

Chapel Hill

Philharmonia

Sunday, 5 May 2024
3:00 p.m.

Moeser Auditorium
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Donald L. Oehler, Music Director

Redemption

War March of the Priests, from *Athalia*, Op. 74

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Piano Concerto in C Minor, Op. 16

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Moderato

Young Artist Concerto Competition Winner, Ivan Menolascino, piano

— *Intermission* —

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Moderato

Allegretto

Largo

Allegro non troppo

Redemption

Our concert presents two works that had a redemptive effect in the composer's lives. One work pulled its author out of deep depression. The other had a vital role in rescuing the composer from severe punishment by an oppressive totalitarian regime. And to begin, we present a familiar march from a largely forgotten stage work.

Mendelssohn: War March of the Priests, from *Athalia*, Op. 74

Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia, like many central European monarchs, admired the Versailles court of Louis XIV, and especially its patronage of the arts. So he established a royal arts institution, and invited Felix Mendelssohn to head its musical program. In the five years he served the king (during which negotiations about his contract became more and more contentious) Mendelssohn provided music for several stage productions at the court. The best known is the score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the last one, in 1845, was for a production of Racine's masterwork, *Athalie*. This tells the biblical story of a usurping queen who worshipped Baal and tried to exterminate all the heirs to the throne of King David. She missed an infant who survived and was hidden from her by Yahweh's priests until he was ready to be crowned king. Then they overthrew the queen and restored the faith.

Racine set his play in the style of Greek tragedy, with a chorus offering commentary between the scenes, so Mendelssohn wrote an overture and set the choruses to music. For the interval before the fifth act he wrote a march representing the entry of the armed priests. A product of Mendelssohn's last years, this march, like the one from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is widely played by itself, especially in band arrangements.

Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto in C Minor, Op 16 (first movement)

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born into affluence. His mother's dowry had included five estates given by her father. But her husband was not a good businessman. One after another, the estates had to be sold to pay debts. So by the time Sergei was studying music seriously the money was running out. And he was not a model student, failing his exams to the point that he had to leave St. Petersburg for Moscow. There he thrived and attracted the attention of Tchaikovsky among others. He wrote a piano concerto and a one-act opera, but the work that most people know from that time is the Prelude in C-sharp Minor. He soon finished a symphony and began work on a second concerto.

Then disaster, in the form of a terrible and brutally panned performance of his symphony. (Some blamed the performers, especially the conductor Glazunov, who was said to be drunk.) This rejection sent Rachmaninoff into a depression that prevented him from composing and finishing the concerto. Friends tried to help, and they had connections. He was sent to visit Tolstoy, which only made it worse. Then someone recommended that he consult a hypnotist, a certain Dr. Dahl. With his patient dozing on the couch, Dr. Dahl intoned to him as follows: "You will begin to write your concerto ... You will work with great facility ... The concerto will be of an excellent quality."



Rachmaninoff during his period of depression

It worked, somehow. Rachmaninoff, now happily freed from self-doubt, completed the concerto and dedicated it to Dr. Dahl. It was first performed on 9 November 1901, with the composer as soloist. This, the first of 145 performances he gave of the concerto, was an immediate and overwhelming

success. Some critics have grumbled, but the public has always loved it, especially for its wealth of directly affecting melody. It is by far the most often performed of his major works. (Its melodies have also given rise to at least three American popular ballads, two by Frank Sinatra.)

The first movement opens in a unique way: the soloist alone plays a series of eight chords alternating with a deep bass octave, ending with a short cadence leading to the first subject. Introduced by the violins and violas in unison, this is a long melodic line passed from one set of voices to another over nearly fifty measures while the soloist plays rolling arpeggios. A transition passage in a faster tempo leads to the relative major, setting up the famous second theme, played by the soloist. After this is elaborated, brasses announce the development, largely based on the second theme. The recapitulation opens with strings in octaves playing the first theme while the soloist accompanies in the style of a march. The second theme is reprised in a dreamy half-tempo by the solo horn. Then things move quickly: a short coda with an *accelerando* leads to three short sharp chords ending the movement.

Thirteen year old **Ivan Menolascino** began studying piano at age five with his father. By seven he was performing solos and accompanying singers and string ensembles in church; he also began studying cello. At ten he began studying with Derison Duarte, his current teacher. His repertoire includes more than a dozen major concertos and a wide variety of solo works. Ivan has won many competitions, including the 2023 MTNA Junior competition for North Carolina, the 2023 DMTA competition, the 2024 Chapel Hill Philharmonia concerto competition, and the 2024 Nakarai competition. This summer he will attend the Bowdoin summer festival to study with Juilliard professor Julian Martin.



Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op.47

One can find instances where a single artistic work marks a crucial point in the artist's career. But the symphony we play is perhaps the only case where a single work may have saved the artist's life.

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in 1906 in St Petersburg. His father was a scientist who worked with Mendeleev, the inventor of the periodic table of elements. At age nine Dmitri studied piano with his mother, and his musical talent was quickly recognized. At thirteen he entered the conservatory, then headed by Glazunov who took him as a protégé. At nineteen he wrote his first symphony as a graduation project, and his composition teacher brought it to the attention of the Leningrad Philharmonic, which performed it on 12 May 1926. The audience reaction was enthusiastic, demanding an encore of the scherzo. This was the breakthrough moment for Shostakovich.

At first he had a concert career as a pianist in addition to his compositions. He wrote two more symphonies, one of which was a pro-Soviet celebration of the October Revolution. In 1934 he wrote his best known stage work, the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. This was a popular success, and for a while it was celebrated in the Soviet press as a work that "could have been written only by a Soviet composer brought up in the best tradition of Soviet culture." But its plot involves explicit sex and murder in scenes vividly portrayed by the music in dissonant harmonies, so there were reservations about it in some quarters.

As 1936 opened, Shostakovich was enjoying his career. His opera was running in three different venues, and he was finishing his fourth symphony, with a premiere planned soon. Then, on 26 January, Josef Stalin and his close associates went to see the opera. They left without a word to the composer, who was present. The next day a blistering editorial appeared in *Pravda*, entitled "Muddle

Instead of Music”, which described the opera’s music as “quacks, hoots, pants, and gasps”. On 6 February another editorial attacked Shostakovich’s music, this time a comic ballet. Fearful of arrest, he went to the head of the committee on culture, who reported to Stalin that he had instructed Shostakovich “to reject formalist errors and in his art to attain something that could be understood by the broad masses.” He also said that the composer admitted his errors. But immediately performances of music by Shostakovich were curtailed or stopped; the opera was canceled; the manager of the orchestra planning to premiere his new symphony told him to withdraw it.

It was not just about him. This was the time of the Stalin Terror, the elimination of his perceived enemies, when people were arrested and simply disappeared, many to be summarily executed. Anything that might be seen as criticizing the regime was proof of disloyalty and subject to punishment. Even expressions of sadness were suspect. And satire was treason.

It was in this atmosphere that Shostakovich began work on a new symphony. It took him only a few months in 1937 to complete it, and it was first performed on 21 November by the Leningrad Philharmonic. The audience reaction was tumultuous: in a half hour ovation the conductor waved the score over his head to show it to the shouting crowd.

Official reaction was more guarded; it was suspected that the cheering first audience had been packed with friends of the composer. But eventually it was decided that Shostakovich had learned his lesson, as the new symphony proved. Soon it was being called “a masterpiece of socialist realism.”

Shostakovich was still suspect, and he knew it. For a time he slept in the hallway outside his apartment, so that a nighttime arrest would not disturb his family. During the war he composed a highly praised symphony as a tribute to the resistance in the siege of Leningrad. But in 1948 he, Prokofiev, and Khachaturian were harshly chastised publicly for failing to produce works that appealed to the Soviet masses. Not until Stalin died in 1953 could these composers (along with other Soviet artists) breathe a bit more easily.



Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Khachaturian in 1948

The fifth symphony is decidedly more conservative in style than the earlier works, but Shostakovich had already been moving in that direction. He was much taken with the works of Mahler, and one can find traces of that influence in the fourth symphony — which was eventually completed and performed for the first time in 1961, well after Stalin’s death.

Shostakovich remained reticent about the “meaning” of the fifth symphony, but he did say of the first audiences: “Of course they understood; they understood what was happening around them, and they understood what the Fifth was all about.” Others have had plenty to say. In his 1979 book *Testimony*, which he claims was largely dictated to him by the composer, Solomon Volkov asserts that in the works from 1936 on there were many coded anti-regime messages. The composer’s son Maxim, a well-known conductor, first disavowed Volkov’s book, but after the Soviet Union fell in 1989 he changed his mind. And several musical friends of the composer also think Volkov has it right.

Modern audiences, who have no personal reasons to look for hidden inferences, have made the fifth symphony a concert favorite. Of the fifteen symphonies Shostakovich wrote it is the most popular.

