

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Pam Davis

### **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844 - 1908)**

#### **Procession of the Nobles from *Mlada* (1889)**

The master of orchestration—think Scheherazade—was tapped to be one of several composers (including Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Cui) involved in a collaborative opera/ballet. The project did not come to fruition and twenty years later Rimsky-Korsakov was engaged to compose the entire four-act production.

*Mlada*, whose story was said to meld Wagnerian opera and ancient Russian legend, was not destined for the standard repertoire, what with its enormous cast and production complications. But this energetic and colorful march remains in the orchestral canon. It was originally the introduction to Act II over which townspeople from a festival crowd shout “The princes are coming! Make way for them, people of Retra.”

Opening with a trumpet fanfare, the regal procession is led by strings and horn. The trumpets regain leadership with ensuing announcements. The strings are permitted to introduce a more subdued melody that continues the forward motion in the whole orchestra. Trumpets wrest control back to revisit the opening and are joined by all forces.

- ♪ 1889 WORLD EVENTS: Charlie Chaplin is born, the Eiffel Tower opens, Mahler’s first symphony premieres
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: 1892 in St. Petersburg
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: tonight is the first performance by the SSO

### **Edvard Grieg (1843 - 1907)**

#### **Piano Concerto in A Minor, Opus 16 (1868)**

Arguably one of the most recognizable and beloved piano concertos in the repertoire, this was the only concerto that Grieg completed. Born in Bergen, Norway, he wrote this work during a relaxing summer family holiday near Copenhagen shortly after the 24-year-old had married and had a daughter.

The Norwegian folk idioms that Grieg included prompted one critic to say that it presented “all Norway in its infinite variety and unity.” This was his most successful composition, with the incidental music to Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* a close second.

It is widely believed that in addition to the nationalistic influences, Grieg was also inspired by Schumann’s Piano Concerto, also in A minor. Studies have been undertaken drawing many parallels.

Grieg visited Franz Liszt in Rome and the superstar pianist sightread the concerto, exuding hearty praise as well as some suggestions. In a letter to his parents, Grieg remarked about the visit, “In conclusion he handed me the manuscript and said in a peculiarly cordial tone: Keep steadily on; I tell you, you have the capability, and—do not let them intimidate you.”

Revised at least seven times, some changes were quite subtle, but others included reversing Liszt’s suggestion to give the second theme of the first movement to the trumpet instead of the cellos.

A timpani roll sets the stage for the solo piano opening flourish. A march-like theme follows in the orchestra picked up by the piano which soon becomes a fresh idea. After a change to a quieter mood, a second melody is heard in the cellos (not trumpets) and winds before being joined by the piano. The development leads into the cadenza and a majestic ending.

The atmospheric second movement opens with a muted string melody underpinned by bassoons and horns. The piano brings an expanding rippling theme, and a fading horn concludes the movement.

Linked without pause to the finale by a few bars, we are regaled with a lilting *halling*, a strongly accented Norwegian dance. After being developed and repeated, a cadenza again ensues. A dramatic pause precedes a recap transforming the duple-time *halling* to a triple-time *springdans* that rushes to an exhilarating finish.

Multiple pop culture vehicles have appropriated portions of this piece, including the use of the first movement's coda in the 1939 film *Intermezzo* and the second movement in the soundtrack of the video game *Civilization V*.

- ♪ 1868 WORLD EVENTS: Scott Joplin is born, the typewriter is patented, Gioachino Rossini dies
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: April 3, 1869, in Copenhagen, with Edmund Neupart as soloist
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: January 2021, Kyle Orth soloist, Kyle Wiley Pickett conducting

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

#### **Symphony No. 10, Opus 93 (1953)**

His first symphonic composition in eight years, the tenth symphony was said to be a commentary on the oppression wrought by Joseph Stalin, who had died in early 1953. Living under the dictator's tyranny for years, Shostakovich's music had been banned, and he was publicly denounced for "formalist perversions and antidemocratic tendencies in music, alien to the Soviet people and its artistic tastes."

Shostakovich stated regarding any programmatic intentions of the music: "Let them work it out for themselves." But in his disputed biography, his friend and student Solomon Volkov asserted that Shostakovich had this to say regarding the tenth: "But I did depict Stalin in my next Symphony, the Tenth. I wrote it right after Stalin's death, and no one yet has guessed what the Symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the scherzo, is about Stalin, roughly speaking. Of course, there are many other things in it, but that's the basis."

Tremendously successful at its premiere, some listeners found the tone difficult and confusing. To which composer Kabalevsky defended: "I am deeply convinced that the conflict it portrays arises from the tension now existing throughout the world." John Mangum summed up the work as 48 minutes of tragedy, despair, terror, and violence and two minutes of triumph.

The first movement is longer than the third and fourth combined. Brooding low strings open the work, joined by the upper strings. A reflective melody in the clarinet insinuates over the strings and soon the full orchestra crescendos to a climax. Following a somber brass chorale, the clarinet quietly returns. The second theme is introduced by the flute creating a sort of waltz feel. The texture thins and is coopted by the bassoon and contrabassoon developing the clarinet theme. The tension is joined by the entire orchestra building with shrieking piccolos and military drums.

Quieting down for the recapitulation, a clarinet duet leads a return to the waltz theme. A duet of piccolos signal the conclusion, ending in a lingering solo.

Second comes the supposed Stalin portrait and the shortest movement. An unrelenting march with continuous aggression and energy races to a brief ominous interlude preparing the final outburst.

About a minute into the third movement Shostakovich employs a technic that he used in some of his later works. A motto is created with the notes D-Eb-C-B. In German notation these are D-S-C-H, symbolizing the composer's name. This motive and its accompaniment is punctuated by a dozen horn call interjections followed by serious responses. The movement closes with an eerie flute and piccolo version of the motto.

The finale begins with a plaintive lengthy introduction with solo woodwinds leading to a joyful allegro followed by a return to the "Stalin" music of the second movement intruding on the celebration, conquered by an enormous orchestral statement of the D-S-C-H motto. A hushed interlude precedes a build to a vast climax, with a brass-strengthened motto said to symbolize the overcoming of a brutal regime.

- ♪ 1953 WORLD EVENTS: Joseph Stalin dies, Hillary and Norgay summit Mount Everest, Sergei Prokofiev dies
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: December 17, 1953, Leningrad, Evgeny Mravinsky conducting
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: tonight is the first performance by the SSO