Ravel and Scriabin, he turned to his own country for renewed inspiration, and became intent on finding a national identity for contemporary Polish music based on the songs and dances of its people. He found his richest native source in the music of the mountain folk of the Tatra region, spending much time in their chief city, Zakopane. In 1927, he was simultaneously offered the directorships of the conservatories of Cairo and Warsaw, and it is indicative of his loyalties at the time that he accepted the post in Poland. In the early 1930s, Szymanowski achieved his greatest success and prosperity. His health, however, never robust, began to fail, and he resigned the directorship of the Warsaw Conservatory in April 1932, thereafter devoting himself entirely to creative work until his death in Lausanne in 1937.

The First Violin Concerto of 1916 is a fantasy, in both its expressive content and its form. Szymanowski, then immersed in translating his studies of myth, exotic cultures and ancient civilizations into music (he had just completed his Third Symphony, subtitled “Song of the Night,” based on verses by the 13th-century Persian poet Jallál-Uddin-Rūmī), turned for the Concerto’s literary inspiration to a sensuous poetic nocturne by Polish poet Tadeusz Micinski (1873-1918): Asses in crowns settle majestically on the grass — fireflies are kissing the wild rose … Pan plays his pipe in the oak grove. Mayflies dart into dance, plaited in amorous embrace eternally young and holy … I fly: here over the water — there under the trees. In the woods are glades as if appointed for these nocturnal revels.

The Concerto is a fantasy in structure as well, freed from traditional forms to create a unique musical dreamscape of waves of volupitous sound upon which floats a dazzling skein of violin melody. “The sound is so magical,” Szymanowski wrote of the premiere, “that people were completely transfixed. And just imagine, the violin comes out on top the whole time. It is my greatest triumph!” When the work was still new, the English musicologist and distinguished Chopin scholar Arthur Hedley offered the following description of it, which captures especially well the fluctuating moods and cinematic flow of this remarkable music: “The Concerto is in one movement — a continuous rhapsody, moving from one ecstatic climax to another, with the solo instrument maintaining almost without break a stream of rapturous music away up on the heights. The orchestral part is complex and large forces are called for in order to provide every shade of color and sufficient volume for the shattering peak-points in the score. There is a profusion of themes both vigorous and reflective of chromatic character given to the solo violin, which never ceases to be the center of interest. Scherzando sections alternate with episodes of
reverie that are almost oriental in their languor and sensuousness, and each climax rises to a higher pitch of intensity than the one that preceded it. By steady stages the music arrives at last at the cadenza, a tour de force, after which the soloist having, so to speak, exhausted his vocabulary, falls silent while the orchestra, with all its forces unleashed, carries the music to the most passionate climax of the whole work. From this point little remains but for the violin to take leave of the listener in phrases of ravishing beauty, drawing the last drop of sweetness and pathos from the themes that have formed the substance of the Concerto; the end is hushed."

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Opus 44 (1935-1936)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Philadelphia, 6 November 1936; Academy of Music; Philadelphia Orchestra; Leopold Stokowski, conductor
PSO PREMIERE: 2 December 1936; Syria Mosque; Antonio Modarelli, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 44 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Following the burst of creative activity between 1895 and 1910 that brought forth three piano concertos, two symphonies, two operas, a symphonic poem and the "choral symphony" The Bells, Sergei Rachmaninoff did not issue another work for orchestra until the Fourth Piano Concerto of 1927. After being forced from his beloved Russian homeland by the 1917 Revolution, he established a career as a pianist and conductor in Europe and the United States whose enormous success almost completely prohibited composition. His return to the orchestral idiom with the Fourth Concerto was poorly received (he revised the score extensively in 1941), and it took him until 1934 to gather enough courage to try again. That attempt — the splendid Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini — met with exceptional acclaim, and encouraged him to undertake a long-delayed successor to the Second Symphony of 1907. The Third Symphony was begun on June 18, 1935 at his Swiss villa, "Senar," on Lake Lucerne, not far from "Triebschen," the house in which Wagner lived from 1866 to 1872. ("Senar" was named for Sergei and his wife, NATalya, Rachmaninoff.) Though he had to spend three weeks taking the waters at Baden-Baden for his rheumatism in July, he finished the first movement by August 22nd and the second movement a month later. By then, however, it was time for him to again begin his strenuous annual international tours, and the Symphony had to await its completion until June 1936. It was finished exactly three decades after the Second Symphony.

As do his two earlier works in the genre, Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony opens with a motto theme that returns in later movements. The motto, here presented immediately in unison by clarinet, muted horn and cellos, is a small-interval phrase derived from the style of ecclesiastical chant. A few measures of vigorous orchestral warming-up introduce the movement's main theme, a doleful plaint issued by the double reeds. The second theme is a lovely, lyrical strain, initiated by the cellos, which gives testimony that Rachmaninoff retained his wonderful sense of melodic invention throughout his life. (He was 63 when he finished the score.) Following a development section of considerable ingenuity and rhythmic energy, the two principal themes are recalled in the recapitulation. The motto theme returns quietly in the trumpet and bass trombone and then in the pizzicato strings to bring the movement to a subdued close.

The second of the Symphony's three movements combines elements of both a traditional Adagio and a Scherzo. The motto theme in a bardic setting for horn accompanied by strummed harp chords is heard to open the movement. The solo violin gives out the principal theme of the Adagio, a languid melody in triplet rhythms; the flute presents a graceful complementary idea that ends with a cadential trill. These two motives are elaborated until a sudden change of tempo and the introduction of a bustling rhythmic figure usher in the Scherzo section of the movement. An abbreviated recall of the music of the opening Adagio rounds out the movement, to which the motto theme played by pizzicato strings serves as a tiny musical benediction.

The finale is a virtuosic tour-de-force for orchestra. (The work was written with Leopold Stokowski's Philadelphia Orchestra in mind.) The main theme, presented by violins and violas, is a motive of martial
vigor; the contrasting second theme, given by the strings doubled by harp (Rachmaninoff demonstrated a remarkable skill in orchestrating for percussion, celesta and harp in this work), is chordal in shape and lyrical in style. The center of the movement is a thorough working-out of the melodic materials, beginning with a fugal treatment of the main theme. As a bridge to the recapitulation, Rachmaninoff employed the Dies Irae ("Day of Wrath"), the ancient chant from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass for the Dead. This evocative traditional tune as well as the Symphony’s motto theme are woven into the recapitulation of the movement’s earlier motives. A brilliant coda brings the work to an exhilarating close.