

JANUARY 8 & 9, 2010

MIDORI PLAYS SIBELIUS

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV: RUSSIAN EASTER OVERTURE, OP. 36

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov: Born in Tikhvin, near Novgorod, March 18, 1844; died in Lyubensk, near St. Petersburg, June 21, 1908

In the *Russian Easter Overture*, Rimsky-Korsakov combined elements of both solemn Christian ritual and extroverted pagan merrymaking in a score thoroughly infused with the splendid orchestral color for which the composer is renowned. This fifteen minute work (a tone poem in all but name), justly one of Rimsky-Korsakov's most famous, celebrates the resurrection of Christ and the rebirth of nature, though, ironically, it was first performed at a time when nature was settling in for the long winter ahead, on December 3, 1888 in St. Petersburg.

The musical themes come from the *Obikhod*, an eighteenth century collection of canticles of the Russian liturgical service. The composer felt that for a truly proper appreciation of his Overture, the listener must have attended at least once in his life an Easter Morning service in a great Orthodox cathedral, where the scene was "thronged with people from every walk of life, with several priests conducting the cathedral service."

Rimsky-Korsakov prefaced the score with evocative passages drawn from the Old and New Testaments plus words of his own. The final portion reads: "Resurrexit! sings the chorus of angels in Heaven to the sound of the archangels' trumpets and the fluttering of the wings of the seraphim. 'Resurrexit!' sing the priests in the temples, in the midst of clouds of incense, by the light of innumerable candles, to the chiming of triumphant bells."

SIBELIUS: VIOLIN CONCERTO IN D MINOR, OP. 47

Jean Sibelius: Born in Hämeenlinna (Tavastehus), Finland, December 8, 1865; died in Järvenpää, near Helsinki, September 20, 1957

Jean Sibelius wrote his only large-scale work for solo instrument and orchestra in the summer of 1903, and conducted the premiere himself in early 1904. After substantial revisions in 1905, the work was reintroduced in Berlin with soloist Karl Halir and no less a celebrity than Richard Strauss on the podium. Chronologically, the concerto comes between the Second and Third Symphonies.

The solo part is one of the most difficult in the entire repertory. Virtuoso passages abound, but they are welded to disciplined musical thought; there is no empty display material here. The orchestral writing bears much evidence of Sibelius' deep interest in this medium, and serves a far greater purpose than a mere backdrop for the soloist. Dark, somber colors predominate, as is this composer's tendency, lending an air of passionate urgency to the music. Note particularly the third theme in B-flat minor in the first movement, played by the unison violins, or the second theme of the finale, again played by the violins, with its interplay of 6/8 and 3/4

meters.

Attention to the formalities of sonata form is largely avoided in favor of originality of thought. In the first movement, there is no development section as such; instead, each of the three main themes is fully elaborated and developed upon initial presentation. A cadenza occurs at the point where a full development would normally stand, followed by a recapitulation of the three themes, each of which is subjected to further expansion. In the *Adagio* movement, Sibelius contrasts the long, dreamy and reflective opening theme with a turbulent and darkly passionate section in the minor mode. The finale, in rondo form, calls to the fore the full technical prowess of the soloist. Energetic rhythms suggestive of the polonaise and gypsy dances offer further elements of excitement to this exuberant movement.

KALINNIKOV: SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN A MAJOR

Vasily Sergeyevich Kalinnikov: Born in Voina, January 13, 1866; died in Yalta, January 11, 1901

Vasily Kalinnikov represents one of the saddest cases of musical talent snuffed out early through poverty and disease. He lived not quite 35 years (a year less than Mozart) and left just a handful of works, mostly orchestral, of which his First Symphony remains his best-known composition. He began studies at the Moscow Conservatory but had to leave early through lack of financial means. He then transferred to a different school where tuition was free, added the bassoon to his curriculum, and began writing his first compositions. Both Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov were impressed with his work, and tried to help him along in his career, but tuberculosis demanded that he move to a more salubrious climate. He spent the last seven years of his short life in the Crimea. When he died, his widow did not even have the money for a tombstone. “Had Dostoyevsky written a novel with a composer as his central character, he might well have invented Kalinnikov,” wrote Rory Guy.

Kalinnikov wrote his Symphony No. 2 between 1895 and 1897. It received its premiere in Kiev on March 12, 1898 by the same orchestra and conductor (Alexander Vinogradsky) as had given the highly successful premiere of the First Symphony a year earlier. As will quickly become obvious to the listener, Kalinnikov’s music is steeped in the unmistakably Russian tradition of Tchaikovsky, Glazunov and Borodin, a four-movement symphony filled with sweeping melodies, colorful orchestration and rhythmic verve.

The opening notes make up the motif that will circulate throughout the symphony in various forms. It soon becomes the basis of the first theme of the main *Allegro non troppo* section (violins). The theme might easily have been drawn from a Tchaikovsky ballet score. The second theme (violas and cellos) has even more graceful flow to it, “a typical example of the Russian ability to suggest inevitable movement over great distances,” as Lewis Foreman puts it.

The *Andante cantabile* will strike many listeners as the symphony’s finest

movement, music of profound sincerity, romantic warmth and a whiff of the exotic. The long, opening theme, sung in the melancholic tones of the English horn, gives the impression of a bardic recitation, gently punctuated by chords from the harp and strings. Eventually the violins take over with a new theme that grows to an intense climax in glowing colors. The opening theme returns first in the oboe, then the cellos, with the final word going to the instrument that opened the movement, the English horn.

The third movement has a heavy, almost peasant earthiness to it, propelled by a swaggering dance rhythm. The contrasting central Trio section features the woodwinds in what sounds like an archaic chant that turns out to be still another variant of the symphony's opening motif.

The exuberance and irrepressible high spirits of the finale (following a brief, subdued introduction) totally belie the miserable circumstances or state of mind of composer when he wrote it. A good half dozen themes crop up, some repeated, some not. As might be expected, the opening motif serves as a glorious peroration, bringing the symphony to a thrilling conclusion.