

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
October 15-16-17, 2021
96th Season
Michael Allsen

This program opens with a brilliant orchestral showpiece, Ravel's Spanish-flavored *Alborada del gracioso*. We are proud to welcome back pianist Olga Kern for her fifth appearance with the Madison Symphony Orchestra. She previously performed in 2008 (Beethoven's third concerto), 2010 (Rachmaninoff's second concerto), 2014 (Rachmaninoff's first concerto), and 2017 (Barber's concerto). Here, she plays Rachmaninoff's last major composition for piano and orchestra, and a work of stunning virtuosity, the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Our season-long tribute to Beethoven begins with his monumental *Eroica Symphony*.

Ravel's *Alborada del gracioso* ("Morning Song of a Jester") is his orchestrated version of a 1905 piano work. Ravel was fiercely proud of his mother's Basque heritage, and this is one of many of his compositions in a Basque or Spanish style.

Maurice Ravel

Born: March 17, 1875, Cibourne, Basses-Pyrénées, France.
Died: December 28, 1937, Paris, France.

Alborada del gracioso

- **Composed:** Written in 1904-1905 as a piano work; orchestrated in 1918.
- **Premiere:** May 17, 1919 in Paris, with Rhené-Baton conducting the Padeloup Orchestra.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 1968.
- **Duration:** 8:00.

Background

Ravel was born to a Swiss father and a Basque mother in Cibourne—a small seaside town in the Basque region near France's border with Spain. Though his family moved to Paris when he was just three months old, he remained emotionally connected to his mother's heritage throughout his life, and many of his works channel influences from Basque and Spanish music. As his friend Manuel de Falla once wrote: "Ravel's Spain was felt in an idealized way through his mother." In 1905, he completed a five-movement piano suite, titled *Miroirs*, with a lively Spanish-style fourth movement, *Alborada del gracioso*. In 1918, impresario Serge Diaghilev asked Ravel to orchestrate *Alborada del gracioso* and another piano

piece, Chabrier's *Menuet pompeux*. These were to appear, together with Fauré's *Pavane*, as the accompaniment for a Spanish-themed ballet by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. While the planned ballet production fell through, Ravel's brilliant orchestral version of *Alborada del gracioso* quickly became one of his most popular concert works.

The musical style and title reflect Ravel's idealized vision of Spain. The *alborada*, or "dawn song," is a traditional form of serenade sung on feast days, or to honor a particular person. In this case the person being honored is a *gracioso*, someone who is funny or witty. Ravel's original music for piano largely reflected this amusing character, but in transforming this work for a large orchestra he also injected subtle elements of darkness and tragedy. This may have reflected the difficult events of the World War I years: Ravel's service as an ambulance driver, which ended with a severe bout of dysentery, the deaths of many close friends, and most traumatic of all, the death of his beloved mother in 1917.

What You'll Hear

Pizzicato strings and harp open this work with a lively texture meant to evoke the strumming of a guitar. Colorfully-orchestrated melodies with distinctive Spanish rhythms spring up from this background, accented by castanets and tambourine, though the mood changes abruptly after a biting orchestral chord. The middle section begins with a soulful and rhythmically free bassoon solo, answered by the strings. The bassoon's melody is picked up by the full orchestra, and works up to a grand emotional climax, before the original mood returns. The closing section is filled with sometimes chaotic good humor before it builds up into a wild conclusion.

Like many composers, Rachmaninoff used the theme from the demonically difficult *Caprice No.24* by the 19th-century violinist Paganini as the basis for his own virtuoso variations. He also worked in references to the funeral chant *Dies irae*, a kind of personal musical signature, appearing in several of Rachmaninoff's works.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia.

Died: March 28, 1943, Hollywood, California.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 43

- **Composed:** July-August, 1934.
- **Premiere:** November 7, 1934; Rachmaninoff as soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski conducting.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1961 (William Doppmann), 1970 (Augustin Anievas), 1983 (Ruth Laredo), 1989 (Vladimir Feltsman), and 2010 (Philippe Bianconi).
- **Duration:** 22:00.

Background

By the 1930s Rachmaninoff was well-established as one of the leading pianists of his age, and spent much of his time touring successfully in Europe and America. In 1930 he visited Switzerland and decided to build a home in the village of Hertenstein, on the shore of Lake Lucerne. The name of his house, “Senar,” was derived from the names “Sergei,” “Natalia,” (his wife) and “Rachmaninoff.” Senar became a beloved retreat until the Rachmaninoffs sought refuge in the United States at the beginning of World War II. He composed two of his final large works while in Switzerland: the *Symphony No.3* (completed in 1938) and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*—his last great solo work for piano.

The choice of Paganini was a telling one. Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) was the model for countless virtuosos to follow. With his astonishing technique and powerful sound, he toured Europe for decades, and was one of Classical music’s first “superstars.” In 1819, he published his ironically-named *24 Caprices* for solo violin. Hardly capricious, this is a series of increasingly challenging technical solos, culminating in the phenomenally difficult *No.24*—a set of variations on an original theme that uses Paganini’s entire battery of advanced playing techniques. Even during Paganini’s lifetime, composers began to use the theme of *No.24* as the basis for their own sets of variations: Liszt, Brahms, and literally dozens of others down to our own day. This theme became something more than just a tune—when it appeared, it was a symbol of virtuosity. Rachmaninoff, himself a towering virtuoso, turned to Paganini’s famous theme as the basis for one of his most challenging piano works. A couple of months before the premiere, Rachmaninoff wrote ironically to a friend: “It is rather difficult. I must begin learning it.”

It is unclear whether or not Rachmaninoff originally conceived of the *Rhapsody* as a piece of program music, but he later suggested a program in a letter to choreographer Mikhael Fokine, who used the *Rhapsody* for a ballet about Paganini. Rachmaninoff suggested to Fokine that he should “...resurrect the legend about

Paganini, who sold his soul to an evil spirit in exchange for perfection in his art and for a woman. All the variations which contain the *Dies irae* represent the evil spirit.” The composer identified Variations 11-18 as “love episodes,” and Variation 19 as “Paganini’s triumph,” but, true to form, the Devil wins in the end and claims the unhappy artist’s soul.

What You’ll Hear

In a move reminiscent of the final movement of Beethoven’s “Eroica” symphony, Rachmaninoff presents the first “variation,” a skeletal version of the theme, before the theme is played in its entirety. When the theme finally appears, it is stated starkly by the strings, with minimal accompaniment from the piano and woodwinds. The succeeding 23 variations wring an amazing amount of musical material from this deceptively modest little idea. Variations 2 through 6 remain close to the outlines of the tune: the piano is supported by sparse orchestration, and the theme is varied with relatively simple ornamental and rhythmic means. In the next four variations (7-10), the mood becomes increasingly sinister, with reminiscences of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*: the *Dies irae* (“Day of Wrath”) chant in Variations 7 and 10, and the ghostly string effects in Variation 9. This demonic tension is resolved in Variation 11, a lush cadenza-style treatment of the theme that must be a tribute to the style of Liszt. Liszt is there for the next few variations as well (12-15), which have a distinctly Hungarian flavor. The climactic point of this section is Variation 18—richly Romantic music familiar from several classic film scores—in which the piano uses the theme in inversion (upside-down) to create lush new harmonic possibilities. Variations 19-24 are a finale that peaks in a solo cadenza before the massive final variation, with its wild piano figuration and the *Dies irae* blasted by the entire brass section. The ending is one of Rachmaninoff’s rare flashes of humor—a flippant little gesture that gives the piano the last word.

This 1803 work was originally dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte, but Beethoven angrily crossed out the title when Napoleon had himself crowned Emperor, and the dedication was changed to celebrate “the memory of a great man.” This bold symphony expresses heroism throughout, from the vast opening and the solemn funeral march, through a blazing scherzo, and the enormous finale.

Ludwig van Beethoven

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

Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No.3 in E-flat Major, Op.55 (“Eroica”)

- **Composed:** 1802-1803.
- **Premiere:** April 7, 1805, Vienna.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1934, 1966, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2011.
- **Duration:** 47:00.

Background

The years 1802-1812 in Beethoven’s life have frequently been labeled the “heroic decade”—the most productive period in his life, and years which saw a new set of personal and musical concerns. In the face of the ultimate challenge to a composer—ever-encroaching deafness—Beethoven’s output over the next decade was indeed heroic: the third through eighth symphonies, the “Razumovsky” quartets, the final two piano concertos, the violin concerto, and *Fidelio*. Beethoven’s writings and the dramatic content of his music during this period—particularly his only opera, *Fidelio*—show an increasing preoccupation with the ideals of human dignity, heroism, and freedom. These works greatly expand the Classical forms, sometimes transcending these forms altogether, and they focus on exhaustive development of thematic material. Nowhere are Beethoven’s “heroic” tendencies more readily apparent than in the “Eroica” symphony.

The well-known story of the “Eroica” symphony’s dedication reflects Beethoven’s political and humanistic concerns during a time of great turmoil across Europe. He had followed the career of Napoleon Bonaparte with great interest, though like many Austrians, he probably began to question the French First Consul’s commitment to the ideals of the French Revolution as France became more and more warlike. The symphony was originally titled “Bonaparte” in recognition of Napoleon’s supposedly republican ideals. However, when he heard of Bonaparte’s coronation as Emperor, Beethoven tore up the dedication page in disgust, exclaiming: “Is he too nothing more than an ordinary man?” (In an early manuscript copy of the symphony, Napoleon’s name has been crossed out so violently that there is a hole in the page.) In the first published edition, Beethoven noted merely that the work was composed “to celebrate the memory of a great man.”

The *Symphony No.3* is formidable in length and depth. It was certainly one of the longest and most complex symphonic works that his Viennese audience had ever heard, and several critics expressed dismay at its “incomprehensibility.” (Beethoven’s fascination with the gigantic works associated with revolutionary France—works by composers such as Cherubini and Méhul—was clearly an

influence in this piece.) This symphony expresses the heroic ideals of struggle and triumph—and though it is not a strictly programmatic piece, despite the evocative “funeral march” of the second movement, it communicates valor and courage. One added dimension that would have been clear to listeners in 1803 is his pointed reference to the music of his *Prometheus* ballet in the final movement. His ballet score had been wildly popular after its premiere two years earlier, and its main theme in the context of a “heroic” symphony would have brought to mind the central character of the ballet: a mythical figure who defied authority to enlighten the human race.

What You’ll Hear

The *Symphony No.3* begins by breaking molds. Most of the later symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, and Beethoven’s own first and second symphonies begin with extensive slow introductions. Beethoven brusquely disposes of the introduction to the first movement (*Allegro con brio*) in two *forte* chords, which lead directly into the opening theme, played by cellos and basses. This theme begins simply enough, but a feeling of restless instability appears almost immediately. An extended transition section culminates in the second main theme, which is first stated by the clarinets and oboes. The exposition ends with an immense closing passage, which serves to introduce even more new melodic material. The development section is heroic both in dimensions and style—this section by itself is longer than many contemporary opening movements. After a climactic series of crashing dissonances, Beethoven introduces a new idea, a melancholy oboe melody. After a recapitulation of the main themes, the movement closes with an enormous coda that continues to develop Beethoven’s ideas.

The funeral march (*Marcia funebre*) is constructed as a rondo, with the somber repeating main theme presented at the outset by the strings. A major-key episode interjects a note of hope, but this is soon overtaken by the main theme. A second contrasting episode begins with bass rumblings and intensifies through a great fugal passage to an impassioned climax. After a final return of the main theme, the movement closes with a stark and haunting coda.

As in the *Symphony No.2* of 1801, the third movement (*Scherzo: Allegro vivace*) is designated as a scherzo (Italian for “joke” or “trifle”), replacing the more usual third-movement minuet used in the symphonies of Beethoven’s contemporaries. This scherzo is set in the same three-part form as the minuet, but it has none of the minuet’s courtly grace (or aristocratic associations). The opening section is a mix of perpetual motion in the strings and a playful melody in the upper woodwinds. The central trio has a more heraldic quality, beginning with a horn call. This call is

answered by the strings and woodwinds. The movement closes with a return of the opening section and a brief coda.

Beethoven was never one to avoid recycling a good tune— to cite merely one example, the famous “Ode to Joy” theme of the *Symphony No.9* appeared in at least two earlier works. The music of the third symphony’s finale (*Allegro molto*) is Beethoven’s final reworking of music that had appeared in three earlier works, beginning with his music for the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1801), a piano contradance of the same year, and the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme from Prometheus* for solo piano. After a brief storm at the opening of this movement (probably a reference to the plot of the *Prometheus* ballet), Beethoven introduces a simple bass line in *pizzicato* strings. This bass line moves through an increasingly complex set of variations, acquiring a countermelody on the way. The central section is a tremendous fugue, which builds towards a broad and triumphant coda. In symphonies by his contemporaries, the fourth movement was typically a rather lightweight, breezy piece, but this finale is a weighty counterbalance to the symphony’s opening movement. If the opening movements of the “Eroica” break the 18th-century mold of symphonic form, this one kicks away the last traces!