

Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and Joyce Yang – March 22, 2009

SUMMA
For String Orchestra

Arvo Pärt
b.1935

Born near Tallinn, Estonia's capital, composer Arvo Pärt began his formal musical education in 1954 at the Tallinn Music Secondary School, interrupted a year later to fulfill his National Service obligation, which he did as oboist and side-drummer in an army band. He entered the Tallinn Conservatory in 1957 while simultaneously working as a recording engineer with Estonian Radio. Although still a student, he composed music for the stage and film. By the time he graduated in 1963, he was already considered a professional composer.

Immediately preceding World War II, Estonia had been bloodlessly annexed by Soviet Union, leaving the young Pärt with only limited access to the musical developments in the West. His early compositions, including his first two symphonies, employed serial techniques, but he soon tired of the rigid rules of twelve-tone composition. After studying French and Flemish choral music from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, including the great composers of this period, Guillaume de Machaut, Johannes Ockeghem, Jakob Obrecht and Josquin Despres, Pärt began incorporating the style and spirit of early European polyphony into his own compositions, beginning in 1971 with his *Symphony No. 3*.

After a lengthy period of silence during which Pärt attempted to develop his own personal voice, he emerged in 1976 with a technique he called "tintinnabuli" (little bells), to which he has mostly adhered to this day. He describes the technique as follows: "I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements – with one voice, two voices. I build with primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells and that is why I call it tintinnabulation." The basic guiding principle behind the technique involves composing two simultaneous voices as one line – one voice moving stepwise to and from a central pitch, first up then down, and the other sounding the notes of the triad (chord) founded on that pitch. The first products of Pärt's new voice were the popular *Fratres*, the moving *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* and *Tabula Rasa*. His compositions have been used as background music in more than fifty movies and TV programs.

The forced isolation behind the Iron Curtain and the endless struggle against Soviet bureaucracy forced Pärt to leave Estonia in 1980, finally settling in West Berlin. Since then, the majority of his compositions have been settings of religious texts.

Pärt composed *Summa*, a setting of the Latin version of the Creed in 1977 for four solo voices (SATB); in 1990-91 he transcribed it for violin, two violas and cello, again for string quartet, and finally for string orchestra. *Summa* employs the free rhythm of plainchant and restricted harmonies, free of chromaticism and dissonance. While the liturgical text has been removed, the repeated melodic elements and gentle pulsing of the music create its meditative ambience.

PIANO CONCERTO No. 2 IN C MINOR, Op. 18.

Sergey Rachmaninov
1873-1943

Sergey Rachmaninov grew up in a middle-class musical family, but under strained economic conditions. His father, a gambler and an alcoholic, squandered the family's fortune to the point that eventually his mother and father separated and she had to sell what remained of the family's assets and move into a small apartment in St. Petersburg. Sergey – whose care in better times would have been entrusted to a nanny – consequently grew up with little supervision.

His schooling suffered as a result. Although he showed early promise as a pianist and obtained a scholarship to study at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, the administration threatened to expel him for failing to attend classes. He subsequently transferred to the Moscow Conservatory where his initial attempts at composing were discouraged by his mentor. Nevertheless, he continued to march to his own drummer, defying his teacher and transferring to classes in counterpoint and composition.

Clearly, his sense of his own worth was more accurate than that of his professors. While still a student, he produced a string of successful works, including the tone poem *Prince Rostislav*, his First Piano Trio, and a flood songs and piano pieces. For his graduation in 1892 he composed the opera *Aleko*, which won him the highest distinction, the Great Gold Medal. The same year he also composed the Prelude in c-sharp minor, a work whose inordinate fame haunted him all his life because audiences always expected – and demanded – it as an encore at his performances as one of history's greatest pianists.

By 1895 Rachmaninov felt confident enough to compose a symphony. The premiere took place in St. Petersburg in 1897 but was a dismal failure, in large part because to the shoddy conducting of Alexander Glazunov. Whereas earlier defeats had produced in Rachmaninov creative defiance, this disappointment brought on a severe depression. For three years he was unable to do any significant composing. After consulting numerous physicians and advisors, even asking old Leo Tolstoy for help, he finally went for therapy and hypnosis in 1900 to Dr. Nikolay Dahl, an internist who studied hypnosis and rudimentary psychotherapy in Paris. The result was one of the first well-known successes of modern psychotherapy. Although the composer was able to return to creative work, relapses into depression dogged him for the rest of his life. Significantly, all his large instrumental compositions are in minor keys, and one of the melodic themes recurring in many of his compositions is the *Dies irae* chant from the Catholic mass for the dead that reminds mourners of the terrors of the day of judgment.

Rachmaninov expressed his gratitude to Dr. Dahl by dedicating the Second Piano Concerto to him. The first performance of the complete work took place in November 1901 with the composer at the piano and was an instant success. It is Rachmaninov's most frequently performed and recorded orchestral work and its popularity has never waned. It even found its way into Hollywood as background music to the World War II movie *Brief Encounter*.

The first movement opens with dark, plodding unaccompanied chords on the piano that increase in intensity and volume, gradually joined by the orchestra and leading to the first theme. The effect is like the tolling of the giant low-pitched bells common in Russian churches. The second broadly romantic theme is a Rachmaninov signature. The lyrical mood is sustained throughout until the coda with its sudden conclusion in a dramatic burst of energy.

The second movement opens with muted strings, following by the piano left hand hesitantly accompanying the high woodwinds. The right hand then joins the woodwinds in dreamy interplay. After a brief energetic cadenza, the atmosphere of the beginning returns.

The beginning of the third movement in the lower range of the orchestra is deceptively gentle, breaking into a sudden sparkling, drivingly rhythmic piano cadenza. The main theme, introduced by the violas and oboes, is intensely passionate – like the second theme of the opening movement. After a surprisingly calm episode, the tempo increases to *presto*; and after another short cadenza the highest instruments in the orchestra take up the theme, culminating in a glittering climax.

SYMPHONY NO. 8 IN G MAJOR, Op.88

Antonín Dvořák
1841-1904

Given his place as one of the foremost composers of the nineteenth century, Antonín Dvořák was something of a late bloomer, but not for want of musical talent and promise. Dvořák's father was a butcher and had expected his son to go into the family trade. Only after his uncle had agreed to finance the boy's musical education was he able to follow his passion for music. Trained as a church organist, his first job was as a performer, playing principal viola in Prague's new Provincial Theatre Orchestra. During this time, he practiced composition, producing songs, symphonies and entire operas but achieved no recognition until he was in his 30s.

After winning national prizes for several years in the 1870s, however, his work came to the attention of Johannes Brahms, who gave him his first real break. The older composer, whose reputation was at its height, promoted Dvořák to his own publisher, Simrock, who in turn offered Dvořák his first commission, the Op. 46 set of Slavonic Dances. Brahms and the music critic Eduard Hanslick urged him to move to Vienna, but Dvořák's love for his native soil kept him in Prague. Like his older nationalist compatriot Bedřich Smetana, he freely incorporated folk elements into his music, utilizing characteristic peasant rhythms and melodic motives but never actually quoting entire folk melodies. Dvořák was never happier than when he could work in a simple country environment with its Czech language and customs.

It was in just such surroundings that he composed the Eighth Symphony in a white heat in 1889. He began sketching it on August 26, finished the orchestration on November 8 and premiered it in Prague in February the following year. More than his other symphonies, it reflects his love for his native culture. It is the most "nationalistic" of his nine symphonies.

By the time he composed the Eighth Symphony, Dvořák was well known and respected, but he nevertheless had problems publishing it. Simrock now saw quicker profits in short piano pieces – more Slavonic Dances, chamber music and songs – and offered a trifling sum for the Symphony. As a result, it was known for a long time as Dvořák's "English Symphony" because it was published by London's Novello, who paid the composer handsomely.

Surprisingly, the Symphony constantly shifts between the major and minor modes. It opens in g minor with a solemn introduction for cellos and the lower winds, not unlike a funeral march. This contrasts with the cheery flute melody that dominates the movement, although the solemn introduction reappears twice, once unchanged and the second time brighter with the full orchestra and in a higher register.

The slow movement, the longest and most complex of the four, creates a particular kind of tension, both musical and emotional. It begins with what might best be described as a recitative for orchestra. The long opening, sometimes discursive, sometimes halting, consists of numerous motivic fragments that are later developed throughout the movement – including a bird call heard first in the flute and oboe – completed after many “false starts” to become the movement’s single full-fledged melody. However, Dvorák does not linger on the sunny optimism of this melody, returning to the more passionate, tonally unstable material in which he further develops his expansive collection of motivic ideas. After several more mood swings, including a passionate climax in the brasses, it is the birdcall – perhaps representing the calming power of nature – that has the final say.

The *Scherzo* is a sad, waltz-like peasant dance with a nostalgic woodwind melody. The lovely Trio, a gentle waltz, is also used for the coda, but at double the tempo, a device Brahms had used in his Second Symphony.

The Finale opens with a trumpet fanfare theme. It is transformed into a slow dance tune in the lower strings that undergoes a series of variations. A lively transformation of the main theme, including a resounding trill for the entire horn section, serves as a refrain.

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