

About the Music

by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

The Comedians, Op. 26 (1938)

— Dmitri Kabalevsky

Born December 30, 1904 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Died February 14, 1987 in Moscow

Dmitri Kabalevsky, one of the most prominent figures in Soviet music, was born in St. Petersburg on December 30, 1904. Though Dmitri showed considerable talent from his earliest years as a self-taught pianist, his father, a mathematician in government service, provided him with a general rather than a specifically musical education that also uncovered abilities in painting and poetry, activities he continued throughout his life. In 1918, the family moved to Moscow, where Dmitri furthered his liberal training while studying piano at the Scriabin Musical Institute. During the following years, he concentrated on the piano by giving lessons, serving as accompanist, and providing background music for silent movies. Short etudes that he wrote for his pupils ignited his interest in composition, and he entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1925 as a student of Nikolai Miaskovsky. His first important compositions (a piano sonata, a string quartet and a piano concerto) date from the late 1920s; they received enough recognition that he graduated from the Conservatory in 1930 with special honors.

After writing articles for the journal *Sovremennaya Muzika* (“*Contemporary Music*”) beginning in 1927, Kabalevsky became a significant contributor and spokesperson in Russian musical life: he was a charter member of the Union of Soviet Composers, a senior editor in the music publishing house of Musgiz, principal editor of *Sovetskaya Muzika*, professor of composition at the Moscow Conservatory and, in 1956, a cultural representative of his country to the United States. In 1940, he became a member of the Communist Party; that same year he was awarded the Order of Merit, and six years later received the Stalin Prize. He died in Moscow on February 14, 1987. Kabalevsky’s works, written largely in an easily accessible idiom characterized by conventional melody, traditional tonal harmony colored with some nose-thumbing, Prokofievian dissonances, and clear, simple forms, include seven operas (*Colas Breugnon* is the best known), four symphonies, numerous independent orchestral scores, six concertos (three for piano, two for cello and one for violin), various chamber pieces and songs, many patriotic choral and vocal compositions, and much incidental music for stage and film.

In 1938, Kabalevsky contributed incidental music to a production of Mark Daniel’s play *The Inventor and the Comedian* staged by the Central Children’s Theater in Moscow. (The Theater must have been an impressive operation. Two years earlier, the ensemble’s director, Natalie Satz, had convinced Prokofiev to write a piece introducing the instruments of the orchestra to her young patrons — it was called *Peter and the Wolf*.) Kabalevsky derived a suite, titled *The Comedians*, from the score in 1939, and the music was first heard in that form in Leningrad the following year. “The composer’s aim,” according to Harold Sheldon, who edited the score of

The Comedians for its American publication, “was to create a number of gay, characteristic pieces and genre pictures, depicting the life of an itinerant company of comedians.” Humor abounds. Indeed, the suite contains one of the funniest pieces in the entire orchestral repertory — a *Waltz* that can never quite get its melody and accompaniment synchronized and finally just gives up all together, rather like a five-year-old who has forgotten the lines of his poem for the holiday pageant and shuffles, thoroughly bemused, off stage. *The Comedians* more than lives up to its title.

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30 (1909)

— Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born April 1, 1873 in Oneg (near Novgorod), Russia

Died March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills, California

The worlds of technology and art sometimes brush against each other in curious ways. In 1909, it seems, Sergei Rachmaninoff wanted one of those new mechanical wonders — an automobile. And thereupon hangs the tale of his first visit to America.

The impresario Henry Wolfson of New York arranged a thirty-concert tour for the 1909-1910 season for Rachmaninoff so that he could play and conduct his own works in a number of American cities. Rachmaninoff was at first hesitant about leaving his family and home for such an extended overseas trip, but the generous financial remuneration was too tempting to resist. With a few tour details still left unsettled, Wolfson died suddenly in the spring of 1909, and the composer was much relieved that the journey would probably be cancelled. Wolfson’s agency had a contract with Rachmaninoff, however, and during the summer finished the arrangements for his appearances so that the composer-pianist-conductor was obliged to leave for New York as scheduled. Trying to look on the bright side of this daunting prospect, Rachmaninoff wrote to his long-time friend Nikita Morozov, “I don’t want to go. But then perhaps, after America I’ll be able to buy myself that automobile.... It may not be so bad after all!” It was for the American tour that Rachmaninoff composed his Third Piano Concerto.

The Concerto consists of three large movements. The first is a modified sonata form that begins with a haunting theme, recalled in the later movements, which sets perfectly the Concerto’s mood of somber intensity. The *espressivo* second theme is presented by the pianist, whose part has, by this point, abundantly demonstrated the staggering technical challenge that this piece offers to the soloist, a characteristic Rachmaninoff had disguised by the simplicity of the opening. The development section is concerned mostly with transformations of fragments from the first theme. A massive cadenza, separated into two parts by the recall of the main theme by the woodwinds, leads to the recapitulation. The earlier material is greatly abbreviated in this closing section, with just a single presentation of the opening melody and a brief, staccato version of the subsidiary theme.

The second movement, subtitled *Intermezzo*, which Dr. Otto Kinkleday described in his notes for the New York premiere as “tender and melancholy, yet not tearful,” is a set of free variations with an inserted episode.

“One of the most dashing and exciting pieces of music ever composed for piano and orchestra” is how Patrick Piggot described the finale. The movement is structured in three large sections. The first part has an abundance of themes that Rachmaninoff skillfully derived from those of the opening movement. The relationship is further strengthened in the finale’s second section, where both themes from the opening movement are recalled in slow tempo. The pace again quickens, and the music from the first part of the finale returns with some modifications. A brief solo cadenza leads to the coda, a dazzling final stanza with fistfuls of chords propelling the headlong rush to the dramatic closing gestures.

Symphony No. 1, Op. 10 (1925-1926)

— Dmitri Shostakovich

Born September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975 in Moscow

Shostakovich entered the Leningrad Conservatory in 1919 as a student of piano, composition, counterpoint, harmony and orchestration. He was thirteen. His father died three years later, leaving a widow and children with no means of support, so Dmitri’s mother, a talented amateur musician and an unswerving believer in her son’s talent and the benefits of his training at the Conservatory, took a job as a typist to provide the necessities for the family. She constantly sought help from official sources to sustain Dmitri’s career, but by autumn 1924, it became necessary for the young musician to find work despite the press of his studies and the frail state of his health. (He spent several weeks in 1924 at a sanatorium to treat his tuberculosis.) Victor Seroff described Shostakovich’s new job: as pianist in a movie house. “The little theater was old, drafty and smelly,” wrote Seroff. “It had not seen fresh paint or a scrubbing for years, the walls were peeling, and the dirt lay thick in every corner. Three times a day a new crowd packed the small house; they carried the snow in with them on their shoes and overcoats. They munched food that they brought with them, apples and sunflower seeds that they spat on the floor. The heat of the packed bodies in their damp clothes, added to the warmth of two small stoves, made the bad air stifling hot by the end of the performance. Then the doors were flung open to let the crowd out and to air the hall before the next show, and cold damp drafts swept through the house. Down in front below the screen sat Dmitri, his back soaked with perspiration, his near-sighted eyes in their horn-rimmed glasses peering upwards to follow the story, his fingers pounding away on the raucous upright piano. Late at night he trudged home in a thin coat and summer cap, with no warm gloves or galoshes, and arrived exhausted around one o’clock in the morning.” The taxing job not only sapped his strength and health, but also made composing virtually impossible — and it was composing that he burned to do. By spring the family decided that he would leave this musical purgatory to devote himself to composition. Shostakovich began the First Symphony immediately, and the hopes of his family were pinned on its eventual success.

By early 1925, Shostakovich had completed his formal studies at the Leningrad Conservatory, and he was seeking to gain a reputation beyond the walls of the school. He chose to write a symphony — a grand, public piece rather than a small-

scale chamber work — as his graduation exercise: “the product of my culminating studies at the Conservatory,” as he called it. The new work, his first for orchestra, was grounded in the Russian traditions of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov and Scriabin that his composition teacher Maximilian Steinberg had passed on to him, but also allowed for such modern influences as the music of Hindemith, Prokofiev, Mahler and Stravinsky.

The Symphony was completed early in 1926, and scheduled for its premiere in May, though his family’s economic hardship was so severe at the time that Shostakovich could not afford to have the parts copied and the score published. The Conservatory, as a gesture of faith in the young composer’s talent, underwrote the expenses, and the Symphony was first displayed to the world on May 12th. It was an immediate success. Shostakovich was proclaimed the leader of the first generation of post-Revolution Soviet composers (Prokofiev had left for the West in 1918), and the twenty-year-old musician became a celebrity at home and abroad in a matter of months. The conductor Bruno Walter performed the First Symphony in Berlin in 1927, and Leopold Stokowski led the Philadelphia Orchestra in the score’s American premiere a year later. Each year for the rest of his life, Shostakovich set aside May 12th as the day he celebrated his “birthday as a composer.”

The first movement follows a form derived from traditional sonata-allegro. The exposition consists of four theme groups, presented almost like large tiles in a mosaic: a melody with long notes presented by the solo trumpet, with a cheeky retort from the bassoon; a scalar theme punctuated by spiky intervals given by the violins alone; a mock-march strutted out by the clarinet; and a cockeyed waltz from the flute. All four themes are whipped together in the development, which reaches a noisy climax before the themes are recapitulated — backwards. First the waltz is heard (flute again), then the mock-march (low strings), followed by the long-note melody (clarinet) and a compressed version of the scalar tune (briefly, in the lower strings). This music exudes the distinctive personality, technical craftsmanship and wry wit that mark the best of Shostakovich’s works.

The second movement is a sardonic scherzo built on a cocky theme initiated by the clarinet. The woodwind-dominated trio, contrasting in mood and meter, is icy and detached in its quiet intensity. The third movement, full of pathos, begins with a lamenting theme for the oboe. A short, rhetorical gesture insinuates itself as accompaniment, and serves as transition to the second theme, a dirge, again entrusted to the oboe. Both themes are recalled, with the rhetorical gesture used as the bridge to the finale. A swell on the snare drum leads directly to the slow introduction of the closing movement. A snappy, chromatic melody from the clarinet is followed at some distance by the movement’s second theme, a broad melody with Tchaikowskian sweep (and Prokofievian “wrong notes”). These two themes, along with the rhetorical gesture (in mirror image — i.e., rising rather than falling) dominate the remainder of the movement, which ends with a stentorian proclamation from the full orchestra.

HARRISBURG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday, May 14, 2016 at 8:00 p.m.

Sunday, May 15, 2016 at 3:00 p.m.

STUART MALINA, Conducting

ANN SCHEIN, Piano

The Comedians, Op. 26

Dmitri Kabalevsky
(1904-1987)

Prologue: Allegro vivace

Comedians' Galop: Presto

March: Moderato

Waltz: Moderato

Pantomime: Sostenuto e pesante

Intermezzo: Allegro scherzando

Little Lyrical Scene: Andantino semplice

Gavotte: Allegretto

Scherzo: Presto assai e molto leggiero

Epilogue: Allegro molto e con brio

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30

Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873-1943)

Allegro ma non tanto

Intermezzo: Adagio —

Finale: Alla breve

— INTERMISSION —

Symphony No. 1, Op. 10

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906-1975)

Allegretto

Allegro

Lento —

Lento — Allegro molto