

CHARLOTTESVILLE
SYMPHONY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

PROGRAM NOTES FOR MARCH 24 & 25, 2018

Suite from *Swan Lake*, Op.20a

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky

Born 7 May, 1840 in Votkinsk, Viatka district, Russia

Died 6 November, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Approximate duration 21 minutes

- *Swan Lake* was Tchaikovsky's first ballet, but he was already an experienced composer.
- Enchantment and impending doom color this expressive score.
- Listen for irresistible waltzes and characteristic national dances.

To the general public, Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* is his most beloved ballet because of its ubiquity during the holiday season. In naming a favorite, connoisseurs of ballet are more likely to argue for *Sleeping Beauty* or *Swan Lake*. Composed in 1875 on commission for the Bolshoi Ballet at St. Petersburg's Imperial Theatre, *Swan Lake* is arguably the more impressive accomplishment because it was Tchaikovsky's first attempt at ballet. Today we recognize him as perhaps the greatest genius for dance of the entire 19th century. Incredibly, the work was a colossal flop at its 1876 premiere, plagued by poor staging, a second rank choreographer and a conductor who could not grasp the complexity of Tchaikovsky's masterly score. Accustomed to banal composers who wrote music subservient to their needs, the dancers complained that *Swan Lake's* music was *undanceable*.

Not until two years after Tchaikovsky's death did the work receive a production worthy of its glorious score, with classic choreography by Marius Petipa. Since then *Swan Lake* has remained a bulwark of the permanent repertoire, and its appealing and melodic score has enjoyed frequent performances in the concert hall. The Suite we hear this weekend excerpts the most beloved numbers. These include two of Tchaikovsky's exquisite orchestral waltzes, which epitomize the magical spirit of this fairy tale. Other highlights in the Suite are the famous oboe solo with shimmering string accompaniment, as well as two of the national dances in the Act III ball: the Hungarian *csárdás* and the sparkling *Danse espagnole*. Only the rare listener can resist occasional swaying and foot-tapping to the captivating music of this Suite.

Tchaikovsky scored the ballet for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two cornets, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum and strings.

SIDEBAR: A TROUBLED HISTORY FOR A GREAT MASTERPIECE

Who is to say why *Swan Lake* failed at its première? It likely was not the fault of the scenario. Both authors knew Russian ballet well and had good theatrical sense. The composer's friend Vladimir Petrovich Begichev was Intendant of the Moscow Imperial Theatres when the ballet was

first produced. Begichev's co-author Vasily Geltser was a dancer and *régisseur* [essentially the stage manager] of the Moscow Imperial Ballet. The subject matter – with its themes of doomed love, deception, transformation, and redemption – was fashionable. And many of the critics were captivated by Tchaikovsky's melodic invention and graceful score.

Yet the first performance, at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre on 4 March 1877, fell flat. The culprit was almost certainly substandard choreography by Julius Reisinger. Within three years, Reisinger's successor Joseph Hansen had rearranged the dancing for a revival. He overhauled the ballet a second time in 1882. Despite a paltry four performances, the ballet somehow remained in the repertory. Eventually Hansen took a bowdlerized version to London as ballet master of the Alhambra Theatre. Another choreographer would rescue *Swan Lake* from comparative oblivion.

Marius Petipa's new choreography for *Swan Lake* was the eventual key to the ballet's immortality. He staged a new version in the Russian imperial capital of St. Petersburg at the Maryinsky Theatre in 1893, after Tchaikovsky's death. *Swan Lake* became one of the first Russian masterpieces to be seen widely outside the Czarist empire. Its subsequent champions and interpreters included the legendary ballerina Anna Pavlova, the choreographer Mikhail Fokine and the impresario Sergei Diaghilev.

Still later, Rudolf Nureyev choreographed *Swan Lake* and was a celebrated interpreter of Prince Siegfried. His performances with Dame Margot Fonteyn as Odette/Odile were legendary.

SWAN LAKE, THE BALLET

Tchaikovsky's beloved ballet is a magical tale involving anthropomorphic switches between swans and humans, an evil magician, mistaken identity, a handsome hero who is duped and an ending that is both tragic and triumphant. What rich material for Russia's most romantic 19th-century composer!

The hero is Prince Siegfried, who is hunting wild swans near his royal castle. He watches as Odette, the queen of the swans, transforms into a beautiful young woman. She reveals that she is captive to the spell of the evil magician von Rothbart. Only the pledge of eternal fidelity from a man who loves her can release her from von Rothbart's spell. Siegfried pledges his eternal love.

The following evening, Siegfried is host to a ball at his castle. (This is the ballet's Act III.) Von Rothbart escorts his daughter Odile who looks so much like Odette that Siegfried is deceived. He proposes and is accepted. Unwittingly, he has broken his oath to Odette. Father and bride-to-be disappear.

Siegfried hastens to the lake, learning the truth. He and his beloved Odette defy the evil von Rothbart and plunge into the lake. Their suicide, an act of faith, love and defiance, breaks the evil spell – but the lovers share their joy only in the eternity that death brings.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

Serge Rachmaninoff

Born 1 April, 1873 in Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia

Died 28 March, 1943 in Beverly Hills

Approximate duration 22 minutes

- Though called ‘Rhapsody,’ this piece is really an elaborate set of variations.
- Rachmaninoff’s theme is a famous violin caprice by the Italian virtuoso, Niccolò Paganini.
- The violins introduce the theme in this orchestral score.
- Listen for miniature cadenzas from the soloist which occur in several places.
- The *Dies irae* chant makes an appearance toward the end.

Niccolò Paganini's greatest musical legacy has been the apparently unstoppable fount of works inspired by his 24th Violin Caprice, drawn from the collection that constitutes a cornerstone of the virtuoso violinist's repertoire. Two romantic masters, Brahms and Liszt, were caught by the spell of the final Caprice; each composed a major work based on the sprightly melody. Many 20th-century composers followed suit.

Rachmaninoff was one of them, lured by Paganini’s catchy tune in the early 1930s. With the Brahms and Liszt works looming as models, he surely knew that his composition risked unfavorable comparison with theirs. The pressure was heightened by the lack of critical and popular acclaim for his Third and Fourth Piano Concerti (1909 and 1926, respectively). Neither concerto had come near achieving the popularity of the Second Piano Concerto, and Rachmaninoff's confidence in his creative ability had been severely shaken.

His original title for the Paganini-inspired composition was "Symphonic Variations." As work progressed, he altered the title to "Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra in Form of Variations," then eventually settled on "Rhapsody" as the key word in the work's title. That decision tells us something about the direction the music took, and Rachmaninoff’s perception of variation form.

He composed the Rhapsody during the summer of 1934 while vacationing with his family in their new villa outside Lucerne. Writing to his friend Vladimir Vilshau, he noted:

It is a very long piece, about 20-25 minutes. That is the size of a piano concerto. . . . I am going to try it out in New York and London, so that I can make the necessary corrections. The composition is very difficult and I should start practicing it, but with every year I become more and more lazy about this finger work. I try to shirk practicing by playing something old, something that already sits firmly in my fingers.

Evidently he regained his technique satisfactorily, for the premiere in November 1934 was a great success, and the Rhapsody has remained firmly in the repertoire ever since.

As Rachmaninoff noted, the Rhapsody is related conceptually to his piano concerti. Broadly speaking, the work divides into three principal sections, with the central D-flat major variation (No. XVIII in the score) functioning as the center of the "slow movement." That famous theme, which is an inversion of Paganini's, constitutes the emotional crux of the piece. It will likely be the melody lingering in your ears as you leave the concert hall.

Another noteworthy feature of the Rhapsody is its incorporation of the Dies Irae chant in three of the variations, including the finale. Rachmaninoff was fascinated with the Gregorian melody. He also used it in his symphonic poem, *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 (1909) and choral symphony, *The Bells*, Op. 35 (1913), and would return to the medieval theme for his final orchestral work, the *Symphonic Dances* (1940).

The score calls for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel, harp, solo piano and strings.

***Rainbow Body* (2000)**

Christopher Theofanidis

Born 18 December 1967 in Dallas, Texas

Approximate duration 13 minutes

- Medieval chant merges with Buddhist thought in this unusual work.
- Philosophy, faith, and mysticism underlie *Rainbow Body*.
- Listen for cello, bass clarinet and flute/piccolo flourishes at the start.
- A big string theme – chant-like – delivers a heavenly sound.
- Blazing brass provide an exultant close.

If you were wondering, the composer's name rhymes with 'Wheaties.' If the name sounds familiar, it could be because the Charlottesville Symphony performed Theofanidis's *Dreamtime Ancestors* two seasons ago. This still young man – he turned fifty just a few months ago – has a very high-powered international career. He's had works performed by the London Symphony, the Oslo Philharmonic, the Moscow Soloists and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte Carlo, as well as by more than 100 American orchestras. Currently serving on the faculty at Yale University, he is also Composer-in-Residence and co-director of the composition program at the Aspen Music Festival.

Theofanidis completed his undergraduate degree at Yale, continuing his formal education at the Eastman School of Music and at the University of Houston. Following a post-doctoral teaching fellowship at the University of Houston, he taught at the Peabody Conservatory at Johns Hopkins University and at the Juilliard School before returning to New Haven to join Yale's faculty.

Many of Theofanidis's compositions have been prompted by spiritual and philosophical searching. The breadth of his interests is reflected in his work titles, which embrace a wide variety of faiths and cultures: *Ariel Ascending*; *Visions and Miracles*; *Song of Elos*; *Metaphysica*; *O Vis Aeternitatis*; *Peace, Love, Light YOU ME ONE*; *Raga*; and *Creation/Creator*, for example.

Rainbow Body, which originated as a piece for string quartet and piano, falls into this multi-faith/multi-cultural category. It brings together Theofanidis's fascination with two different streams of thought. The first is the music of Hildegard von Bingen, an 11th-century German Benedictine abbess, composer and visionary who has received considerable attention from performers and scholars in recent years. The second stream is the Tibetan Buddhist idea of "Rainbow Body." (When an enlightened being dies, his or her body is absorbed directly back into the universe as energy and light.) Theofanidis has written, "This seemed to me to be the metaphor for Hildegard's music." He used one of Hildegard's responsorial chants, "Ave Maria, o auctrix vite," as the basis for *Rainbow Body*'s principal melody.

The result is both attractive and appealing. Reviewing the première of the orchestral version, Charles Ward of *The Houston Chronicle* wrote:

Not too often does the premiere of a work for a symphony orchestra elicit a standing ovation that is genuinely heartfelt, not obligatory. The rapturous sounding *Rainbow Body* by Christopher Theofanidis received that accolade Saturday. . .an authentic hit.

A quiet, contemplative opening entrusts most of the initial material to the strings, dividing them into as many as eight parts. As Theofanidis introduces the larger orchestral ensemble gradually, texture, volume and tempo all increase. He intersperses sustained, chant-like elements with medieval hocket effects [a bit like instrumental hiccupping - rapid exchanges on alternate beats between instruments]. It all drives toward a splendid climax for full orchestra, replete with exultant brass and percussion.

Meet the Composer commissioned the orchestral *Rainbow Body* for the Houston Symphony. The score calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet; third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones (third doubling bass trombone), tuba, timpani, percussion (suspended cymbal, chimes, gong, claves, triangle, congas, Chinese cymbal, crash cymbals, vibraphone, bass drum, & bells), harp, piano and strings.

THE COMPOSER SPEAKS - CHRISTOPHER THEOFANIDIS ON *RAINBOW BODY*

In the early years of the present century, I listened a great deal to the music of the medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen. As simple and direct as her music is, I was constantly amazed by its staying power. Hildegard's melodies have very memorable contours which set them apart from other chants of the period. They are wonderfully sensual and set up a very intimate communication with the divine.

Rainbow Body is based on one of her chants, 'Ave Maria, o auctrix vite' (Hail Mary, source of life). It begins in an understated, mysterious manner, calling attention to some of the key intervals and motives of the piece. When the primary melody enters for the first time about a minute into the work, I present it very directly in the strings without accompaniment. In the orchestration, I have tried to capture a halo around this melody, creating a "wet" acoustic by emphasizing the lingering reverberations one might hear in an old cathedral.

Although the piece is built essentially around fragments of Hildegard's melody, I also return to the tune in its entirety several times throughout the work, as a kind of plateau of stability and peace within an otherwise turbulent environment. *Rainbow Body* has a very different sensibility from Hildegard von Bingen's chant, because of a dramatic and developmental structure. Still, I hope that it conveys at least a little of my love for the beauty and grace of her work.

Rainbow Body is dedicated to Glen Rosenbaum, without whose support and encouragement I would not be composing.

- Chris Theofanidis

Suite from *Billy the Kid*

Aaron Copland

Born 14 November, 1900 in Brooklyn, New York

Died 2 December, 1990 in Tarrytown, New York

Approximate duration 22 minutes

- Copland's music has a specifically American sound.
- Snippets of folk songs and cowboy songs float through the score.
- All the music was intended to be danced to - lots of rhythmic bite!

The ballets of Aaron Copland hold a special place in the hearts of Americans. With his three early dance scores, *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), Copland caught the spirit of pioneer America, expressing this nation's optimism, grit and indigenous folk culture. Music from these three scores seems as American as apple pie, yet Copland's voice shines through, flavoring the wholesome melodies of his ballet music with twentieth-century spice.

The first of the three popular ballets, *Billy the Kid*, was written on the heels of Copland's hit orchestral piece, *El salón México* (1936), in which he first used folk material. *Billy* grew out of a suggestion by Lincoln Kirstein, then director of the American Ballet Caravan. Kirstein wrote the scenario, romanticizing the outlaw's life. The story focuses first on the pivotal incident of Billy's youth, when he sees his mother killed by a stray bullet. Incensed by fury and grief, he slays one of her assailants with a knife, and his fugitive life begins.

Copland's concert suite consists of seven movements, or about two-thirds of the complete ballet. We hear the opening, which evokes the solitude and loneliness of the open prairie. The folksy atmosphere of a frontier town is emphasized by Copland's adaptation of the tunes from "Git along little doggies" and "Oh bury me not on the lone prairie." He also alludes to the cowboy songs "Come Wrangle yer Bronco" and "Goodbye Old Paint." The rough-and-tumble scenes of violence spring vividly to life through Copland's use of muted trumpets and side drum; gentler and more humorous sides of Billy's character also come through in this down-to-earth, likeable score.

Copland's score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano and strings.



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