

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Subscription Program No. 5 – Beethoven & Rachmaninoff
February 19-20-21, 2027

Music Director Emeritus John DeMain returns to the podium for this midwinter program, which opens with *Kauyumari*, a rhythmically intense work written by Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz. Pianist Inon Barnatan makes his Madison Symphony Orchestra debut with the Beethoven fourth piano concerto. To close, we have a late romantic masterpiece: Rachmaninoff's grand second symphony.

This intense piece was written to celebrate the return to live musicmaking following the Covid lockdown. In it, Ortiz draws upon an indigenous Mexican healing ritual.

Gabriela Ortiz

Born: December 20, 1964, Mexico City, Mexico.



Kauyumari

- **Composed:** 2021
- **Premiere:** October 9, 2021, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel conducting.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 7:00.

Background

Gabriela Ortiz is among Mexico's leading composers. She started by playing in her parents' folk group, where she absorbed styles from all around Latin America.

Gabriela Ortiz came by her interest in folk music quite naturally: her parents were founders of the famed group Los Folkloristas, a group dedicated to performing both Mexican music and vernacular styles from throughout Latin America. Even as she was playing *charango* and guitar in her parents' group, she was also studying classical piano. After initial studies in composition in Mexico, with Daniel Catán and others, she earned master's and doctoral degrees in composition in London. Today she is among Mexico's most prominent composers. Ortiz, who was recently the composer-in-residence at Carnegie Hall, has a particularly close relationship with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and its music director, Venezuelan Gustavo

Dudamel; their album *Revolución diamantina*, featuring three of her works, won three Grammy awards in 2025. The LA Philharmonic and Dudamel commissioned and gave the world premiere of her *Kauyumari* in 2021.

This is an amazingly concentrated piece of music, based upon a single repeated rhythm, and a single theme.

What You'll Hear

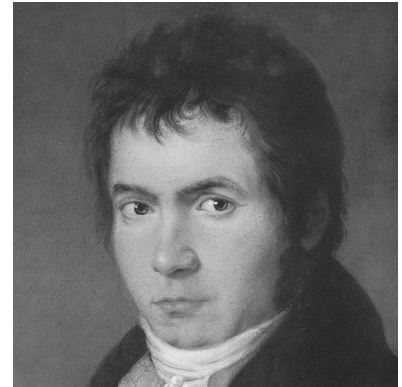
The composer provides the following note on the work:

Among the Huichol people of Mexico, *Kauyumari* means “blue deer.” The blue deer represents a spiritual guide, one that is transformed through an extended pilgrimage into a hallucinogenic cactus called peyote. It allows the Huichol to communicate with their ancestors, do their bidding, and take on their role as guardians of the planet. Each year, these Native Mexicans embark on a symbolic journey to “hunt” the blue deer, making offerings in gratitude for having been granted access to the invisible world, through which they also are able to heal the wounds of the soul. When I received the commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic to compose a piece that would reflect on our return to the stage following the pandemic, I immediately thought of the blue deer and its power to enter the world of the intangible as akin to a celebration of the reopening of live music. Specifically, I thought of a Huichol melody sung by the De La Cruz family—dedicated to recording ancestral folklore—that I used for the final movement of my piece, *Altar de Muertos (Altar of the Dead)*, commissioned by the Kronos Quartet in 1997. I used this material within the orchestral context and elaborated on the construction and progressive development of the melody and its accompaniment in such a way that it would symbolize the blue deer. This in turn was transformed into an orchestral texture which gradually evolves into a complex rhythm pattern, to such a degree that the melody itself becomes unrecognizable (the imaginary effect of peyote and our awareness of the invisible realm), giving rise to a choral wind section while maintaining an incisive rhythmic accompaniment as a form of reassurance that the world will naturally follow its course.

While composing this piece, I noted once again how music has the power to grant us access to the intangible; healing our wounds and binding us to what can only be expressed through sound. Although life is filled with interruptions, *Kauyumari* is a comprehension and celebration of the fact that each of these rifts is also a new beginning.

Kauyumari begins mysteriously, with a long-held bass note and an insistent shaker rhythm. A series of short, trumpet solos hint at the Huichol melody, which is finally played in full by solo piccolo. This is repeated in ever-changing instrumental combinations, amid ever-denser orchestral texture. At the same time, the melody begins to break down into fragments and variations. The end comes abruptly, following a gradual acceleration: as if the music has reached a kind of critical mass and then simply stops.

This piano concerto was one of the products of Beethoven's phenomenally prolific "heroic decade" (1802-1812).



Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: December 17, 1770 (baptism date), Bonn, Germany.

Died: March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

Concerto No. 4 in G Major for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 58

- **Composed:** 1805-06.
- **Premiere:** December 22, 1808 in Vienna.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** It has been played six times previously at these programs, with pianists Gunnar Johansen (1944 and 1970), James Tocco (1982), Christina Ortiz (1986), André Watts (2000), and Philippe Bianconi (2012).
- **Duration:** 46:00.

The concerto was first played by Beethoven himself at a marathon concert in 1808.

Background

Concertos were the favorite genre of Beethoven's Vienna audience, and like Mozart before him, Beethoven saw public performances of his piano concertos as a ready source of cash. And he needed cash in late 1808, when he was wrapped up in lengthy process of reworking the opera *Fidelio*. His fourth piano concerto was performed for the first time at an *Akademie*, a concert staged for Beethoven's benefit. The program for this landmark event also included the premieres of his fifth and sixth symphonies, excerpts from his *Mass in C* and the concert aria *Ah, perfido*, together with premieres of two works with Beethoven himself at the piano, the hastily-composed *Choral Fantasy*, and the *Piano Concerto No. 4*. The concerto

was apparently received with some reservation by the audience, perhaps due to its radical deviations from Classical concerto forms. (Or maybe due to its place near the end of a four-hour December concert in a poorly-heated theater!) The fourth piano concerto is one of the products of the period known as Beethoven's "heroic decade" and it has the same musically adventurous spirit as *Fidelio* and the fourth through sixth symphonies.

The concerto is laid out in three movements:

- A broad opening movement in an innovative version of sonata form.
- A lyrical slow movement that is set as a dialogue between the orchestra and the soloist.
- A brilliant closing movement in rondo form.

What You'll Hear

From its opening bars (*Allegro Moderato*), this concerto goes beyond the Classical norms that Beethoven followed in his three earlier piano concertos. Common practice was to provide an extended orchestral exposition before the soloist's first entrance, but the fourth concerto begins with a quiet statement by the piano which the orchestra answers in an immediate change of key. This allows Beethoven to set up an underlying harmonic tension that is not completely resolved until the final bars of the coda. Members of the audience at the first performance, where Beethoven was at the piano, reported that he played "impulsively and at a tremendous pace"—certainly a reference to the fiery passages that fill the transitions and development section of this movement, rather than its sublime thematic material.

The second movement (*Andante con moto*) is a dialogue for piano and strings. Contrasts abound here: between the rich harmonies of the solo instrument and the spare octaves and unisons of the strings, and between the almost harsh rhythms of the orchestra and the piano's more lyrical phrasing. Only near the end, after a brief cadenza, do the strings join the piano in mood.

The final movement (*Vivace*) is set as a rondo, often considered to be the lightest of Classical forms: a main theme that alternates with contrasting material, but there is nothing insubstantial about this movement. All of the usual rhythmic energy of the rondo is here, but Beethoven employs harmonic complexity usually reserved for opening movements. Not content to set up the conventional polite conversation between main and contrasting themes, Beethoven also expands the form to provide extensive development of his musical ideas.

This is a large-scale symphony, very much in the mold of Tchaikovsky and other Russian romantics.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia.

Died: March 28, 1943, Hollywood, California.



Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

- **Composed:** 1907.
- **Premiere:** February 15, 1908, in St. Petersburg.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1953, 1985, 1993, 2001, and 2013.
- **Duration:** 57:00.

The premiere of his second symphony in 1908, was a moment of great triumph and redemption for Rachmaninoff, whose first symphony had been a disaster.

Background

Rachmaninoff's second symphony was the work of a young man—completed when he was only 34—but it was also a work of a man who had already seen his share of troubles. The premiere of his first symphony in 1897 had been such a disaster that Rachmaninoff seriously considered giving up composition. The critical attacks on this work contributed to a severe bout of depression.

Rachmaninoff recovered his emotional stability and confidence only in 1900. The second piano concerto, published in 1901 (and heard at these concerts in October), represents his return to life as a composer. Perhaps with the failure of his first symphony in mind, he worked on his new E minor symphony in secret. At the time, he was living in Dresden, having left Moscow to escape increasingly violent political turmoil in Russia, and he did not tell even his closest friends about the new project. But somehow a German newspaper reporter found out about the new symphony and wrote about it in a journal widely read in Russia. In February of 1907, Rachmaninoff wrote to a friend: "I have composed a symphony. It's true! It's only ready in a rough draft, though. I finished it a month ago and immediately put it aside. It has caused me a great deal of distress, and I'm not going to think about it for a while. But I'm mystified as to how the newspapers got onto it!"

Rachmaninoff returned to Russia in the summer of 1907, bringing the nearly-completed score for the *Symphony No. 2* with him. Despite some difficulties in working out the orchestration, the new symphony was ready in January of 1908 for its first performance in St. Petersburg. This performance, which Rachmaninoff

conducted, was as much a triumph as his first symphony had been a failure. A second performance, just a week later in Moscow, was equally successful. Rachmaninoff had vindicated himself as a symphonist. The second symphony has remained in the repertoire ever since that time. However, in many performances of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, a time when long romantic symphonies were not particularly popular, the *Symphony No. 2* was often subjected to severe cuts. Rachmaninoff himself suggested a brief cut in the finale, but several later conductors cut the symphony from a work that lasts from nearly an hour to a mere 35 or 40 minutes. Despite its length, however, Rachmaninoff's score is carefully planned in every detail, and the sort of radical surgery that was often performed upon his score distorted the symphony's form. This trend has reversed in recent decades. Most modern performances of the *Symphony No. 2*—including the one at these concerts—present nearly all of Rachmaninoff's original music, making only a few minor cuts, such as omitting the repeat of the exposition in the first movement, or Rachmaninoff's "sanctioned" cut in the finale.

Rachmaninoff's *Symphony No. 2* is a big late-romantic work, equaling the scores of Bruckner or Mahler in length and breadth. This is not a Germanic work, however—virtually every note of this 320-page score speaks Russian. It is in many ways the continuation of the romantic tradition of Tchaikovsky and his contemporaries. Rachmaninoff's focus, here as in most of his works, is on creating an unending and beautiful flow of melody.

It is set in four movements:

- A lengthy movement in sonata form, whose slow introduction introduces a melodic motto heard in all four movements.
- A large scherzo in three sections, that hints at the *Dies irae* at the end.
- A lush, romantic slow movement.
- A grand, triumphant finale in sonata form.

What You'll Hear

In the background of the entire work is a melodic motto that is first heard in the cellos and basses in the opening bars (*Largo*). This restless melody is transformed repeatedly in the main themes of each movement. A slow introduction lays out this motto in increasingly dense texture. The tempo speeds (*Allegro moderato*), and the remainder of the movement is in sonata form. The main theme of this section is based almost completely on the motto, and is played in a very dense, contrapuntal texture. After an agitated transition, Rachmaninoff introduces a contrasting major-key theme, again carried mostly by the strings. The lengthy development

culminates in two massive orchestral climaxes. The movement ends with a recapitulation of the main themes and an understated coda.

The scherzo (*Allegro molto*) is laid out in three large sections. The opening passage develops two fast-paced melodies. The first of these, heard first in the horns, is again based on the motto from the first movement. The central section of the movement is an agitated *fugato*, which Rachmaninoff eventually combines with a chorale melody from the brass. The final section returns to the opening music, but near the end, the trombones enter with a brief hint of the *Dies irae*. This chant melody from the Latin funeral Mass became a kind of “signature tune” for Rachmaninoff: it would reappear as a main theme in several other large works, including *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* and *The Isle of the Dead*.

The third movement (*Adagio*) is romantic throughout. The strings enter with a lush passage, and the solo clarinet then spins out a seemingly endless melody above a string background. The central section of this movement develops the symphony’s motto melody in the strings. The oboe and English horn overlay the strings with a rather spooky new theme. In the concluding section, Rachmaninoff returns to the opening theme, now letting it expand in much broader strokes.

The finale (*Allegro vivace*) is set in sonata form. In the exposition, Rachmaninoff presents several ideas: a lively theme in triplets at the opening, a more marchlike melody, and a singing string melody. Before he develops these themes, however, the tempo slows and there is a reminiscence of the third movement’s main melody. The development section builds towards a peak of great intensity before Rachmaninoff recapitulates his main ideas. The most forceful orchestral passage is saved for the very end, however, when Rachmaninoff brings this immense symphony to a close.