

## **DANIEL POWERS (b. 1960)**

### **Overture for the THSO (2005)**

The composer writes:

Overture for the THSO was commissioned by the Terre Haute Symphony. It was originally intended as a concert opener for the 2005 season and was titled Overture to the Season to reflect its original purpose. Since it is now being used as a season closer, the original title was no longer appropriate, hence the new title. It was composed during July and early August 2005.

The commission specified a time limit of five minutes, so I kept things simple. There is a slow introduction featuring a horn call, repeated by trumpets. A lively middle section follows, based on a more rhythmic theme first heard in the violins. The theme is repeated, building in volume and momentum. Finally, the opening call is heard again, and the Overture comes to an exuberant conclusion.

Overture to the Season is dedicated to David Bowden.

## **SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)**

### **Piano Concerto no. 2 in C minor, op. 18 (1901)**

By the time Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory at the age of 19, he had already made a name for himself as an outstanding young pianist, winning the Gold Medal in piano performance (which he shared with Josef Lhevinne and Alexander Scriabin—truly an extraordinary graduating class!). He had also written the Prelude in C sharp minor, a piece which became so popular that he eventually came to detest it, since he would never be permitted to leave the stage until he had performed it as an encore.

He quickly established himself as a brilliant virtuoso, performing throughout Russia and Europe. But while he wished to put greater emphasis on composition, that side of his career would suffer serious setbacks early on. The premiere of his First Symphony in 1897 met with the worst possible reception, hissed by the audience and lambasted by critics, one of whom described it as “a symphony about the plagues of Egypt performed by a Conservatory in Hell.”

Rachmaninoff was only 25, and a fiasco like this threw him into a severe creative depression. For three years he could not bring himself to face a blank page.

Not even a highly successful concert tour in London could help. In a way, it made matters worse. The London Philharmonic invited him to return to London to perform a piano concerto of his own composition. The problem was that, while he had already written his first concerto,

he no longer had any confidence that it was good enough for London. But the thought of writing a new one had him completely paralyzed.

The Rachmaninoffs were a close-knit family, and help would come when some of his cousins arranged a visit to Dr. Nicolai Dahl, a specialist in the new field of hypnotherapy and an amateur musician. In later years, Rachmaninoff described the sessions: "I heard the same formula repeated day after day, while I lay half-asleep in an armchair in Dahl's study. 'You will begin to write your concerto...You will work with great facility...The concerto will be of an excellent quality...' It was always the same, without interruption. Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me. Already at the beginning of the summer I began again to compose...By the autumn I had finished two movements of the concerto: the Andante and the Finale."

The concerto was finished in May 1901, and bears a grateful dedication to Dr. Dahl. Rachmaninoff performed the premiere in Moscow that November. The concerto was an immediate success, and would go on to be one of the most frequently performed concertos in the concert repertory. All of the ghosts of the First Symphony's failure were finally banished, and Rachmaninoff never lost confidence again.

Rachmaninoff had a gift for crafting memorable melodies, which influenced generations of American songwriters, some of whom lifted tunes intact and turned them to jazz standards. The Second Concerto alone spawned three such songs; in the 1940s, a Tin Pan Alley composer named Ted Mossman turned two of Rachmaninoff's melodies into the standards "Till the End of Time" and "Full Moon and Empty Arms." Sadly, copyright law at the time allowed this—Rachmaninoff's work, being Russian, was not protected in the United States—and Mossman reportedly earned more in royalties from these two songs than Rachmaninoff did from the entire concerto. In 1975, Eric Carmen used the principal theme of the second movement of the concerto as the basis for the power ballad "All By Myself," believing that the work was in the Public Domain. It wasn't, but he didn't find out until after he had already released the single. Copyright law had changed, and Carmen was forced to negotiate with the Rachmaninoff estate for permission to use the melody. Today Rachmaninoff shares a credit as co-composer of the song.

The first movement of the concerto was actually the last to be composed. The piano begins alone, with a series of deep chords beginning softly but gradually building in intensity. Once the orchestra enters with the principal theme, the piano recedes to the background, accompanying the theme with brilliant figurations (Rachmaninoff loved accompanying, and he liked his accompaniments to be interesting). A somber phrase in the violas leads to the pianist introducing the lyrical second theme. The development begins vivaciously, but gradually takes on a heroic quality, until the recapitulation begins with the principal theme in a march-like variation.

The second movement begins with four measures of muted strings modulating from the home key of C minor to the distant key of E major. The piano enters as accompanist again, while the

first clarinet introduces the principal theme; the theme is heard again with the two instruments reversing roles. After a faster middle section, ending with a brief cadenza, the principal theme returns in the violins while the piano returns to its role as accompanist.

The Finale begins with a longish introduction, mainly concerned with accomplishing the modulation back to C minor. The piano introduces the dazzling first theme in a brilliant display of pyrotechnic fingerwork. The tempo slows considerably for the second theme, presented by violas and taken up by the piano; this is the biggest tune in a work full of big tunes, and is possibly the most familiar portion of the concerto. The exposition ends with a surprising passage; the momentum comes almost to a complete halt for several seconds, but it is only the calm before an approaching storm. The development returns to the faster tempo of the beginning, and is mainly concerned with the principal theme, including an extended fugal variation. After both themes return, there is a long transition to another short cadenza, a triumphal statement of the big tune by full orchestra and soloist, and a whirlwind finish.

## **JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)**

### **Symphony No. 1 in C minor, op. 68 (1876)**

The year 1876, listed as the composition date for Brahms' First Symphony, must actually be regarded as a completion date. Brahms' work on the Symphony—sketching, revising, recomposing—took place over an incredible 21 years.

Brahms' long struggle with the symphonic form began in the mid 1850s, shortly after his first meeting with Robert Schumann. Schumann, an influential music critic as well as a composer, hailed Brahms as the new standard-bearer in a long-standing aesthetic battle between the German traditionalists (including Schumann and Mendelssohn) and the more radical ideas of the "New German School" (Liszt and Wagner). Brahms was held up as the next Beethoven, and Schumann and his colleagues began urging Brahms to write a Symphony.

Despite misgivings, Brahms attempted to comply, but was not successful. A large portion of a Symphony in D minor was sketched by 1856, but abandoned after it became clear that Brahms was simply not ready for the challenge. (The effort was not totally wasted. Brahms soon reworked much of the aborted symphony in his first Piano Concerto.) Up to that point, Brahms had only written smaller-scale works, and had never attempted to write an orchestral piece, let alone a symphony. Clearly a long apprenticeship would be required before he would be deserving of Schumann's hopes.

By 1860 Brahms had completed his first Piano Concerto and two Serenades for orchestra, which give the impression of attempts at symphonic writing on a small scale. By the end of the 1860s, he had composed the German Requiem and a number of smaller pieces for voices with orchestra. As well, he grappled with the problems of large-scale structure in a series of extended chamber works.

In 1873 he sent a few small pieces to his publisher Fritz Simrock, who replied, "Aren't you going to do anything more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in 1873 either?" Simrock did not have much longer to wait, but in fact Brahms had been working in secret on a Symphony all along. The seeds of his First Symphony had been planted at about the same time as the unfinished D minor symphony. An early version of the first movement was finished in 1862; it is no longer extant, but was apparently in C major rather than the C minor of the final version. Brahms showed the movement to no one but Schumann's widow, Clara. She expressed admiration, but also concern that the movement ended too abruptly.

By 1874, Brahms felt he was ready to tackle the symphony again. He revised the first movement, changing the key and adding an introduction alluding to themes already almost 20 years old, then turned his attention to the remaining movements. Work on the symphony, though steady, was still slow, and it wasn't until the summer of 1876 that the long-awaited First Symphony was finally ready.

Those who had waited for so long for a symphony from Brahms were well satisfied. The conductor Hans von Bülow declared that Schumann's prophecy had been fulfilled, and dubbed Brahms' symphony "The Tenth" (i.e., the symphony Beethoven would have written after his ninth). Moreover, as Carl Dalhaus wrote, Brahms' First was the beginning of "the second age of the symphony". Brahms had single-handedly revitalized the symphony as a genre, rescuing it from years of dormancy, and paving the way for the achievements of Dvorak, Mahler, Sibelius, Nielsen, Shostakovich, and later generations.

The symphony opens with a movement of unmatched passion and power. It begins with a 37-measure introduction (*Un poco sostenuto*), a rare feature in Brahms' music. The remainder of the first movement (*Allegro*) is in the traditional sonata form, with an unusually long, complex, and dramatic development section, and concluding with a slower coda. The second movement (*Andante sostenuto*) features rich,

chordal string writing, answered by a lyrical oboe solo. Near the end of the movement, the oboe repeats its theme, joined by horn and solo violin (the only appearance of a concertmaster solo anywhere in Brahms' orchestral music). In place of the expected Scherzo, the third movement (*Un poco allegretto e grazioso*) is a moderate, graceful, and relatively short interlude. The Finale begins with a vast introduction (*Adagio*). Some writers have suggested that the movement really begins with two introductions; the first tragic, beginning mysteriously and culminating in a series of outbursts, the second optimistic, with a sunny, lyrical horn call and a brief chorale in the trombones. Finally, the main body of the movement (*Allegro non troppo, ma con brio*) begins, with a long theme which is notable for its similarity to the "Ode to Joy" theme in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. (The similarity seems to have been deliberate; when one audience member remarked on it, Brahms acidly replied, "Any ass can see that!") The remainder of the movement is in sonata form, ending with a quickening tempo leading into a triumphant coda.