

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**November 15-16-17, 2024**  
**99th Season / Subscription Program 3**  
**J. Michael Allsen**

Guest conductor Michael Stern opens the program with Johnathan Leshnoff's intense *Rush for Orchestra*. This is a driving and exciting work that builds up a tremendous amount of momentum throughout. We then welcome back pianist Garrick Ohlsson: a favorite of the audience and the orchestra—his *sixth* performance with the MSO. In previous visits, he has played Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 3* (1984 and 2008), Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 25* (1985) Brahms's *Piano Concerto No. 3* (2002) and Tchaikovsky's seldom-heard *Piano Concerto No. 2* (2012); Here he plays a familiar favorite, Edvard Grieg's *Piano Concerto*, a romantic masterpiece infused with the spirit of Grieg's Norwegian homeland. We end with the powerful fifth symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich. This sometimes bombastic work, which Shostakovich humbly described as “the practical answer of a Soviet artist to justified criticism,” in fact seems to be have been a subtle and bitter reaction to the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin.

Maestro Stern conductor the premiere of this work in 2009.

**Jonathan Leshnoff**

**Born:** September 8, 1973, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

***Rush***

- **Composed:** 2008.
- **Premiere:** January 31, 2009, in Germantown Tennessee, by the IRIS Orchestra, under the direction of Michael Stern.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 8:00.

**Background**

Jonathan Leshnoff is among the most important and frequently-programmed of American contemporary composers.

GRAMMY-nominated Jonathan Leshnoff has been described by the *The New York Times* as “a leader of contemporary American lyricism.” His music runs the gamut from small orchestral works like *Rush* through symphonies (four, to date) and over a dozen concertos, to six full-size oratorios, to chamber and wind band music.

Lehnoff has written these works for some of the world's leading soloists—Joyce Yang, Gil Shaham, Roberto Díaz and others—and for America's leading orchestras: Philadelphia Orchestra Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Kansas City Symphony, Nashville Symphony Orchestra, and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He is currently on the faculty of Towson University in Baltimore. *Rush* is one of several works written by Leshnoff for Maestro Stern and the IRIS Chamber Orchestra.

### **What You'll Hear**

A short, intense work, *Rush* alternates between the fierce mood of the opening, and calmer music for solo clarinet and harp.

*Rush*, scored for a chamber orchestra, is an exercise in the concentrated development of a single motive, heard at the outset. Its furious forward motion is broken in the middle of the work by a lyrical clarinet solo. The ferocious mood of the opening gradually returns, only to be halted once more near the end of the work by the clarinet and a lovely solo cadenza by the harp. At the very end, the fury returns in a brief coda.

This is Grieg's only concerto and one of his relatively few large orchestral pieces, but it has become one of the most important romantic concertos for piano.

### **Edvard Grieg**

**Born:** June 15, 1843, Bergen, Norway.

**Died:** September 4, 1907, Bergen, Norway.

### ***Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16***

- **Composed:** 1868.
- **Premiere:** April 3, 1869, in Copenhagen, with Edmund Neupert as soloist
- **Previous MSO Performances:** Previous performances at these concerts have featured Elsa Chandler (1927), Storm Bull (1929), Audun Ravnan (1971), Howard Karp (1984), Santiago Rodriguez (1993), Jasminka Stancul (2005), and André Watts (2011).
- **Duration:** 32:00.

### **Background**

The *Piano Concerto*, written when he was just 25 years old, was a career-making piece for Grieg, among his first pieces to attract notice and performances outside of his native Norway.

In an age of musical nationalism, Norwegian Edvard Grieg firmly identified himself with the music of his homeland. Grieg's works are often built using German Classical forms, but his melodies, which are at once lyrical and folk-like, are firmly rooted in the Norwegian musical traditions he knew and loved. In describing his approach to composition, Grieg once wrote: “Composers with the stature of a Bach or Beethoven have erected grand churches and temples. I have always wished to build villages: places where people can feel happy and comfortable ...the music of my own country has been my model.”

Grieg's piano concerto was written during the summer of 1868, when he and his family were on holiday in Sölleröd, near Copenhagen. While it is dedicated to the pianist Edmund Neupert, there are also close connections between Grieg and the preeminent piano virtuoso of the 19th century, Franz Liszt. By 1868, when he first saw some of Grieg's music, the 57-year-old Liszt had taken minor Catholic orders (although he was never ordained as a priest), and was dividing his time between the court at Weimar and a Roman monastery. Liszt wrote a very complimentary letter to Grieg, inviting him to come for a visit. Grieg brought this letter to the attention of a Norwegian government ministry, which granted him funds to travel to Rome in October of 1869. Understandably, Grieg brought the manuscript of his concerto along. According to Grieg's account of the meeting, Liszt asked him to play through the concerto, and when Grieg declined (he had not practiced it): “...Liszt took up the manuscript, went to the piano, and said to the assembled guests with a smile, ‘Very well, then, I will show you that I also cannot.’” Grieg goes on to tell how Liszt sight-read the concerto with great verve, ending with words of encouragement: “Keep steadily on your course. I tell you, you have the stuff in you—don't let them intimidate you!” When the concerto was published, it was dedicated to the late composer Rikard Nordraak, who wrote the melody to *Ja, vi elsker dette landet*, which would become the Norwegian national anthem.

### **What You’ll Hear**

A fervent Norwegian musical nationalist, Grieg tried to infuse the style of Norwegian folk music into nearly all of his works. The concerto is in three movements:

- A broad opening movement in sonata form.
- A set of *Adagio* variations.
- A fast-paced finale based upon a series of folklike themes.

The *Piano Concerto* has been a regular part of the romantic concerto repertoire since the late 19th century. It is set in three movements, following the strictest

German models in matters of form, but Grieg's Norwegian heritage shows through in every passage, in his regular phrasing and in his lyrical melodies. The stormy introductory flourish in the piano that opens the first movement (*Allegro molto moderato*) leads into a marchlike theme introduced by the woodwinds and restated by the piano. Cellos and trombones introduce the more passionate second theme. Grieg's fiery cadenza at the end of the recapitulation serves to further develop the opening march theme. Grieg rounds off the movement with a brief coda—a new theme spun off from the march, and a return to the opening flourish.

The serene *Adagio* is a series of free variations on a calm, hymnlike theme introduced by muted strings. Orchestra and soloist first develop this theme in the manner of a dialogue, but eventually combine their lines in the final statement. The closing measures of the *Adagio* lead directly into the third movement (*Allegro moderato molto e marcato*). This closing movement is set as a rondo, in which Grieg uses five different themes, all of them having a distinctly folklike character. The movement comes to its climax with a brief but intense cadenza that develops the fifth of these themes.

Shostakovich's fifth symphony, composed in the deeply repressive atmosphere of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, is a symbol of resistance and humanity in the face of totalitarian oppression.

### **Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

**Born:** September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia.

**Died:** August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia.

### ***Symphony No. 5, Op. 47***

- **Composed:** 1937.
- **Premiere:** in November 21, 1937 in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), by the Leningrad Philharmonic, under the direction of Yevgeny Mravinsky.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** It has been played three times previously at our concerts, in 1980, 1993, and 2006.
- **Duration:** 44:00.

### **Background**

Shostakovich, who was in deep trouble with the authorities in 1937, meekly described his fifth Symphony as a “practical answer of a Soviet artist to justified criticism.” However, he seems to have put one over on Soviet authorities!

Music and the arts are potent symbols of humanity and freedom, and totalitarian states invariably seek to control them for their own purposes. In Josef Stalin's Soviet Union, state supervision of the arts was a powerful and controlling reality. A manifesto outlining the principles of “Socialist Realism” appeared in 1933. This doctrine was originally intended to control the content and style of Soviet literature, but it was quickly adapted to the visual arts, film, and music. As explained in an article published by the Union of Soviet Composers:

“The main attention of the Soviet composer must be directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic, bright, and beautiful. This distinguishes the spiritual world of Soviet man, and must be embodied in musical images full of beauty and strength. Socialist Realism demands an implacable struggle against those folk-negating modernistic directions typical of contemporary bourgeois art, and against subservience and servility towards modern bourgeoisie culture.”

In practice, Soviet music of this period served the propaganda needs of the state, and was aimed at proletarian consumption. Composers abandoned “formalist” devices—unrestricted dissonance, twelve-tone technique, etc.—in favor of strictly tonal harmonies and folk music (The designation “formalist” was eventually used to describe just about anything an official critic didn’t like.).

Shostakovich struggled heroically within this system. There was a continuing pattern in his works of the 1930s and 1940s of perilously pushing the limits of official tolerance and then rehabilitating himself with a work that seemed to conform more closely to the Party line. In 1934, his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was a rousing success, and continued to run for over 100 performances. In 1936, however, Stalin himself attended a performance, and left the theater in a rage. Within a few days, a review of the opera appeared in *Pravda*, complaining of an “intentionally dissonant, muddled flow of sounds,” and angrily denouncing its anti-Socialist “distortion.” Shostakovich was quickly transformed from one of the young lions of Soviet music to a suspected Formalist, and articles published in *Pravda* and the bulletin of the Composers' Union began to reveal “modernistic” and “decadent” elements in many of his works that had previously been blessed by Soviet authorities. The composer immediately cancelled the premiere of his fourth symphony, fearing that the dissonant nature of this score would push the authorities too far. He was so certain, in fact, that Stalin's goons would appear at his door that he kept a small suitcase in his apartment, packed for his trip to the Gulag Archipelago. A hastily-composed ballet glorifying life on a collective farm was not enough put him back in favor with the Composers' Union, but with the

performance of his *Symphony No.5* in November of 1937, Shostakovich regained a certain amount of his position in the hierarchy of Soviet musicians.

The usual story of the symphony's composition is that it was written very quickly, between April and July 1937. But in a note to his recently-published critical edition of the score, Manashir Iakubov shows that in fact it was a much more extensive process lasting from April up through just a few weeks before the November premiere. On its surface, the *Symphony No.5* seems to be a meek acquiescence—in fact Shostakovich humbly subtitled the work “The practical answer of a Soviet artist to justified criticism,” and it was composed in honor of the 20th anniversary of the 1917 revolution. In describing the fifth symphony at its premiere, Shostakovich wrote: “The theme of my symphony is the making of a man. I saw humankind, with all of its experiences at the center of this composition, which is lyrical in mood from start to finish. The Finale is the optimistic solution of the tragedy and tension of the first movement. ...I think that Soviet tragedy has every right to exist. However, the contents must be suffused with positive inspiration...” All safely Socialist sentiments—but hearing the *Symphony No.5*, I am struck not so much by the triumph and optimism of the Finale, but by the deeply personal anxiety and sense of suffering that underlies the entire work.

The premiere was a phenomenal success and Soviet officials were quick to investigate what all the fuss was about. The Committee on Art Affairs dispatched two of its members to Leningrad to hear a later performance, they explained that tempestuous applause at the end was because the promoters had hand-picked the audience, excluding “ordinary, normal people.” But a subsequent performance for hand-picked Party officials and guests was just as successful. Official suspicion persisted— one musical official cited the “unwholesome stir around this symphony”—but in this case, Soviet authorities seem to have decided to put a positive spin on the affair and accept the popularity of this work at face value. Glowing reviews followed in the official press. The review by composer Dmitri Kabalevsky was typical: “After hearing Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, I can boldly assert that the composer, as truly great Soviet artist, has overcome his mistakes and taken a new path.”

The audiences at these early performances were probably more perceptive, however. Many members of the audience wept at the premiere, and the applause following the performance lasted nearly half an hour—facts that were reported in the official press as an emotional response to the symphony's uplifting conclusion. As Shostakovich wrote some 25 years later (well after Stalin was safely dead and repudiated): “Someone who was incapable of understanding could never feel the

Fifth Symphony. Of course they understood—they understood what was happening around them and they understood what the Fifth was about.” This work was indeed a “response to criticism,” but it was a much more tragic and anguished response than the authorities chose to believe.

### **What You’ll Hear**

The symphony is in four movements:

- A tragic and menacing opening.
- A humorous scherzo.
- A luminous third movement for solo woodwinds and strings.
- A bombastic finale, that closes in a triumphant mood.

The tragic character of this symphony is established in the opening bars (*Moderato*), in an angular, off-beat melody introduced by the low strings. Much of the beginning is devoted to an imitative exposition of this melody in the strings. A rhythm appears in the lower strings, repeating incessantly beneath the second main theme, a lyrical melody in the first violins. This melody is built over the same large leaps as the opening theme, but here the effect is more melancholy than tragic. After flute and clarinet solos comment upon this theme, the horns introduce a more menacing march-like melody. This march increases in intensity until the climactic return of the opening theme. Near the close of the movement the second theme returns, now on a more hopeful note, in the solo flute.

For the main theme of the scherzo (*Allegretto*), Shostakovich parodies a melody from his *Symphony No. 4*. The irony is obvious—here was a work that was unknown to the audience, and that, the composer felt, would never be performed. So the outward humor of this movement—bumptious bass lines, woodwind trills and tongue-in-cheek violin solos—overlays a bitterly sarcastic comment on Socialist Realism. A military-sounding waltz alternates with this main theme in the manner of a trio. At the end, he uses one of Beethoven's favorite jokes: what seems to be yet another repeat of the trio, played hesitantly by a solo oboe, is brusquely tossed aside by the brass, and the movement ends abruptly

The third movement (*Largo*) belongs entirely to the strings and solo woodwinds. Shostakovich divides the string section into eight parts throughout this movement, weaving complex counterpoint around a single somber melody. Flutes and harp introduce a second subject which is gradually woven together with the first. In a very beautiful central passage, solo woodwinds expand on the main themes above an effectively simple background of string tremolos. The movement builds gradually towards its climax, a return of the first theme in the full string choir,

before fading away at the end. Though it is overshadowed by the broad opening movement and the powerful finale, the *Largo* may have been the movement that had the deepest impact at the premiere. Much of the weeping in the audience took place during the *Largo*, leading biographer David Fanning to suggest that the movement was “...a channel for a mass grieving at the height of the Great Terror, impossible otherwise to express openly.”

The finale (*Allegro non troppo*) is set as a rondo, and brings the symphony to a properly jubilant finish. The main theme is an almost violent march, which alternates with several quieter sections. Shostakovich brings back reminiscences of several moments from preceding movements, building towards a massive coda in D Major. The composer's own program note (and the official reviewers) described the finale as triumphant and exultant. Once again, Shostakovich's intent in this movement may well have been sarcasm, rather than exaltation.

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Complete program notes for the 2023-24 season are available at [www.madisonsymphony.org](http://www.madisonsymphony.org).



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