

OVERTURE TO *RUSLAN AND LUDMILA*

MIKHAIL GLINKA

*Born June 1, 1804, in Novospasskoe near Smolensk in Belarus, Russia*

*Died February 15, 1857, in Berlin, Prussia (Germany)*

“All Russian music stemmed from one source: Mikhail Glinka.”

–Igor Stravinsky

“All Russian music was contained in Glinka’s *Karmarinskaya*, like a majestic oak in a tiny acorn.”

–Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

During a three-year trip to Italy between 1830 and 1833, Mikhail Glinka became terribly homesick. After returning to Russia, he decided that he would, in the future, “write in a Russian manner.” And he did, earning the title of “the father of Russian nationalism in music.” He delved heavily into the works of Alexander Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol, immersing himself in the world of Russian literature and history. After the success of his first opera, *A Life for the Tsar*, the director of the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg suggested that he write another opera, based on Pushkin’s epic poem, *Ruslan und Ludmila*.

Glinka worked five years on his second opera and composed its Overture at the very end. Concerning the Overture, the composer remembered, “I was up in the balcony (after a dinner at the Russian court), and the clattering of knives, forks, and plates made such an impression on me that I had the idea to imitate them in the prelude (Overture) to *Ruslan*. I later did so, with fair success.” He did so, writing the Overture during rehearsals for the opera!

In sharp contrast to the success of *A Life for the Tsar*, *Ruslan and Ludmila* was a failure after its premiere on December 9, 1842, in St. Petersburg. Undaunted, the composer mused, “It may be recognized in a hundred years.” It did not take a hundred years; in 1867, Mily Balakirev produced a complete uncut staging in Prague, which was received enthusiastically.

Pushkin’s poem spun a fairy tale that included a flying dwarf, Chernomor (receiving power from his beard), fights with a disembodied head, a fallen hero who is later revived, and a happy ending for two lovers who had been through abduction, poisoned sleep, bad witches and spells, and the aid of a magic ring. But Pushkin died in a duel and the story fell into other hands. Musicologist Geoffrey Kuenning quotes that after Pushkin’s death, the composer first asked for help from Konstantin Bakhturin, who “took it upon himself to work out the opera, and he did so in just a quarter of an hour while drunk,” or, as some say, a “vodka-saturated” 15 minutes. Then he asked for more help from a dilettante army officer, Valerian Shirkov. He also did a bit of writing himself. No surprise: the libretto was a mishmash, and the singers were mediocre. But the music was wonderful and was praised by contemporary music critics and Franz Liszt, who had attended the premiere.

The Overture has had a long, successful life. It opens with happy music, derived from the final wedding music. Big *fortissimo* chords announce the beginning. Two themes take center stage: the first comes from violins, violas, and flute, and the second is a lithe melody in violas, cellos, and bassoon. Occasional dissonances reference the dwarf’s nasty activities, and there are quotes from music written for a lull in the Act II battle and Ruslan’s thinking about his true love, Ludmila. A sparkling coda has the final word, colored by bell-like tones coming from the brass.

Sean Newhouse was on the podium for the orchestra's last performances of the Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmila* in July 2008.

CONCERTO NO. 2 IN C MINOR FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 18

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

*Born April 1, 1873, in Oneg, Russia*

*Died March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California*

"I try to make music speak simply and directly that which is in my heart at the time I am composing. If there is love there, or bitterness or sadness or religion, these moods become part of my music, and it becomes either beautiful or bitter or sad or religious."

–Sergei Rachmaninoff

After the disastrous failure of Sergei Rachmaninoff's first symphony in 1897, the composer fell into a serious, unquenchable depression for several years. No wonder. Critics were unrelenting and even cruel. César Cui went so far as to say that the symphony had been produced from "the Conservatory in Hell" and was "one of the seven plagues of Egypt." The sensitive composer lamented, "My dreams of a brilliant career lay shattered. My hopes and confidence were destroyed. I felt like a man who had suffered a stroke and for a long time, had lost the use of his head and hands ... something within me snapped. A paralyzing apathy possessed me ... my only occupation consisted in giving a few piano lessons to keep me alive." Not only was he depressed, he was embarrassed. He began to drink heavily to escape his shame and perceived inadequacy.

Only after three years under the care of Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a hypnotherapist and musician, was he brought back to life and to his dual career as composer and pianist. This good doctor charged nothing for his daily appointments. Rachmaninoff dedicated his Piano Concerto No. 2 with gratitude to his physician.

Rachmaninoff began the concerto in the summer and fall of 1900 while vacationing in Italy, beginning with the second and third movements, and finally writing the first during the winter. The concerto premiered in Moscow on November 10, 1901, with the composer as soloist. The response was enthusiastic and immediate. And it still is.

Mr. Watts has been acclaimed throughout the world for his definitive, exquisite performances of this massive personal and musical triumph. The concerto was written by a brilliant pianist, accessible only to the greatest, most powerful, and most musically intelligent pianists who can, in their own heart and with enormous technique, successfully voice the emotion, the passion, the beauty, and the vision of the composer.

Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto opens with the soloist. Eight resonant piano chords, perhaps referencing the church bells of his youth, grow dynamically from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*. As the outer notes of the chords remain constant, inner notes change, creating powerful and shifting harmonic coloration in each iteration. The effect is riveting. Clearly, unmistakably, the piano is in charge from the beginning. A surging main theme pours from the strings and is shared by the soloist, together moving to an enormous climax. "Enough notes to keep a half dozen

music typographers busy for a week.” (Michael Steinberg) The turbulence gives way to a sudden peace in which the pianist introduces the arching second theme shifted to the more cheerful key of E flat Major. A development ratchets the intensity with faster tempos, huge leaps, and dazzling *passaggi* from the piano in a frenzy of emotion.

The *Adagio sostenuto* begins in a Minor key, which quickly glides into E Major. Flute and clarinet sing the main idea with flourishes of pianistic commentary before the soloist embarks on his own presentation. Trombone and tuba announce a long *cadenza*, followed by a small recapitulation.

The final *Allegro scherzando* emerges with piano and orchestra working in tandem. Then comes the famous second theme known popularly, thanks to the big band era, as “Full Moon and Empty Arms.” This has become one of the great moments in musical Romanticism, and the orchestra, as well as the pianist, is given a turn in the presentation. But this is not all. Rachmaninoff pours out his heart in one poignant theme and idea after another. These ideas surge, dance, sing, and grow to enormous proportions. Emotional and coloristic events are released with abandon. The concerto concludes in full plumage with a ravishing coda.

Natasha Paremski was soloist in the orchestra’s last performances of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in February 2006, under the direction of Keith Lockhart.