



2022-2023 Musical Interludes

BETWEEN THE WARS (MOSTLY) | RUSSIA

Program Notes

By Brian Lauritzen

This season's Interludes programs have centered on music from three countries during the period between World War I and World War II. For all three countries--France, the United States, and Russia--this was a time of transition, albeit in escalating order. In France, it was a time of intense creativity while marked by the tragedy of war that had taken place on its own soil. In the United States, economic prosperity followed by economic collapse.

In Russia, revolution.

Before all the upheaval, though, **Serge Prokofiev** was busy cementing his place in history as an *enfant terrible* performer/composer who not only defied conservatory rules and played his own piano concerto at his final exam/competition instead of any of the standard repertoire pieces that were on the approved list, he ended up winning the top prize for his audacity. His award: a new grand piano.

That was 1911, when Prokofiev was 20 years old. A year later came the **Ballade, Op. 15**, for cello and piano on this program. In fact, the Ballade contains music that Prokofiev wrote a decade prior as an 11-year-old. He converted some bars from an early violin sonata into the opening theme of this Ballade, saying, "the first theme of the Ballade, composed at the age of eleven, is the earliest of my published works with an opus number."

Not one to exhibit an inordinate amount of humility, Prokofiev was nevertheless realistic when it came to the challenges this music presented him as he composed it. "Although I had good instincts and a sound grasp of orchestration," he said, "I was not well prepared technically to write chamber music. Bringing the cello and piano parts of the Ballade into good order and balance cost me much labor, but the more the work continued the easier it became."

Igor Stravinsky's theatrical work (I suppose you could call it a "chamber opera") *L'Histoire du Soldat* (**The Soldier's Tale**) dates from 1917, the year of the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Stravinsky, however, was not residing in Russia at that time. Rather, he was in famously neutral Switzerland and was interested in composing a traveling theater work that could be staged in smaller Swiss towns. The original concept was a work for three actors, one or more dancers, and a septet of instruments (clarinet, bassoon, cornet or trumpet, trombone, percussion, violin, and double bass). The drama is based on *The Runaway Soldier and the Devil*, by Alexander Afanasyev, and is a parable of a soldier who trades his violin to the devil in exchange for a great fortune.

Spoiler alert: the deal with the devil doesn't work. In the end, the wealth the soldier gains is squandered and his relationships are ruined. The narrator gives us the moral of the story:

*You must not seek to add
To what you have, what you once had;
You have no right to share
What you are with what you were.
No one can have it all:
That is forbidden;
You must learn to choose between.
One happy thing is every happy thing;
Two, is as if they had never been.*

L'Histoire du Soldat premiered in a small theater in Lausanne in a production bankrolled by the financier Werner Reinhardt, who was also an amateur clarinetist. As a gesture of gratitude to Reinhardt, Stravinsky made this “greatest hits” trio version for clarinet, violin, and piano heard on today’s program.

Though 13 years his junior and a considerably less brash individual, **Dmitri Kabalevsky** is certainly a kindred artistic spirit with Serge Prokofiev. Their musical language is similar and each acknowledged the other’s influence in their output. Kabalevsky’s **Four Preludes, Op. 5**, are among his first published compositions and they are themselves a prelude to his set of 24 Preludes to come later in his career: a form established by J.S. Bach and expounded upon by Frédéric Chopin and Claude Debussy before Kabalevsky (among many others) threw his hat into the preludes ring.

From 24 preludes to 24 variations. To close this concert (and season) of music between the wars, it’s one of the great successes of a composer whose legacy is a bit more complex than his “hitmaker” status might suggest. **Sergei Rachmaninoff**, who never found much success in his native Russia. At dinner with Leo Tolstoy—a writer whom he greatly admired—he played one of his solo piano works for Tolstoy and asked him what he thought about the music. Tolstoy’s reply: “Does anybody need music like that?”

The great American music critic and composer Virgil Thomson said, “[Rachmaninoff’s music is] mainly an evocation of adolescence...[it is] no part of our intellectual life.”

Add to that the fact that Rachmaninoff’s family was a member of the bourgeoisie in Russia, so when the revolution came in 1917, he was forced to leave the country. On December 25, 1917, he set off in the snow with his wife and two daughters from Petrograd to Helsinki in, and I’m not making this up, a one-horse open sleigh.

From that moment, until his death in 1943, Rachmaninoff never returned to Russia. While he never ultimately found success in his homeland, he was a bonafide superstar in the United States. **The Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini** is the final work he wrote that includes the piano. It is a set of 24 variations on the 24th solo violin caprice, by Nicolo Paganini, the great violin virtuoso of the 19th century. Along with the second and third piano concertos, it is one of Rachmaninoff’s best-loved compositions.

One final tidbit about the Rhapsody: Rachmaninoff did not drink alcohol. Why does that matter? His Rhapsody is extremely difficult to play. In particular, the 24th and final variation is a virtuosic tour de force. Rachmaninoff was generally a very impressive performer, but, at the premiere of the Rhapsody, he was quite nervous. A friend of his suggested maybe have a little swig of something before the concert to steady your nerves. What could possibly go wrong? Rachmaninoff imbibed. He had a few slugs of crème de menthe just before walking out on stage. The performance was a spectacular success and musicians, being the superstitious creatures that they are, Rachmaninoff decided he needed a small drink before every subsequent performance of the Rhapsody. He even nicknamed the 24th variation the Crème de Menthe Variation.