

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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We open this concert with our first-ever performance of Schubert's *Symphony No. 3*, a spirited work written while he was still a teenager. Another Madison Symphony Orchestra first is Bartók's *Suite from "The Miraculous Mandarin."* This colorful, but challenging score tells a dark and disturbing story. After intermission we welcome back pianist Yefim Bronfman for Rachmaninoff's virtuoso showpiece, the *Piano Concerto No. 3*. This is his fourth appearance with the MSO. He previously played here in 2003 (Beethoven, *Piano Concerto No. 3*), 2008 (Prokofiev, *Piano Concerto No. 3*), and 2014 (Beethoven, *Piano Concertos No. 2 and No. 5*).

This work, written when Schubert was 18, is a fine example of his all-too-rarely heard early symphonies.

Franz Schubert

Born: January 31, 1797, Vienna, Austria.

Died: November 19, 1828, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 3 in D Major, D. 200

- **Composed:** between May 24 and July 19, 1815.
- **Premiere:** Date unknown, but it may have been performed in Vienna by the amateur orchestra led by Schubert's friend Otto Hatwig.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 25:00.

Background

Schubert himself likely played the viola part in an informal premiere of this symphony at the home of one of his many Viennese friends.

The early symphonies of Franz Schubert are infrequently played today—and that is a shame. These are bright and vivacious works, written with a song-composer's gift for unforgettable melodies and an increasingly confident grasp on orchestral writing. Growing up in Vienna, Schubert was of course surrounded by the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, and was certainly well aware of the more radical symphonies produced at the time by Beethoven. He also studied privately

with the court composer Antonio Salieri. Not surprisingly, his *Symphony No. 1* (1813; written while he was a student at the City College in Vienna) and *Symphony No. 2* (early 1815), are rather conservative in style, following the forms of Haydn and Mozart. He began work on the *Symphony No. 3* on May 24, 1815, but set it aside after completing only the beginning of the first movement. He returned to the symphony on July 11, completing it in just eight days. At this time, the 18-year-old composer was working as a teacher at his father's school but 1815 was a tremendously prolific year. In addition to the symphonies *Nos. 2-3*, Schubert completed four small operas, two masses, and some 145 songs! He does not seem to have had a particular purpose in mind for *Symphony No. 3*, and in fact, like all of his symphonies, it was not published until long after his death. However, it was probably played by an amateur orchestra that had had its beginnings as a Schubert family quartet, in which Franz played viola. By late 1815, the group had grown into a small orchestra that met regularly at the home of violinist Otto Hatwig.

What You'll Hear

This symphony is laid out in four movements:

- A movement in sonata form with a formal introduction.
- A calm *Allegretto* with a contrasting middle section.
- A vigorous minuet, combined with a rustic German country dance.
- A brilliantly quick finale in Italian comic opera style.

Schubert uses a small “Classical” orchestra for this compact symphony: strings, pairs of woodwinds, horns and trumpets, and timpani. The influence of Haydn and Mozart is clearly there, but there is also a hint of Rossini, whose comic operas had become phenomenally successful popular in Vienna at the time. It opens with a long Haydnesque introduction (*Adagio maestoso*) that spends much of its time in D minor. But the character and tempo change abruptly for the body of the movement (*Allegro con brio*), and the clarinet introduces a good-humored main theme in D Major. This continues into a brisk transition that uses a sweeping figure from the introduction. The second theme, played by the oboe, is equally jolly. A short but intense development focuses on a figure from the first theme. In the recapitulation, Schubert, introduces a few surprises: expanding and developing the transition, and having the clarinet play both main themes. The transitional figure appears again at the end, now transformed into a forceful coda.

In place of the usual slow movement, Schubert provides a relaxed *Allegretto*. (In this case, his model may have been Beethoven's seventh and eighth symphonies, which had been played in Vienna a few years earlier.) This is set in scherzo form, beginning with a gentle tune in two repeated sections. In the middle, there is a

more pastoral episode, led by solo clarinet, and the movement ends with a repeat of the opening music. Schubert follows Viennese tradition with a *Menuetto* as the third movement—but this, like many of Haydn’s minuets, is rather rough-edged and fast (*vivace*) music, with its oddly-placed accents, has little to do with the old courtly dance. The central trio section, led by the oboe and bassoon, and accompanied in German country dance band style, is a *Ländler*, a German dance tremendously popular in the decades before it was eclipsed by the waltz in the 1820s.

The brilliant and quick finale (*Presto vivace*), with a feather-light main theme in 6/8, often sounds very much like music that could have been transplanted from a Rossini overture. Schubert introduces flashes of humor: offbeat accents to punctuate the main theme, a mock-serious second theme, and a couple of grandiose pauses that momentarily halt the furious forward momentum.

Though it was unsuccessful as a ballet during his lifetime, Bartók’s *The Miraculous Mandarin* became much more popular—and much less controversial—as a concert piece

Béla Bartók

Born: March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary.

Died: September 26, 1945, New York City.

Suite from “The Miraculous Mandarin,” Op. 19

- **Composed:** Bartók composed this work as a ballet score in 1918-19, and orchestrated and revised it in 1923-24. He made additional revisions, including extracting the suite heard here, in 1926-31.
- **Premiere:** November 27, 1926 in Cologne, Germany, conducted by Eugen Szenkar.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 21:00.

Background

In both *The Miraculous Mandarin* and his opera *Bluebeard’s Castle* (1918) Bartók follows an Expressionist style. This approach, most prominently heard in his contemporaries Schoenberg, Berg, and Weber, is often intensely dissonant and disjointed, expressing dark and often traumatic subjects.

Bartók composed his ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* in 1918-19, on a 1917 play by Menyhért Lengyel. (Lengyel described it as a “pantomime grotesque.”) In the years after World War I, Hungary was in political turmoil, and under the control of an authoritarian right-wing regime. With no prospect of performing as potentially controversial a work as *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Bartók did not return to the score for five years, and finally secured a premiere at the Cologne Opera in November 1926. This performance was a disaster. The conductor, Eugen Szenkar, later remembered: “At the end of the performance there was a concert of whistling and catcalls. The uproar was so deafening and lengthy that the fire curtain had to be brought down. Nevertheless, we endured it and weren’t afraid to appear in front of the curtain, at which point the whistles resumed with a vengeance.” There was no second performance in Cologne, and the work was actually banned in Germany. Though there was a more successful production in Prague a year later, through the rest of Bartók’s life, *The Miraculous Mandarin* was known almost exclusively through a suite, or “concert version” he extracted from the score in 1927. (The full score was not published until 1955.) There was to have been a performance in Budapest in March 1931, in a much-revised version. The production was troubled from the start: sloppy performances by a disgruntled cast, and poor stage design caused Bartók himself to cancel the performance.

So why was this work so problematic? Bartók’s music is certainly difficult: dissonant, intensely rhythmic, and presenting tremendous technical challenges for nearly every section of the orchestra. But it was the plot of *The Miraculous Mandarin* that seems to have caused the problems: a dark and depressing Expressionist story with multiple seductions, violence, murder, and the supernatural.

What You’ll Hear

Bartók’s brilliantly-orchestrated music closely follows the lurid and violent plot of *The Miraculous Mandarin*

The suite is drawn directly from the first two-thirds of the original score and the music reflects the action on stage. There are six sections played without pauses. It opens with a pair of scenes titled *Introduction (Street Sounds) — The Thugs Order the Girl to the Window*. It begins with a musical picture of a busy and ugly modern city: Bartók described it as an “awful clamor, clatter, stampeding, and blowing of horns.” The main setting is a room occupied by three thugs and a girl. The men force her to go to the window, to seduce passing men into the room so that they might rob them. Here the thugs are represented by angry trombone passages as the noise of the city continues in the background. In *The Girl Seduces the Old Rake*,

she entices their first victim. The girl, in the guise by a sinuous clarinet, attracts a rakish old man up to the room. The horny old guy is represented by smearing trombones, and when it is clear that he does not have any money, the thugs beat him and throw him out: a swirling string passage with violent percussion accents. The next victim is a shy young man. In *The Girl Seduces the Young Man*, the clarinet again plays a slinky melody and when the young man comes up to the room, they dance together in a series of passages for solo woodwinds. But once again he turns out to be penniless and is tossed out by the criminals in another violent percussive passage.

The Girl Seduces the Mandarin begins with another clarinet passage, as the girl spots their third victim, an elderly mandarin. (While it was an honorific in China, here “mandarin” was actually a rather ugly racist stereotype widely current at the time: a wealthy Chinese man who lusts after white women.) The mandarin is played by the trombones and horns, with a pentatonic, “oriental”-sounding melody. In *The Girl Slowly Begins to Dance for the Mandarin*, she continues her seduction as the mandarin enters the room, with slow, teasing music that eventually grows into a kind of dreamy waltz. *The Dance Concludes: the Mandarin Chases the Girl* begins with a frantic passage for muted trombones representing the aroused mandarin, and then wild music as he chases the girl around the room. At the end of this section, Bartók provided a brief concert ending to bring the suite to a close.

What did Bartók leave out? The closing sections of the piece are the most violent, bizarre, and overtly sexual bits of *The Miraculous Mandarin*, and probably the most objectionable to the original audience. The thugs suddenly emerge from hiding, and beat the mandarin, stealing his jewels and money. They make three attempts to murder him, first smothering him with a bedsheet, then stabbing him with a rusty knife, and finally hanging him from the chandelier. The mandarin not only refuses to die, but begins to glow, still looking at the girl. Finally, she realizes what has to be done. He is cut down from the chandelier and after she returns his embrace, he finally dies. Pretty strong stuff for 1926...or 2023 for that matter.

Rachmaninoff was one of the 20th century's greatest pianist-composers. Maestro DeMain has described his third piano concerto as the "Mt. Everest" of the piano repertoire: a challenging work for both the soloist and the orchestra.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia.

Died: March 28, 1943, Hollywood, California.

Concerto No. 3 for Piano and Orchestra in D minor, Op. 30

- **Composed:** 1909.
- **Premiere:** Rachmaninoff was the soloist in its first performance on November 28, 1909, with the New York Symphony Society, under conductor Walter Damrosch.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** Our eight previous performances have featured Carroll Chilton (1969), Garrick Ohlsson (1984 and 2008), Horacio Gutierrez (1991), Cecile Licad (2003), and Philippe Bianconi (2017).
- **Duration:** 41:00.

Background

Rachmaninoff composed this work for his first tour of the United States, premiering it at his debut concert in New York City in November 1909.

In 1909, Rachmaninoff spent the summer at the Russian country estate of his wife's family preparing for his upcoming American tour, practicing and working on a third piano concerto to be unveiled at his American debut in New York. Rachmaninoff, the last in a long line of Romantic pianist/composers, was then at the peak of his powers, and was acclaimed throughout the world. A trip to America was a solid career move for any Old World virtuoso of that time. If American audiences were notoriously conservative, tours in this country were also notoriously profitable. He looked forward to his first trip to America with anticipation and some nervousness. His ocean passage to New York anything but relaxing: the ever-driven Rachmaninoff spent virtually the entire trip in his stateroom, practicing on a silent keyboard. (Igor Stravinsky, remembering Rachmaninoff's unrelenting seriousness, once described him as a "six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl.") Though the premiere of his new concerto under Walter Damrosch in November was a great success, the composer remembered the second New York performance, conducted by Gustav Mahler, with special fondness. Mahler went to great lengths to perfect the complex orchestral accompaniment during a marathon rehearsal. One account of this event notes that, after the rehearsal had gone an hour and a half past its scheduled ending time, Rachmaninoff and Mahler paused to discuss a troublesome passage. When a few

brass players at the back of the room began to pack up, Mahler fixed them with a steely glare and growled: “As long as I am sitting, no musician has a right to get up.” (There were no Union rules in those days...)

What You’ll Hear

The concerto is laid out in three broad movements:

- An opening movement that develops two lyrical themes, culminating in a huge cadenza.
- The *Intermezzo* is a very free set of variations on a theme introduced by the orchestra.
- Like the opening, the virtuosic final is set in sonata form, this time developing much more forceful ideas.

The D minor piano concerto is among the most difficult of Rachmaninoff’s piano works, making sizable demands on soloist and orchestra alike. The concerto’s appeal goes beyond piano pyrotechnics, however—the sumptuous themes of its three movements are subtly interrelated, imposing a kind of organic unity on this work. In the first movement (*Allegro ma non tanto*) the piano enters after only two measures of introduction, with a subdued stepwise melody. Rachmaninoff denied that this melody was a Russian folk tune or Orthodox chant, asserting that it simply “wrote itself.” The strings introduce a more poetic second theme, which is taken up in an elaborate piano rhapsody. The movement closes with a monumental solo cadenza, which is occasionally supported by thematic fragments from the woodwinds. At the last moment, there is a brief reminiscence of the opening theme.

The opening of the *Intermezzo (Adagio)* is one of relatively few places in the concerto where the orchestra takes the lead, introducing a lush and lyrical melody. After this opening passage, however, the piano is fully in charge, spinning a free set of variations on this opening theme. The variations gather momentum towards the end, with the soloist playing ever-more complex and chromatic figuration above occasional snippets of melody from the opening movement. After a restatement of the main theme, a suddenly aggressive piano passage and a few crisp brass chords lead directly into the *Finale (Alla breve)*. The lengthy last movement is a fiery display of piano technique. Both of its forceful themes are introduced by the soloist and elaborated upon almost solely on the piano, during a prolonged variation-style development section. An extended coda brings the concerto to an exalted conclusion in D Major.