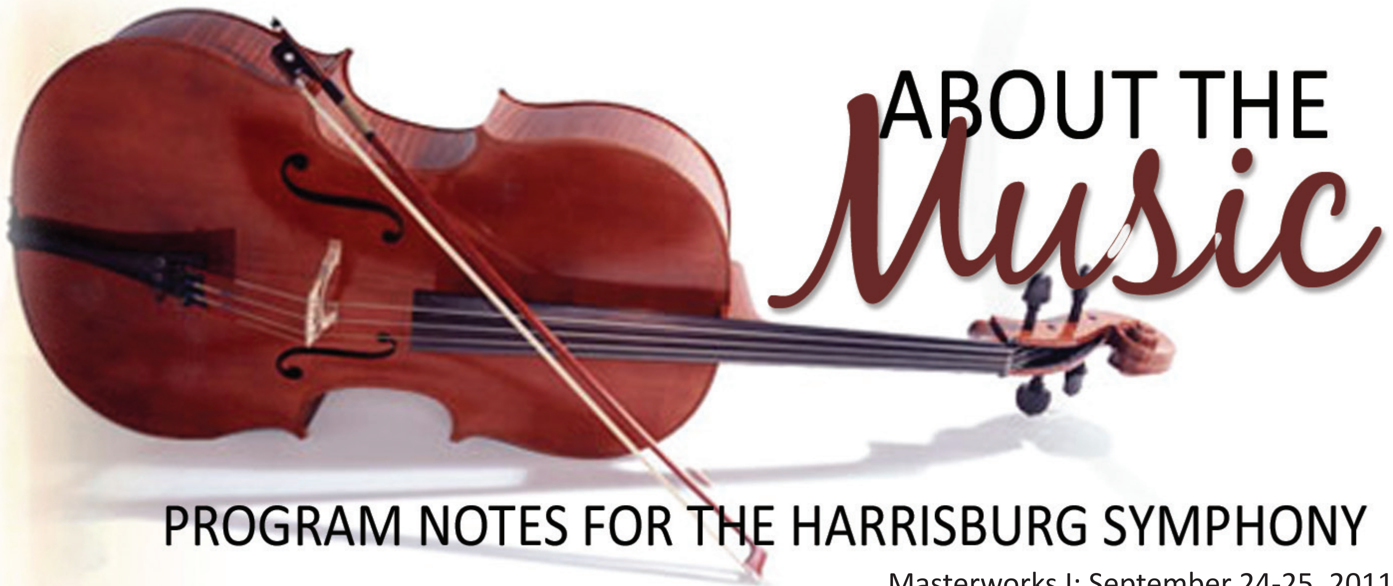
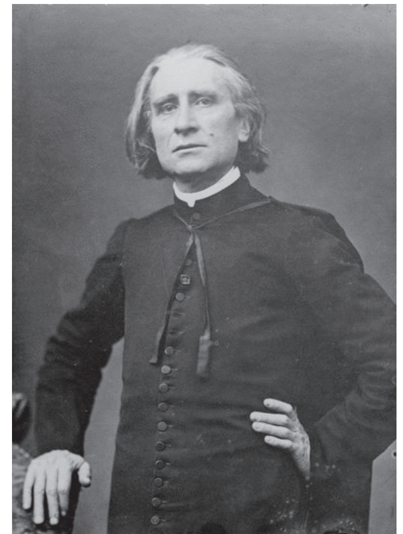


Masterworks I: September 24-25, 2011

by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, (1850; orchestrated 1855) — Franz Liszt



Born October 22, 1811 in Doborján, Hungary (now Raiding, Austria)
Died July 31, 1886 in Bayreuth, Germany

Franz Liszt was a most unusual Hungarian patriot. Though born in Hungary, he was raised in the French language (he never did learn Hungarian very well, despite several attempts), moved with his family to Vienna at the age of ten, and visited his homeland only infrequently thereafter. Yet he maintained an interest in Hungarian music throughout his life, and wrote numerous works incorporating national melodies: the nineteen Hungarian Rhapsodies and several other pieces for solo piano (six of the Rhapsodies were later transcribed for orchestra), a symphonic poem, a Mass written for the coronation of Emperor Franz Josef as King of Hungary in 1867, and the Hungarian Fantasy for piano and orchestra. In addition to his original compositions, he published and edited ten volumes of Hungarian Folk Melodies between 1839 and 1847, and followed them with a 450-page thesis on The Gypsies and Their Music in Hungary, issued in French (!) in 1859. Liszt was convinced that he was immortalizing the true folk music of his native country in these compositions, among the earliest works of the "nationalism" movement that gained such importance during following decades. As the 19th century neared its end, however, it became apparent through systematic researches into Eastern European music that Liszt's basic theory had been wrong.

Liszt believed that Hungarian folk music was derived from the Gypsies. However, it was shown that exactly the opposite was true — that the Gypsies, who can be traced only to the 15th century in Hungary, assimilated the local idioms into their songs and methods of performance, mixed them with musical formulae from other lands, especially those of the Near East, and had, by the 19th century, evolved a kind of urban salon music that Liszt mistook for original folk art.

Liszt's ethnomusicological blunder, however, in no way diminishes the intrinsic value of his original "Hungarian" compositions, which remain excellent examples of his art and atmospheric souvenirs of a particularly colorful kind of music, whether based on authentic folksong or not. Many of these works were built around the performance method of the Hungarian national dance, the Czardas, which alternates (at a sign from the dancer to the orchestra) between a slow movement — "Lassu" — and a fast one — "Friss." To describe their resultant free structure and quick contrasts, Liszt borrowed the term "Rhapsody" from literature, saying that it was meant to indicate the "fantastic, epic quality" of this music. He may have been the first to use this title in a musical context, just as he had introduced the word "recital" to describe his solo concerts of the 1840s.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op. 1 — Sergei Rachmaninoff (1890-1891)

Born April 1, 1873 in Oneg, district of Novgorod, Russia
Died March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills, California

In the summer of 1890, while still a student at the Moscow Conservatory, Rachmaninoff began a grand Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor. (He had abandoned a similar attempt two years earlier.) The first movement was finished quickly, but he did not return to the piece until the following year. On July 20, 1891, he wrote to Mikhail Slonov, "On July 6th, I fully completed composing and scoring my Piano Concerto. You can imagine what a job that was! I wrote from five in the morning till eight in the evening, so after finishing the work I was terribly tired. Afterwards I rested for a few days. While working I never feel fatigue (on the contrary — pleasure). With me fatigue appears only when I realize that a big labor is finished. I am pleased with the Concerto." Rachmaninoff gave the Concerto's premiere on a student concert at the Moscow Conservatory on March 17, 1892; the school's director, Vasily Safonoff, conducted. "At the rehearsals the 18-year-old Rachmaninoff showed the same stubbornly calm character that we knew from our comradely gatherings," wrote his fellow student Mikhail Bukinik. "Safonoff, who ordinarily conducted the compositions of his students, would brutally and unceremoniously change anything he wished in these scores, cleaning them up and cutting parts to make them more playable.... But Safonoff had a hard time with Rachmaninoff. This student not only refused categorically to accept alterations, but also had the audacity to stop Safonoff (as conductor), pointing out his errors in tempo and nuance. This was obviously displeasing to Safonoff, but being intelligent, he understood the rights of the author, though a beginner, to make his own interpretation, and he tried to take the edge off any awkwardness. Besides, Rachmaninoff's talent as a composer was so obvious, and his quiet self-assurance made such an impression on all, that even the omnipotent Safonoff had to yield."

The new Concerto enjoyed little success at its premiere, though one reviewer allowed that it showed "taste, tension, youthful sincerity and obvious knowledge; already there is much promise." Rachmaninoff himself thought the work in its original version to be flawed. Though he played the Concerto frequently, his dissatisfaction with it remained, and, after talking about doing so for years, he finally undertook its revision in October 1917 — just as the Russian Revolution erupted in the streets around his Moscow flat. "I sat at the writing table all day without troubling about the rattle of machine guns and rifle shots," he noted in his diary. In December, he fled to Finland with other members of the aristocracy, supported himself for a year in Scandinavia by giving concerts, and settled in the United States in 1918. The revision of the First Concerto (which was undertaken after the composition of the Second and Third Piano Concertos) was extensive, especially in its alterations to the work's form and orchestration. The Concerto's thematic material, however, with its sense of bursting, youthful impetuosity, was largely retained.

Though the opening movement follows the traditional concerto form, its greatest appeal arises from the melancholy nature of its themes, a quality at which Rachmaninoff excelled from his earliest works, and the virtuosic pianism required of the soloist, most notably in the mountainous solo cadenza that occurs near the end. The brief Andante is rhapsodic in spirit and lyrical in style, with the piano strewing sweeping arabesques upon the subdued orchestral accompaniment. The finale is aggressive and virtuosic, with a quiet center section to provide contrast before the brilliant closing pages of the work.

Symphony No. 5, Op. 100 (1944) — Sergei Prokofiev

Born April 23, 1891 in Sontzovka, Russia
Died March 5, 1953 in Moscow

"In the Fifth Symphony I wanted to sing the praises of the free and happy man — his strength, his generosity and the purity of his soul. I cannot say I chose this theme; it was born in me and had to express itself." The "man" that Prokofiev invoked in this description of the philosophy embodied in this great Symphony could well have been the composer himself. The work was written in the summer

of 1944, one of the happiest times he knew. His home life following marriage to his second wife four years earlier was contented and fulfilling; he was the most famous and often-performed of all Soviet composers; and Russia was winning the war. In fact, the success of the premiere of this work was buoyed by the announcement immediately before the concert that the Russian army had just scored a resounding victory on the River Vistula. The composer's mind was reflected in the fluency and emotional depth of his music.

Prokofiev never hinted that there was a program underlying the Fifth Symphony except to say that "it is a symphony about the spirit of man." During the difficult years of World War II, Soviet music, according to Boris Schwartz, "was meant to console and uplift, to encourage and exhort; nothing else mattered." Though some, like Martin Bookspan, find "ominous threats of brutal warfare" lurking beneath the surface of Prokofiev's music, there is really nothing here to match such symphonies born of the violence of war as Shostakovich's Seventh and Vaughan Williams' Fourth. Rather it is a work that reflects the composer's philosophy after he returned to Russia in the 1930s from many years of living in western Europe and America. In his 1946 autobiographical sketch, he wrote, "It is the duty of the composer, like the poet, the sculptor or the painter, to serve his fellow men, to beautify human life and point the way to a radiant future. Such is the immutable code of art as I see it."

The Symphony's opening movement is a large sonata form in moderate tempo that begins without introduction. The wide-ranging main theme is presented simply by flute and bassoon before being taken up by the strings; flute and oboe sing the lyrical second theme. Two brief motives close the exposition. One, characterized by its dotted rhythms, arrives on the crest of the movement's first climax; the other is an angular, skittish fragment tossed off by high woodwinds, violins and cellos. The development gives prominence in its first portion to the opening theme and the skittish motive from the end of the exposition; it later focuses on the second theme and the arch-shaped complementary melody. The recapitulation is heralded by the stentorian sounds of the brass choir announcing the main theme.

The second movement, the Symphony's scherzo, is one of those pieces that Prokofiev would have classified as "motoric": an incessant two-note rhythmic motive drives the music forward through its entire first section. The principal theme arises from the solo clarinet, and much of what follows is a series of loose variations on this cheeky melody. The movement's central section is framed by a bold, strutting phrase from the woodwinds adorned with the piquant "wrong notes" that spice so much of Prokofiev's quick music. The clarinets and violas play the main theme of this middle section over another mechanized rhythm that gives these pages, despite their triple meter, the nature of a propulsive march. The strutting phrase reappears. The following section begins slowly, and, like the stoking of some giant engine, gradually gains momentum until the opening scherzo returns to bring the movement to a riveting close.

The brooding third movement is in a large three-part design. The outer sections are supported by the deliberate rhythmic tread of the low instruments used as underpinning for a plaintive melody initiated by the clarinets. A sweeping theme begun by the tuba serves as the basis for the middle section. An extended, searing climax links this section with the return of the plaintive melody high in the strings. The touching coda is suspended in the piccolo and strings high above a shimmering string accompaniment.

The finale opens with a short introduction comprising two gestures based on the main theme of the first movement: a short woodwind phrase answered by the strings, and a chorale for cellos. The main body of the movement is a sonata-rondo structure propelled by an insistent rhythmic motive. The movement accumulates a large amount of thematic material as it progresses, though it is the solo clarinet playing the main theme which begins each of the important structural sections of the form. A furious, energetic coda ignites several of the movement's themes into a grand closing blaze of orchestral color.

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