

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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Michael Allsen

This program opens on a somber note, with Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*. The orchestra has a showpiece in Kodály's colorful *Háry János Suite*. This was inspired by a series of tales told by the fictional Háry János, whose increasingly outrageous stories about himself are clearly "fake news." After intermission, we welcome back the extraordinary violinist Gil Shaham, who previously appeared with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2018, performing the Tchaikovsky concerto. At these programs, he is part of our season-long celebration of Beethoven, playing Beethoven's *Violin Concerto*.

Inspired by a painting of a dead soul being rowed to the underworld, Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead* is a dark and sober work, dominated by references to the funeral chant *Dies irae*.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia.

Died: March 28, 1943, Hollywood, California.

Isle of the Dead

- **Composed:** Early 1909.
- **Premiere:** May 1, 1909 in Moscow, the composer conducting.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 2006.
- **Duration:** 20:00.

Background

In 1905, Rachmaninoff left Russia, then in the throes of the abortive 1905 Revolution, and spent most of the next three years abroad. He spent much of his time in Dresden, working diligently, but he also found time to travel, taking in concerts and art galleries. One of the paintings that particularly attracted him was an 1880 work by the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead*. He saw a black and white photograph of the work in Paris in 1907, and later saw the various originals in galleries in Germany—Böcklin painted the subject at least five times. Rachmaninoff later claimed to have much preferred the black and white version, and to have had that one in mind when writing his piece. Böcklin was one of the leading exponents of the late 19th-century style known as Symbolism, concerned with creating a mood, and symbols of deeper meaning, rather than objective

reality. His *Isle of the Dead* shows the mythological Charon—boatman of the underworld—rowing a coffin and single white-clad mourner to a lonely island. Though Rachmaninoff was deeply struck by the painting, it was apparently one of his friends from Dresden, Nicholas von Struve, who suggested it as the basis of a musical work. Rachmaninoff later dedicated the completed score to him.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Rachmaninoff was never shy about discussing extra-musical influences on his works, at one point explaining that: “When composing, I find it of great help to have in mind a book recently read, or a beautiful painting, or a poem. Sometimes a definite story is kept in mind, which I try to convert into tones without disclosing the source of my inspiration.” Though he does not seem to have said explicitly just what about Böcklin’s somber canvas made it so attractive, it clearly took hold of him. In an interview about the piece, he later said: “When it came up, how it began—how can I say? It arose within me, was entertained, and written down.” Though Rachmaninoff was hardly consumed by thoughts of death at this point in his career, he was already writing to friends about feeling old (at age 36!).

What You’ll Hear

The piece begins with a slow introduction set in an undulating and chromatic 5/8, that suggests the rolling of a rather oily sea. The music is filled with hints of the *Dies irae* (“Day of Wrath”)—a 13th-century chant from the Latin Mass for the Dead. Rachmaninoff used this tune as a touchstone in four of his major works: it also appears in the *Symphony No. 2*, the *Symphonic Dances*, and *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. This opening section builds to almost shattering intensity, and then subsides. A dour trombone chorale brings the section to a close and there is a more tranquil and lush central section in 3/4 carried by the strings. Brasses again intrude, and bring this section to a close, eventually stopping everything with a series of hammer blows. The final section begins with the opening notes of the *Dies irae*, played over and over as an ostinato in the woodwinds. The chant tune disappears during a series of short cadenzas, but then reappears in brass chorale. The work ends quietly, in a mood of resignation.

A orchestral “sneeze,” a mechanical clock, the single-handed defeat of Napoleon’s armies, and a richly deserved reward from the emperor himself are all part of Kodály’s opera *Háry János*. The title character is a Hungarian storyteller who stars in his own increasingly fantastic tales. The score has rich Hungarian flavoring, spiced with folk music and a prominent role for Hungary’s national instrument, the cimbalom.

Zoltán Kodály

Born: December 16, 1882 in Kecskemét, Hungary.

Died: March 6, 1967 in Budapest, Hungary.

Suite from the opera *Háry János*

- **Composed:** Kodály composed the opera *Háry János* in 1926, and completed the *Suite* in 1927.
- **Premiere:** The opera was first produced in Budapest on October 16, 1926, and the *Suite* was premiered in New York City, on December 15, 1927.
- **Previous MSO performance:** 1994.
- **Duration:** 25:00

Background

The mythical Háry János (literally “John Henry” and probably a version of the Hungarian folk character “Strong John”) was a soldier and a habitual spinner of tall tales, who first appeared in an early 19th-century novel by Johann Garay. He is part of the grand tradition of great liars that show up in the folklore and literature of many countries: like Baron Munchhausen in Germany or Mike Fink in frontier America. Kodály’s opera dramatizes a series of Háry’s implausible whoppers, culminating in his singlehanded defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte’s army. Kodály’s treatment of Háry is humorous but sympathetic; Háry is not a simple liar, but a romantic dreamer who believes his own farfetched imaginings.

Kodály orchestrated his *Háry János Suite* within a few months of the opera’s premiere. Like most of Kodály’s music, it channels the distinctive sound of Hungarian folk music. As young men, Kodály and his close friend Béla Bartók travelled through rural Hungary, collecting folk songs and dance music with the aid of primitive sound recording equipment. Both men absorbed this style into their own compositions. Part of the distinctively Hungarian sound of *Háry János* is the cimbalom, a Hungarian folk instrument (a large hammered dulcimer).

What You’ll Hear

The *Háry János Suite* presents six episodes from the opera. The first movement, *Prelude: The Tale Begins*, opens with what can best be described as an orchestral “sneeze”—according to Hungarian superstition, any statement made following a sneeze can be regarded as the Gospel Truth! The music for this movement has Háry sitting down before a group of faithful listeners in his home town of Abony Magna, to begin the story of how he once had to subdue Napoleon. After the opening “sneeze,” the music moves gradually towards a high point, and closes rather quietly as Háry whispers to bring his listeners closer.

The second movement, *Viennese Musical Clock*, describes the fabulous clock at the Imperial palace of Schönbrunn. At this point in the story, Háy and his sweetheart Orsze are in Vienna with Marie Louise, daughter of the Austrian Emperor, and wife of Napoleon. In passing through Abony Magna, Marie Louise had seen Háy and had—of course—fallen hopelessly in love with him. Marie Louise begged him to accompany her to Vienna, and Háy agreed—on condition that he could bring Orsze along! The music for this movement is perfectly descriptive: a clock in with marching mechanical soldiers and elaborate chimes to mark the hour.

In the third movement, *Song*, Kodály has Háy and Orsze pining away for their homeland, and singing a sentimental song about the little cottage they will build when they return. Here, Kodály uses a Hungarian folk tune, *On this Side the Tisza, Beyond is the Danube*, as the main theme. This lovely theme is sung by a series of solo instruments, beginning with the cello. The cimbalom plays a prominent role in the more agitated middle section of this movement.

Battle and Defeat of Napoleon is the outrageous climax of Háy's tale. Napoleon has heard of his wife's love for Háy, flies into a jealous rage, and sends an invading army to Austria. Háy defeats wave after wave of French soldiers, and eventually forces Napoleon to fall to his knees and beg for mercy. The music is dominated by brass and percussion, and includes a lugubrious duet for bass trombone and tuba. Napoleon is personified by the solo saxophone, and we hear him ordering his troops into battle, and eventually pleading with Háy.

The *Intermezzo* reflects the joyful mood after Háy's amazing victory. The opening theme uses the traditional Hungarian *verbunkos*, a courtship dance. This section once again showcases the cimbalom. Kodály also uses folk material in the lyrical middle section of this movement: the solo horn introduces an 18th century dance tune.

The final movement, *Entrance of the Emperor and his Court*, brings his tale to a close. Here Háy describes how the Austrian Emperor and his entire court come to pay their respects and to thank him for turning back the French invasion. This is set as an energetic march, as the courtiers and ladies make their grand entrance. Finally, with a brass fanfare, the Emperor himself enters to give Háy a richly-deserved reward.

Beethoven's only concerto for the violin, written in 1806 for a young virtuoso, did not really become standard repertoire until decades after his death. Unlike most violin concertos of the day, it takes a symphonic approach, avoiding flashiness in favor of careful development of themes, particularly in the broad opening movement. It also features a beautifully expressive slow movement, and a brilliant closing finale.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 17, 1770 (baptism date), Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

Concerto in D Major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61

- **Composed:** 1806.
- **Premiere:** December 23, 1806, at the Theater-an-der-Wien in Vienna, with Franz Clement as soloist.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1928 (Gilbert Ross), 1937 (Marie Endres), 1945 (Roman Totenberg), 1951 (André de Ribaupierre), 1968 (Sidney Harth), 1980 (Ruggiero Ricci), 1988 (Sidney Harth), 1999 (Elmar Oliveira), 2008 (Cho-Liang Lin), and 2016 (Alina Ibragimova).
- **Duration:** 39:00.

Background

Beethoven completed his only concerto for violin in 1806, during a burst of creativity that also produced the three “Razumovsky” quartets, the fourth symphony, the “Appassionata” sonata, and the fourth piano concerto. The concerto was written for Franz Clement, a violinist whose association with Beethoven went back to 1794, when Clement was a 14-year-old *Wunderkind*. The title page dedicates the work to Clement, while noting his “clemency” towards the composer. (Beethoven's puns were even worse than the normal lot.) The concerto was premiered at a concert that apparently included some pretty flamboyant showmanship. According to a review of the concert in the *Wiener Theater-Zeitung*, Clement inserted one of his own violin sonatas between the first and second movements of the concerto—a sonata played on one string, with the violin held upside-down! Perhaps because of this blatant showstopper, reviews of the performance were generally disdainful. The fact that Clement was reportedly sight-reading the concerto may not have helped, either.

This was not a work that caught on quickly, and it certainly did not follow the fashion of the time. By 1806, audiences were beginning to demand works that displayed astonishing feats of speed and agility: flash over substance. Even as late

as 1855, when a young Joseph Joachim played Beethoven's concerto for the virtuoso Louis Spohr, Spohr's reaction was: "This is all very nice, but now I'd like you to play a *real* violin work." Beethoven's concerto is more symphonic in style, focusing on careful development of his broad and profound themes, and brilliant orchestration, instead of empty virtuosity. The concerto finally came into its own in the later 19th century, as players like Joachim confronted the special challenges of Beethoven's work: thoughtfulness and musical expression.

What You'll Hear

The first movement (*Allegro ma non troppo*) begins in a striking fashion: five unaccompanied timpani notes that usher in the woodwinds. The orchestral introduction presents the themes that will provide the raw material for the solo violin's more extensive treatment. At the close of the introduction, the orchestra hushes and allows the opening violin line to burst forth—a flourish that spans the entire range of the instrument. The body of this movement is based on a set of beautiful hymn-like themes. The violin's expansion of these melodies is never merely flashy decoration, but instead careful development. A lengthy cadenza leads to a final statement of the second main theme.

The *Larghetto* is certainly one of the most intriguing and expressive of Beethoven's compositions. Its form has variously been described as "theme and variations," "semi-variations" and even "strophic." In a classic essay, Beethoven scholar Owen Jander suggested that the deliberate ambiguities in the overall theme and variations form of the *Larghetto* reflect a burgeoning Romanticism—that the slow movement is a musical rendering of a poetic dialogue. In fact, the movement proceeds in a gentle but passionate dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra, culminating in a dramatic cadenza that leads directly into the final movement.

The last movement is more typical of Classical style—a spirited 6/8 Rondo. Here, it seems, Beethoven made a slight bow to audience demand and gave the violinist some flashy technical passages. There is a brief minor-key episode at the center, but otherwise the mood of this concerto is exuberant throughout. The concerto closes with an extended coda that gives the violinist one more chance to show off with some soloistic fireworks.