

WATCH rte.ie/culture

LISTEN RTÉ lyric fm



FRIDAY 1 OCTOBER 2021, 7.30pm
BORD GÁIS ENERGY THEATRE

WILLIAM GRANT STILL	<i>Mother and Child</i>
RACHMANINOV	Piano Concerto No. 3
TCHAIKOVSKY	Symphony No. 5

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Conductor **Joshua Weilerstein**

Denis Kozhukhin piano

Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm



RTÉ lyric fm

PROGRAMME NOTES

WILLIAM GRANT STILL 1895-1978

Mother and Child

Mother and Child is the middle movement of Still's *Suite for Violin and Piano*. It is inspired by the portrait, *Mother and Child*, created by Sargent Johnson, famous Negro artist. The *Suite* was premiered by Louis Kaufman in Boston March 15, 1944. *Mother and Child* is perhaps the most beloved work by William Grant Still - timeless and endearing for all who hear it.

© William Grant Still Music

SERGEI RACHMANINOV 1873-1943

Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30

- i. *Allegro ma non tanto*
- ii. *Intermezzo: Adagio*
- iii. *Finale: Alla breve*

By 1909, Sergei Rachmaninov had become recognised as one of Russia's leading musicians. The tone poem *The Isle of the Dead* had confirmed his status as a composer and he was appointed Vice-President of the Imperial Russian Musical Society, on the condition it would only carry nominal responsibilities. He was then made a lucrative offer to undertake an American tour that winter. He felt a new work would be appropriate and started writing his third piano concerto that June. The task was completed by the end of September but, as usual, he was still tinkering with the score up to his departure for New York. He even took a dummy keyboard with him on his transatlantic crossing so he could practise during the journey.

He gave the first performance of the Piano Concerto No. 3 in New York on 28 November 1909 with Walter Damrosch conducting. He played it twice more that season, with Mahler directing the third performance.

Rachmaninov was greatly impressed by Mahler's handling of the complex orchestral part, placing him alongside Artur Nikisch as among the greatest conductors of his time. The third concerto comes eight years after the second and, although it has never achieved quite the same popularity, it is a fine work with subtle themes and exciting developments of the basic ideas, while the soloist is given one of the most strenuous parts in the concerto repertoire.

It opens with a much gentler introduction than the famous drama of Piano Concerto No. 2. Two bars of murmurings on the strings are followed by the piano, with a soft introduction to the lilting first subject. There are some similarities between this tune and its opposite number in the second concerto; the tonic note of D is prominent in both, but the new melody is more wistful and subtle. There were comments at the time about its similarity to a religious chant from Kiev, but Rachmaninov was quick to disagree, stating it was 'borrowed neither from folk-song forms nor from church sources. It simply wrote itself!... If I had any plan composing this theme, I was thinking only of sound. I wanted "to sing" the melody on the piano, as a singer would, and to find a suitable orchestral accompaniment that would not muffle it. That is all.'

The theme is repeated by violas and horns over piano arpeggios and the tempo quickens to Allegro. A distinctive little *staccato* motto appears on clarinets and horns and much use is made of it in the movement. However, this is not the real second subject, which emerges after the motto has been worked over for a number of bars. It is another lyrical melody announced by the piano and taken up by the woodwind. The development of this material is highly imaginative, with the soloist flashing through the orchestral textures in page after page of brilliant inspiration, featuring some of the composer's finest piano writing. There are clever variations on the first theme until the music dies away to a *pianissimo*, which introduces the main cadenza. There are two versions of the cadenza; the first is a longer 75-bar version, but Rachmaninov then wrote a shorter 59-bar cadenza that he plays in his own recording and

seems to have favoured in performance. In the late 1950s Van Cliburn started a fashion for employing the longer version and this has gained popularity in recent times. Rachmaninov worked out his ideas very fully in the development and cadenza, so he reduces his recapitulation to the minimum. The two subjects are reintroduced and the motto theme also makes its final appearance.

The oboe launches the main theme of the *Intermezzo* and a lengthy orchestral treatment follows before the piano takes up the melody. There are suggestions of the first subject from the opening movement in this music, but an even more direct reference follows in the central 3/8 scherzo-like sequence, where the theme is a clear variant of that melody, although its note values have been altered and it has moved to a major key. This is an example of the skill and imagination of Rachmaninov's writing throughout the concerto and his ability to draw his elements together into a remarkably cohesive composition. A sombre orchestral passage brings the music back to the *Intermezzo's* opening melody for a brief restatement before the music moves on without a break into the *Finale*.

The exuberant first theme of the *Finale* is subjected to lively excursions by the piano. The tempo slows down (*meno mosso*) and a lyrical second theme is introduced by the piano; in a scherzo-like sequence there is a further reference to the opening movement's first subject and Rachmaninov works up a fine head of steam as he gives full flight to his romantic inspiration. A short cadenza leads to the lively recapitulation and the exciting presto coda.

Note by Ian Fox © RTÉ

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

- i. *Andante – Allegro con anima*
- ii. *Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza*
- iii. *Valse: Allegro moderato*
- iv. *Finale: Andante maestoso – Allegro vivace*

There is a long break between Tchaikovsky's Fourth (1877–8) and Fifth (1888) symphonies. At the time of the Fourth he had been undergoing a near-suicidal period following his disastrous marriage to and separation from Antonina Ivanova Milyukova. In the years following this unfortunate liaison he began to work out a more acceptable lifestyle and hints of how he was thinking are apparent in a note he made in 1888. It outlines the plot of the first movement of a new symphony he was contemplating: *'Introduction. Complete resignation before Fate or, in other words, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence. Allegro. (1) Murmurs, doubts, worries, reproaches against XXX. (2) Shall I throw myself into the embraces of faith ???'* In his diaries he usually hid the names of his homosexual liaisons under the term 'XXX'.

At first he seemed well pleased with the new composition and wrote to a friend: 'My symphony is ready, and it seems to me that I have not blundered, that it has turned out well'. However, the first performance in St Petersburg, which he conducted on 17 November 1888, was less successful than he had expected, a feeling which was confirmed at further concerts, and it took time for the work to gain acceptance.

The first movement opens with a dark *Andante* theme on clarinet over chords from the string section. The music becomes even slower until soft string chords present the accompaniment to another sombre but faster melody, initially played by the clarinet and bassoon, the true first subject of the movement. This theme is amplified and extended by the strings with bubbly woodwind figures, later punctuated by the brass. The tempo pulls back again as hints of the second main subject peek

through the textures. Eventually this melody appears on pizzicato strings with sudden outbursts from the woodwind. The strings expand it into a sweeping waltz. A stormy sequence with loud horn-calls leads to the development of the themes; the material is expanded and elaborated upon in powerfully emotional sequences. Finally calm is restored and the bassoon reintroduces the main theme, treating it to further variation, followed by the second subject in a fresh presentation (*molto più tranquillo*). The horns introduce the coda, with further interesting variants on the subjects; the main theme is given a marchlike presentation and then the music dies away, *ppp*.

The lower strings set the mood for the theme of the slow movement, introduced by a remarkable horn solo (12/8, *dolce con molto*) while the clarinet provides a lazy accompaniment. The oboe brings in a counter melody assisted by the horns and the music plunges down to the lower strings, only to recover in a more animated extension of the themes. The clarinet launches a new idea, with a distinctive decoration woven through it, the bassoon takes over and the strings help to set a more lively pace. Suddenly, the theme from the introduction to the first movement bursts through savagely. There is a shocked silence at such an intrusion, as soft pizzicato chords set the music on its way again, with further variants of the main theme, building up to the full force of the orchestra, with blazing brass comments in a brilliantly scored sequence. Once more the introduction bursts in with a mighty *ffff* crash and howling brass. The main theme replaces this indiscretion quickly and the movement drifts towards its *pppp* ending over throbbing horns.

The short third movement is a charming waltz, a welcome respite after the drama of the first two movements. It is a gentle affair with strings and woodwind sharing its graceful measures. There are three parts to the opening melody: the theme itself, a livelier oboe and bassoon counter-melody, and the main idea again in a fresh woodwind dressing. The central or 'trio' section is a bustling affair, started by staccato strings and decorated by fireworks from the wind. The oboe brings back the waltz and the music builds to a strong chordal climax before slipping in a brief

reminder of the first movement introduction on bassoon, followed by a diminuendo which fools one into expecting a really soft ending. Instead, six powerful *ff* chords bring the waltz to a positive conclusion.

The finale presents the listener with few, if any, problems, though it has caused controversy among musicologists. Sir Donald Tovey expressed his reservations with characteristic vivacity when he compared it to the 'Alice-and-Red-Queen' effect, where they ran faster and faster while remaining rooted to the spot. Certainly it is not a movement of great subtlety, but its brash affirmation of life provides a thrilling conclusion to this journey through the composer's fears and anxieties. It begins with a strong reiteration of the introduction to the first movement and expands it into a majestic climax before dying away over a timpani roll. The movement proper then gets underway with a rapid chordal theme on strings; further material is quickly introduced as the music gathers momentum and speeds away. The woodwind bring in a subordinate melody which the strings briefly adopt before returning to the main theme, now up to full speed as a whirlwind march. The ideas are tossed around the orchestra in exciting sequences until the recapitulation brings back the main theme for a further dramatic presentation. The coda comes sailing in as the winds reintroduce the principal theme over scurrying strings. A great drum roll and an orchestral chord pull the tempo back for a restatement of the main theme - *moderato assai e moto maestoso*. This becomes increasingly ceremonial - *marziale, energico con tutta forza* - producing a spectacular climax. The tempo surges into *Presto* and the symphony thunders to its dramatic finish in an explosion of powerful chords.

Note by Ian Fox © RTÉ