

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**October 19-20-21, 2019**  
**94th Season / Subscription Concert No.2**  
**Michael Allsen**

This program brings together music by the three greatest composers of the old Soviet Union, beginning with Prokofiev's tongue-in-cheek music from the film *Lieutenant Kijé*. The sensational violinist Rachel Barton Pine makes her first appearance with the Madison Symphony Orchestra playing Khachaturian's *Violin Concerto*, a work deeply influenced by the music of Armenia, the composer's homeland. We end with Shostakovich's ninth symphony, a sometimes sarcastic work written at the end of the Great Patriotic War...and one that got Shostakovich in trouble with Stalin's artistic bureaucracy.

**Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)**  
**Suite from *Lieutenant Kijé*, Op.60**

*Prokofiev composed his film score to Lieutenant Kijé in 1933, and extracted the suite heard here in 1934. The composer conducted the Moscow Radio Orchestra in the suite's premiere on December 21, 1934. This is the Madison Symphony Orchestra's first performance of the complete suite. Duration 20:00.*

In the early 1930s, Prokofiev was living in Paris, making a fine living as both a composer and a pianist. Though he had fled from Russia in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution, he was homesick, and this was a period of increasingly frequent visits to the Soviet Union, and works written for Soviet organizations—he would return permanently to Russia in 1936. In 1933, he was commissioned to write music for Alexander Feinzimmer's film *Lieutenant Kijé*. Prokofiev would later have great success as a film composer, most notably with his monumental scores for *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944). While the film *Lieutenant Kijé* was successful when it opened in Russia in March 1934, Prokofiev was less than satisfied with his innovative first attempt writing a film score. However, at the invitation of the Moscow Radio Orchestra, he began to assemble all of the short fragmentary musical cues from the *Kijé* film score into a more coherent five-movement suite. Though Feinzimmer's film is largely forgotten today, Prokofiev's *Suite from "Lieutenant Kijé"* remains one of his most popular pieces of concert music.

*Lieutenant Kijé*, based on a satirical novel by Yuri Tynyanov, tells the story of a soldier whose very existence was invented to keep his superiors out of trouble. The novel is set during the reign of Czar Paul I (r. 1796-1801), who was notorious for his nitpicking devotion to military protocol and bureaucracy. When he was read a dispatch by one of his officers, the Czar mistakenly understood the words *Poruchiki zhe...* (The lieutenant, however...) as *Poruchik Kizhe* (Lieutenant Kijé). The Czar takes an interest in this “Kijé,” and his officers find it safer to play along than to correct their Czar. They construct a detailed life story for Kijé, eventually giving him a romance and a wedding. Their invention succeeds too well, however, and the Czar finally expresses a desire to meet this gallant young soldier. The officers safely kill off Kijé before the Czar suspects that he has been hoodwinked.

Prokofiev’s suite contains some delightfully wry and witty music. One interesting bit of orchestration is his prominent use of a tenor saxophone, which replaces the baritone singer of the film score. The first movement, *Birth of Kijé*, introduces the oboe theme that represents Kijé himself. Most of the movement is a flashy and satirical military march, with a moment of mock-seriousness at the end. *Romance* portrays Kijé’s rather ponderous love affair, with a long solo for the saxophone and highly melodramatic pauses. *The Wedding of Kijé* opens with a kind of wedding-toast fanfare from the trombones, followed a sardonic polka-style wedding dance from the solo trumpet. After an opening drinking-song, the *Troika* depicts a rather frenzied ride in a traditional Russian three-horse sleigh. The closing lament, *The Burial of Kije*, opens with Kijé’s oboe theme, and continues with a suitably morose funeral march. Prokofiev mixes together several reminiscences of music from episodes in Kijé’s “life,” before ending with a final melancholy statement of his theme.

### **Aram Khachaturian (1903-1976)**

#### **Violin Concerto**

*Khachaturian composed his Violin Concerto in 1940 for violinist David Oistrakh, who played its premiere in Moscow on September 16, 1940. This is the first performance of the concerto at these concerts. Duration 33:00.*

Of the three great Soviet composers included on this program, Armenian-born Aram Khachaturian was the one who moved most comfortably in the artistic atmosphere imposed in the era of Stalin—one biographer has characterized his music as “Socialist Realism at its best.” Khachaturian was an enthusiastic participant in the State’s musical authority: joining the Union of Soviet Composers, and eventually serving as President of the Union’s National

Organizing Committee. Soviet doctrine was that music should be optimistic and uplifting, and should further the goals of the State, but all too often it became a means of censure and punishment of composers whose work was found to contain “formalist” elements: dissonance, intellectualized forms, modernist ideas, and characteristics generally considered *bourgeois*. While Prokofiev and Shostakovich pushed the boundaries throughout their careers, Khachaturian seems to have worked comfortably within Soviet expectations—his natural style was straightforward and had an immediate mass appeal. (However, even Khachaturian was censured for a few years in the repressive years between the end of World War II and Stalin’s death in 1953.) His musical style is generally Romantic, drawing on the music of Liszt, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Borodin, but he also absorbed the melodic style and rhythmic vitality of Armenian music.

The decade following the composition of his *Piano Concerto* in 1936 saw the creation of some of Khachaturian’s finest music: his incidental music for *Masquerade* (1939), the ballet *Gayane* (1942), his second symphony (1943), and his *Cello Concerto* (1946). The *Violin Concerto* was also composed during this fertile period. Khachaturian wrote much of it during the summer of 1940, while living in a “composer’s cottage” at a remote estate managed by the Union of Soviet Composers. He was inspired by the artistry of his friend David Oistrakh, the Soviet Union’s leading violin virtuoso, who advised Khachaturian throughout his composition of the concerto. The composer later wrote “I worked without effort... Sometimes my thoughts and imagination outraced the hand that was covering the staff with notes. The themes came to me in such abundance that I had a hard time putting them in some order.” The concerto was wildly successful when Oistrakh played the premiere that fall, but with Khachaturian’s permission, Oistrakh substituted his own solo cadenzas. The concerto is usually performed with Oistrakh’s cadenzas today.

The first movement (*Allegro con fermezza*), set in traditional sonata form, begins with a bold statement from the orchestra, and a short motive from the solo violin that soon grows into a lively Armenian dance that serves as the main theme. A languorous second theme emerges above a background of flutes and pizzicato strings. This ends with a short solo passage, before an orchestral outburst opens the extensive development section, which explores and combines both main themes—culminating in a pair of sinuous duets with the clarinet and orchestral solo violin, and a long solo cadenza. The movement closes with a shortened and varied recapitulation of the main themes and an energetic coda. The slow movement (*Andante sostenuto*) begins with a solemn solos by bassoon and clarinet. According to biographer Grigory Shneerson, Khachaturian’s inspiration was the

improvised melodies created by Armenian traditional bards, as they sang folk epics. The violin sings the movement's unhurried and melancholy main theme, filled with Armenian color. There are a few slightly contrasting episodes, but the overall mood of the movement remains wistful and quiet until a grand orchestral statement of the theme near the end—the mood soon calms, and it ends in hushed serenity. The wild finale (*Allegro vivace*) presents a series of folklike dance themes that serve as springboards for brilliant solo passages. There is a more reserved reminiscence of material from the first two movements, before the opening character returns for a fierce ending.

**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**  
**Symphony No.9 in E-flat Major, Op.70**

*Shostakovich's ninth symphony was completed in August of 1945. The premiere took place in Leningrad, on November 3, 1945, with the Leningrad Philharmonic under the direction of Eugene Mravinsky. Previous performances by the Madison Symphony Orchestra were in 1998 and 2008. Duration 27:00.*

“It is a merry little piece. Musicians will love playing it and critics will delight in blasting it.”  
 - Dmitri Shostakovich

For Shostakovich—as for all artists working in Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union—art was inexorably tied to politics. Composers like Prokofiev, Khachaturian, and Shostakovich were employees of the State, and it was expected that their music would be created in the service of the Communism. An article published by the Union of Soviet Composers directs that composers turn their thoughts “towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic, bright, and beautiful. This distinguishes the spiritual world of Soviet man, and must be embodied in musical images full of beauty and strength.” Musical commissars and even Stalin himself took an intense interest in the works of Soviet composers, and scrutinized every measure to make sure that they adhered to the Party line. The consequences for delinquency were immediate and severe: at best, censure and unemployment—at the worst, a one-way trip to the Gulag Archipelago.

Shostakovich's career in the 1930s and 1940s seems to be a recurring pattern of official censure and rehabilitation—he never dropped into the abyss, but often came uncomfortably close to the edge. At the height of Stalinist purges in the late 1930s, Shostakovich kept a small suitcase packed and by the door at all times, so that he would be ready if the police arrived to take him away. One of the first

times he suffered official censure was in 1936, when Stalin published a critical review of one of Shostakovich's operas. Only after a public apology and the performance of his *Symphony No.5* did he regain some sort of security.

The composition of his ninth symphony marks another occasion where Shostakovich suffered Stalin's displeasure. His seventh and eighth symphonies were enormous, powerful works—each lasts well over an hour—that take their cues from events in what Russians refer to as the Great Patriotic War. Shostakovich had dropped hints that he would round out a trilogy with a symphony celebrating Soviet victory, but at the war's end in 1945, he found that he had little desire to create yet another glorification of Stalin. The *Symphony No.9*, composed relatively quickly during the summer of that year, is a miniature in comparison to the wartime works: it is under half the length of either the seventh or the eighth, and is scored for a standard-sized orchestra. The work is cheerful and ironic throughout—certainly not the ecstatic and victorious patriotic piece that Soviet authorities expected. Years later, when Stalin was safely dead, Shostakovich remembered that “When my ninth was performed, Stalin was incensed. He was deeply offended, because there was no chorus, no soloists—and no apotheosis. There wasn't even a paltry dedication. It was just music, which Stalin didn't understand very well, and which was of dubious content.” The piece received a cool reception from the critics and Shostakovich again found himself on the wrong side of Soviet musical authorities. It was not until after Stalin's death in 1953 that he was rehabilitated again.

The opening movement (*Allegro*) is set in traditional sonata form. The bright and cheery mood is set in the opening bars with a lively string theme. The second theme features an almost hilarious combination of piccolo and trombone: the piccolo playing a happy little tune in alternation with dour two-note fanfares from the trombone. Only near the end of the development does the music become dark and troubled, but it is only for a moment; the original material soon returns to rescue the mood. Underlying much of the movement is a vaguely military feel, clearly satirical in intent.

The sparsely-scored second movement (*Moderato*) begins with a plaintive clarinet solo. This becomes a duet with the addition of a second clarinet, then a trio with the flute, and finally a woodwind ensemble. This texture gradually thins out and there is a lengthy central passage for muted strings that becomes gradually more sinister. The opening material returns at the end, now introduced by a solo flute.

The final three movements are played without pauses. The brief *Presto* begins with woodwinds playing at breakneck speed, introducing a scherzo-style theme. There are two contrasting episodes placed between repeats of this music: first a passage dominated by the strings, and then a march-style theme for solo trumpet and trombones. The final statement of the scherzo fades away and the mood darkens, setting up a bridge to the next movement. The *Largo* opens with an ominous statements by trombones and tuba. This idea alternates with a bassoon recitative. The bassoon's second recitative suddenly changes character, and becomes the main theme of the final movement (*Allegretto*)—a grotesque tune that is soon picked up by the strings, and then by string and woodwinds. Like the first movement, the finale is set in sonata form, and here the contrasting idea is a limping string theme. The development section is a gradual crescendo towards the climactic moment: a return of the bassoon's main theme, now shouted out by the brass. The trumpet plays a military-style fanfare through much of the brief recapitulation. The tempo suddenly quickens, and the movement ends with a brisk coda.