

**Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835-1921)

*Danse Macabre*, op. 14 (1874)

An old legend tells that on certain nights of the year, the skeletons of the dead rise from their graves at midnight and dance until morning, while Death himself plays on the fiddle. The legend inspired a poem by Henri Cazalis, published in 1872 and almost immediately was set to music as an extended song by Saint-Saëns. Not long afterward, Saint-Saëns used the song as the basis for a longer tone poem for orchestra with solo violin, which has become one of his most popular works.

The image of Death as a fiddler appears in many paintings going back to medieval times, and would certainly have been familiar to 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian audiences. Saint-Saëns gives the image a light, almost comic touch, asking the concertmaster to play upon a deliberately mistuned violin (the E string is tuned down a half-step).

*Danse macabre* begins with the sound of a distant church bell (depicted by the harp, in this case) striking the midnight hour. Death then aggressively tunes his fiddle (never quite getting it right!), and the dead quickly rise and begin dancing. Saint-Saëns employs a xylophone in his orchestra—still a novelty at the time—to depict the sound of rattling bones. After a while, a new theme appears, based on the *Dies Irae* chant. This old tune has been used frequently to symbolize death in concert works, but Saint-Saëns here recasts the melody incongruously as a waltz. The action becomes increasingly frenzied until a crowing cock (an oboe) suddenly announces the dawn. The party of the dead slowly vanishes, and Death plays a final mournful tune on his fiddle, before slinking off until next year.

**Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff** (1873-1943)

*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (1934)

Fleeing political instability in Russia and war in Europe, Rachmaninoff and his family arrived in New York in November 1918. Having left most of the family belongings and money behind, financial stability was Rachmaninoff's most pressing need. Fortunately, he was well-known as one of the world's greatest pianists, and the memory of his triumphant American tour in 1909-10 was still fresh. It didn't take long for a busy performing career to be re-established.

His American years were sadly marked by a decrease in his composing. Rachmaninoff required quiet and isolation in order to work, and both were in short supply. From 1918 until his death twenty five years later, he only completed six significant compositions and a handful of smaller works, mostly arrangements.

In 1932, Rachmaninoff purchased a villa near Lake Lucerne, Switzerland. He named it Villa Senar, after the first two letters of his and his wife's names (Sergei and Natalia), and the first letter of their last name. It became their summer retreat, and with a haven to escape the pressures of his career, he began to think of composing again.

In 1934, during their third summer in Villa Senar, Rachmaninoff worked in secret on a new work for piano and orchestra. Late in August, as they were preparing to return to America, he wrote to a friend, "Two weeks ago I finished a new piece. It is called 'Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra in the Form of Variations on a Theme of Paganini' (the same theme on which Liszt and Brahms based their variations). It is very long, about twenty or twenty-five minutes—the length of a piano concerto! ...The composition is very difficult, and I should start practicing it, but with every year I become more lazy about this kind of fingerwork."

Presumably, he made himself practice it. He premiered the new work (retitled simply *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*) on November 7<sup>th</sup> of that year, with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Leopold Stokowski. Though critical opinion was initially dismissive (as usual), it was immediately successful with the public, and is now considered one of Rachmaninoff's greatest works.

Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840) was an Italian violinist whose virtuosity is still legendary, as is the rumor that he received his ability thanks to a pact with the Devil. The "theme of Paganini" used by Rachmaninoff is taken from the 24<sup>th</sup> Caprice for solo violin, itself a set of variations composed by Paganini in 1817. Numerous composers besides Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and Brahms have been intrigued by the tune down to the present day (Wikipedia's article on the 24<sup>th</sup> Caprice includes a list of over fifty composers who have written their own variations on it).

A striking feature of Rachmaninoff's work is the inclusion of a phrase from the *Dies Irae* plainchant, which is worked into several of the variations. The *Dies Irae* is taken from the traditional Requiem Mass, where it evokes the terrors of the Day of Judgement. In concert music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had become a way of alluding to evil supernatural forces in general. Rachmaninoff inserted it by way of suggesting the violinist's supposed demonic bargain, as he explained to the choreographer Michael Fokine a few years later when the two were discussing a possible ballet treatment. "Why not resurrect the legend of Paganini," Rachmaninoff wrote, "who, for perfection in his art and the love of a woman, sold his soul to an evil spirit? All the variations which include the Dies Irae represent the evil spirit...Paganini himself first appears in the theme and again, now conquered, in Variation 23." Fokine's ballet *Paganini*, first performed with Rachmaninoff's music in 1939, largely followed the composer's ideas.

Although the work is not a concerto in the traditional sense, the grouping of the variations into three easily discernable sections does make at least a nod to three-movement concerto form. After a brief introduction and a variation in which the theme is heard in skeletal form, the theme proper is heard in the violins (with punctuations by the piano). The next several variations deal with the theme in various transformations, while the tempo gradually quickens. In Variation 7, as the tempo slows, the piano presents the Dies Irae theme while Paganini's theme slithers through the bass instruments of the orchestra. The next three variations pick up the tempo again, at times suggesting a sinister march; finally all the energy dissipates, and there is a brief pause before the next section begins.

In this middle section, slow tempos predominate. Variation 11 is essentially an accompanied cadenza, leading into a slow minuet in which Paganini's theme steps delicately as the piano plays a graceful adaptation of the Dies Irae theme. The pace once again speeds up, culminating in an extended brilliant passage for the piano alone. The tempo then slows, then slows again and again, before relaxing into Variation 18, arguably the most famous section of the piece. The piano unfolds one of those beautiful, lyrical, Romantic themes that are so typical of Rachmaninoff. At first hearing, it seems like a completely new idea, but it is nothing more than Paganini's theme played much slower and inverted (in effect, played upside down), with little else changed.

The last section begins with a spiky treatment of the theme, obliterating the languid mood of the preceding section. Each of the next several variations ratchets up the pace and the tension level. After another cadenza, Variation 23 reintroduces the theme in something close to its original form. Yet another brief cadenza, and the final variation gets underway. As it draws to a close, the Dies Irae theme is heard one last time, and the music seems to push toward a typical grandiose conclusion, but ends unexpectedly in two whisper-soft chords.

## **Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)**

*Symphonie Fantastique*, op. 14 (1830) (movements 2, 4, and 5 only)

It's somewhat uncomfortable to admit, in this day and age, that Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, one of the most influential and highly-respected works in the classical canon, is nearly an hour of music depicting a drug-induced hallucination.

According to the composer's own program, the symphony depicts the dreams of a tortured artist who has taken opium in a fit of lovesick despair. He imagines that he has murdered his beloved, is executed on the guillotine, and finds himself in Hell where the spirit of his love appears leading a witches' Sabbath, climaxing in a frenetic orgy.

It gets worse. The inspiration for the symphony is at least partly autobiographical, stemming from Berlioz' obsession with a young Irish actress. The story behind the symphony is almost as disturbing as the symphony itself; it seems to come straight from a made-for-cable movie.

It begins with Berlioz, young and still unknown, attending a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Paris in 1827. Even though the performance is in English, a language he does not understand, Berlioz is entranced with Shakespeare's play, but even more with Harriet Smithson, the young actress portraying Ophelia. He writes her that evening, extravagantly praising her performance and her beauty, and actually proposing marriage! Dozens of letters follow, but Smithson declines to answer even one of them, and eventually leaves Paris without meeting him or acknowledging his existence in any way.

Berlioz sublimates his frustrated passion in the *Symphonie Fantastique*. Having heard a rumor that Harriet has been carrying on an affair with her manager, Berlioz exacts revenge by symbolically casting her into Hell as a whore. The

symphony is premiered in 1830, and is an immediate (if controversial) sensation, Berlioz' first major success as a composer.

Two years elapse, during which time Berlioz has a fling with another woman, is dumped by her, and contemplates revenge by murdering her and her new lover, then committing suicide. Harriet returns to Paris and is talked into attending a performance of the *Symphonie Fantastique*. It is an open secret that Harriet is the inspiration behind the work, and gossip columnists eagerly await her reaction. They are not disappointed; Harriet, overwhelmed by the music's passion, finally agrees to meet with Berlioz. They are married a year later.

To no one's surprise, the marriage goes badly. For one thing, the language barrier is never really overcome: husband and wife must rely on phrasebooks to communicate. Further, in marrying her, Berlioz takes on sole responsibility for repaying her enormous debts, since she chooses to retire from the stage and does not contribute a penny to the household accounts. Finally, Harriet turns out to be a mentally unstable alcoholic, with a tendency to wake her husband up in the middle of the night and scream invective at him for hours. Somehow they have a son, Louis, but soon separate, and are divorced in 1844.

The work that came from this strange situation has turned out to be a landmark in the history of concert music. For one thing, Berlioz broke new ground in the use of orchestral color and effect. The orchestra used is much larger than was considered normal at the time, and includes several new instruments making their first appearance in a symphonic score. Note for instance the appearance of two tubas (actually *Ophicleides*, now obsolete ancestors of the tuba) in the fourth and fifth movements, two harps in the second, and church bells in the finale. Other instruments are played in unusual ways; an oboe is played offstage, flutes and clarinets are asked to "bend" notes, violins and violas are played *col legno*, that is by striking the strings with the wood of the bow.

A formal innovation was the use of a theme (for which Berlioz coined the term *idée fixe*) which occurs in various guises throughout the symphony. This theme was intended to represent the artist's beloved, but has the additional effect of providing an element of structural unity to the work. It was a technique that would be imitated even by composers who did not share Berlioz' hyper-romantic outlook.

Finally, while the idea of a programmatic work was not new, this was the first time that a symphony had been written with such a detailed and elaborate program. Berlioz stipulated that the program should be printed and distributed to the audience as a guide to the symphony. Tonight, the Terre Haute Symphony Orchestra will be performing the second, fourth, and fifth movements, and we close these notes with Berlioz's program for those movements:

**Part II: A Ball.** The artist finds himself in the most varied situations--in the midst of the tumult of a party, in the peaceful contemplation of nature; but everywhere, in the town, in the country, the beloved image appears before him and disturbs his peace of mind.

**Part IV: March to the Scaffold.** Convinced that his love is unappreciated, the artist poisons himself with opium. The dose of narcotic, too weak to kill him, plunges him into a sleep accompanied by the most horrible visions. He dreams that he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death and led to the scaffold, and that he is witnessing his own execution. The procession moves forward to the sounds of a march that is sometimes somber and fierce, and sometimes brilliant and solemn, in which the muffled sound of heavy steps gives way without transition to the noisiest clamor. At the end, the *idée fixe* returns for a moment, like a final thought of love before the fatal blow.

**Part V: A Witches' Sabbath.** He sees himself at the sabbath, in the midst of a frightful troop of ghosts, sorcerers, and monsters of every species, all gathered for his funeral; strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter, distant cries which other cries seem to answer. The beloved melody appears again, but it has lost its character of nobility and shyness; it is now no more than a dance tune, mean, trivial and grotesque. It is she, coming to join the sabbath ... a roar of joy at her arrival. She takes part in the devilish orgy--funeral knell--burlesque parody of the Dies Irae--sabbath round-dance--the sabbath round-dance and the Dies Irae combined.