

Longwood Symphony Orchestra – May 1, 2010
Rachmaninoff & Nielsen
PROGRAM NOTES
By Steven Ledbetter

SERGEY RACHMANINOFF

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Opus 30

Sergey Vassilievich Rachmaninoff was born at Semyonovo, district of Starorussky, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. He composed his Piano Concerto No. 3 during the summer of 1909 in preparation for an American tour and played the first performance at the New Theatre in New York on that November 28 with the New York Symphony Society conducted by Walter Damrosch. In addition to the solo piano, the score calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, and strings. Duration is about 39 minutes.

When Rachmaninoff came to write his Third Piano Concerto, he had a far different problem from the one that had faced him when composing the Second. At the time he started the earlier concerto, there was a question whether he would ever compose again at all. His confidence and self-esteem had been shattered by the catastrophic premiere of his First Symphony in 1897. (One reviewer at that premiere, the acid-tongued composer Cesar Cui, had commented, "If there were a conservatory in Hell, if one of its talented students were instructed to write a program symphony on 'The Seven Plagues of Egypt,' and if he were to compose a symphony like Mr. Rachmaninoff's, then he would have fulfilled his task brilliantly and would bring delight to the inhabitants of Hell.") It took Rachmaninoff two years to develop the courage to compose again, and then only after extensive counseling sessions, partly under hypnosis, with a psychiatrist. The result, though, was the C-minor Concerto, which instantly established it as an audience favorite.

Thus, by 1909, when he began work on the Third, he had to compete with his younger self. In addition to the success of the Second Concerto, his Second Symphony had just won the Glinka Award of 1,000 rubles, beating out Skryabin's *Poem of Ecstasy* for the honor. He spent the summer of 1909 planning his first American tour, which began in Northampton, Massachusetts, on November 4 and continued until January. But the culminating event took place in New York City on November 28 when he premiered the new piano concerto with Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Society. The same forces repeated it two days later at Carnegie Hall and Rachmaninoff played it once more on January 16, 1910, this time with the Philharmonic and Mahler conducting. It was considered a qualified success—respected, though by no means the instant hit of the previous concerto.

The general tone of critical response and this from critics who had heard the work three times in the space of seven weeks was that, despite its many and undoubted beauties, the concerto was too long and rather full of notes. The *New York Herald* predicted that "it will doubtless take rank among the most interesting piano concertos of recent years," but added the observation as true today as it was then that "its great length and extreme difficulties bar it from performances by any but pianists of exceptional technical powers."

Of course, Rachmaninoff himself was a pianist of "exceptional technical powers," among the most utterly gifted of keyboard artists of all time, and he was, in the first instance, writing specifically for himself. Yet he opened the concerto not with a stunning blast of keyboard virtuosity but with a muted muttering in the strings of a subdued march character and then, after two measures, a long, simple melody presented in bare octaves in the piano. Like so many Russian tunes and so many of Rachmaninoff's this one circles round and round through a limited space, only gradually reaching up or down to achieve a new high or low note. Rachmaninoff was often asked whether this was a folk tune, and he always insisted that it was completely original and had simply come into his mind freely while working on the concerto. Musicologist Joseph Yasser has discovered a marked similarity between this theme and an old Russian monastic

chant, which the composer might have heard as a boy when, while visiting his grandmother in Novgorod, they made visits to the local monasteries. The distant, buried memory of the chant might then have appeared unbidden, to be further shaped by the mature composer, into the concerto's main theme. In any case, its essential Russian quality is palpable.

The theme itself, and its rustling accompaniment, both play a role in the progress of the movement. The orchestra takes over the theme while the piano begins rapid figuration to a solo climax and preparation for the second theme. This begins with a dialogue between soloist and orchestra emphasizing a rhythmic motif that soon appears in a leisurely, romantic *cantabile* melody sung by the piano. A literal restatement of the concerto's opening bars marks the beginning of the development, which employs mostly material from the main theme and its accompaniment. This culminates in a gigantic solo cadenza which takes the place of the normal recapitulation, commenting *in extenso* on the motivic figures of first the principal theme, then the secondary theme; after its close, only a brief reference to both themes suffices to bring the movement to a close.

The slow movement, entitled "Intermezzo," seems to start in a "normal" key, A major (the dominant of D minor) with a brief languishing figure in the strings that generates an elegiac mood in its extensive development. But the piano enters explosively to break the mood and carry us to the decided untypical key of D-flat, where Rachmaninoff presents a sumptuous and lavishly harmonized version of the main theme in a texture filled with dense piano chords. A bright contrast comes in a seemingly new theme, presented as a light waltz in 3/8 time, heard in the solo clarinet and bassoon against sparkling figuration in the piano. But Rachmaninoff has a very subtle trick up his sleeve here: the "new" theme is, in fact, note-for-note, the opening theme of the entire concerto, but beginning at a different pitch level of the scale (the third instead of the tonic) and so changed in its rhythm so as to conceal the connection almost perfectly! It would be easy to hear the concerto many times and still completely miss this "underground" link that nonetheless helps tie the movements together. This passage leads back to D-flat and an orchestral restatement of the opening.

The soloist "interrupts" the end of the slow movement with a brief cadenza that leads back to the home key of D minor for the finale. This is the *ne plus ultra* of virtuosic concerto finales, filled with impetuous and dashing themes, rhythmically driving, syncopated, and sunny by turns. An extended *Scherzando* section in E-flat fills the middle of the movement. It involves both acrobatic and lightly spooky variations on a capricious theme which seems new at first but turns out to be related to the opening of the finale and the second theme of the first movement. Moreover, between the increasingly ornate miniature variations, Rachmaninoff inserts a reminder of both themes of the first movement. Following the restatement of all the thematic material, the piano builds a long and exciting coda that brings this most brilliant and challenging of concertos to a flashing, glamorous close.

CARL NIELSEN

Symphony No. 4, Opus 29, The Inextinguishable

Carl August Nielsen was born in Norre-Lyndelse, Fyn, Denmark, on June 9, 1865, and died in Copenhagen on October 3, 1931. He began to sketch the Symphony No. 4 in 1914 and completed the work on January 14, 1916. He himself conducted the first performance with the orchestra of the Copenhagen Music Society in Odd Fellows Hall, Copenhagen, on February 1, 1916. The score calls for three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings. There are two sets of timpani and two players, the second stationed opposite the first. Duration is about 36 minutes.

Carl Nielsen grew up in a rural environment and from early childhood developed a love of the natural world and a remarkably insightful perception of human beings and their role in the world. Though he had artistic leanings to both the visual arts and literature, his musical gift was even stronger. It was discovered early because his father played violin and cornet as a much sought-after village musician. His mother sang him simple songs, and he learned to imitate them, at the age of six, on a small violin. By nine he had become part of an amateur orchestra, thus extending his horizons to orchestral dance movements and a few symphonic excerpts from Haydn and Mozart. Yet he remained a product of the country, earning

some of the family's income by looking after geese during school holidays and developing a realistic and utterly down-to-earth character, which remained an important part of his music.

Though he long earned his living as an orchestral violinist, Nielsen's real interest quickly turned to composing. His First Symphony (1894) revealed a strong Brahmsian influence, but his Second, *The Four Temperaments*, was already wonderfully personal, characteristic. To many of his symphonies he gave a title, intended to suggest the general character and no more. Like the others, the "*Expansive Symphony*" grew out of purely musical concerns and makes its dramatic and lyrical points with purely musical techniques. Most significant of these is Nielsen's tendency to shape a symphony in what has been called "progressive tonality," written not so much *in* a key as *toward* it. The Third Symphony, for example, begins undeniably in D minor, but it ends in A major; throughout its entire course, Nielsen sets up conflicts of tonality that eventually resolve in the latter key.

The Fourth Symphony was composed during two of the most harrowing years of the 20th century, from 1914 to 1916, when the vast European war broke out in August 1914 and quickly became a grinding, repetitive, murderous slog that wore away four full years of human history and changed forever our perceptions of "before" and "after." Given the horrors that were unfolding only a few hundred miles from where he lived in Denmark, it is astonishing that Nielsen retained his essentially positive view of life. He was by no means blind to the situation along the hundreds of miles of trench warfare, where one side might gain a few yards today only to lose them next month—and both advances and retreats taking an appalling waste in the lives of young men from Germany, France, Belgium and England.

Perhaps the strongest sign of Nielsen's trust in the "life force" is the title he gave his Fourth Symphony. This is not the "Inextinguishable Symphony"—as if the title were an adjective intended to describe the music. No, in Danish the title is in the neuter, and it refers to that which is inextinguishable in human life and in the world of nature.

In a short epigraph to the score, Nielsen noted that the title was intended "to indicate in one word what the music alone is capable of expressing to the full: *The elemental Will of Life*." He emphasizes that the title is not a program intended to "explain" the music, still less does it offer any kind of "plot" for the unfolding of the work. But it does represent the feeling that he had learned as a child in the woods, that after the longest and coldest winter, a new burgeoning of life would appear in the spring, so that even after the longest and most senseless of wars, there could yet be a hope for the rebirth of the natural world and also for the future of human aspiration.

This sounds highly poetic, but what is most impressive is the purely *musical* way that he achieves it. The process is similar to that of the Third Symphony—starting in one key and ending in another. Of course any rank amateur can make the elementary mistake of ending a piece in the "wrong" key. What Nielsen accomplishes is to make the "wrong" key the right one, the home that the music has sought from the very beginning. It is perhaps an expression of his confidence that, for all our folly as a race, we have the capability to grow and change, and to find ourselves, at the end, in a surprising place.

In the Third Symphony, Nielsen had cast the music into the standard four movements, with a break between them. In the Fourth, the work unfolds with four sections that function and sound like the four movements if a traditional symphony, but that are linked directly from one to another. He had been immensely impressed by Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor, which was shaped in much the same way. And he had gotten well started on the new symphony by mid-July 1914, which he described in a letter to a friend as "a sort of symphony in one movement, which is meant to represent all that we feel and think about life in the most fundamental sense of the word, that is, all that has the will to live and to move." Only a few days after the writing of this letter the world exploded with an assassination in Sarajevo and all the countries in Europe, with interlocking secret treaties of mutual support, found themselves facing one another in battle.

It is hard to know exactly how much the ground-plan of the symphony might have changed because of the war, but there is no change in Nielsen's fundamental decency or his sense of the ultimate success of

the “inextinguishable,” which wins out at the end of the work even though the war still had nearly three years to run (though no one could have realized this) as he penned the closing pages.

It is difficult to discuss Nielsen's achievement without getting at least slightly involved in technical explanations. Essentially the piece begins with music that seems to be in D minor (or perhaps major—it changes often), but that key is undermined by a simultaneous suggestion of C. So even without a guidebook, it is clear from the opening measures that all is not well, that there is a state of struggle. Ultimately the symphony will end in a glowing E major, and the final end point can be glimpsed (or rather heard) briefly at various points in the course of the symphony until it finally becomes the only possible ending for the music.

The symphony opens with an outburst of great energy with the woodwinds and the strings emphasizing different keys (D and E respectively) but unfolding essentially the same musical ideas, rhythmically vigorous (with long and short notes appearing in surprising places to complicate our sense of the meter) and at a great speed. The argument gradually calms down. A pair of clarinets sings a sweet duet in thirds (later echoed by other woodwinds), but the rest of the orchestra objects to more of this and breaks out with a restatement of the very opening soon after with the introduction of a new idea in E—the first strong statement of the key that will be the final goal of the symphony.

First violins over a solo timpani rhythm link the first movement with the Poco Allegretto. This tempo, and indeed this whole movement, seem to reflect the kind of substitution for a scherzo that Brahms liked to employ—not too fast, not too slow, often quite charming and slightly old-fashioned in feel. The woodwinds are featured throughout, and the movement offers a splendid example of Nielsen's ear for woodwind color.

As the last hint of the movement dies away in a faltering clarinet flutter, the violins enter with a passionately intense statement to introduce the slow movement (in E, though chromatic and not immediately stable). It becomes less stable when the woodwinds begin to return (solo flute first), agitating and building to a massive orchestral climax. A short statement lickety-split in the strings sounds as if it is going to turn into a fugue—but it suddenly stops in a grand pause and the finale begins.

The last movement begins with a vigorous waltz theme that is not allowed to dance because it is part of the final struggle of the life force to exert itself. The key signature suggests A major (which is closely related to E), but the timpanists—two players—begin attacking any sense of key by playing the “forbidden” interval of the tritone (F/B, or D-flat/G), once called “the devil in music,” to confound any sense of “home.” Eventually a clear A-major rings out as the orchestra—including timpani—the perfect fifth (E down to A), which banishes the “devil” (Nielsen marks this passage “glorioso.”) But it is still necessary to reach the destination, E major. Further struggle occurs, culminating in the arrival of the brass instruments pouring forth the melody that the clarinets had introduced in thirds back in the first movement—now climactically in E, a key that the rest of the orchestra confirms to bring the symphony to its glorious climax, celebrating all that is inextinguishable.