

RACHMANINOFF & THE FIREBIRD PROGRAM

Cindy McTee (1953-) *Circuits*

A native of Tacoma, Washington, McTee holds degrees from Pacific Lutheran University, Yale University, and the University of Iowa, with additional study at the Academy of Music in Kraków. After a distinguished teaching career at the University of North Texas, she retired in 2011 as Regents Professor Emerita. McTee has received numerous awards for her music, including fellowships from the Guggenheim and Fulbright Foundations, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts, and she is recognized as one of the leading composers in the United States.

Although McTee originally wrote *Circuits* for chamber orchestra, she revised it extensively in 2011 for orchestra. The score calls for brass, woodwinds, strings, and diverse percussion instruments, including cowbells and alpine bells.

According to the composer, “*Circuits* is meant to characterize several important aspects of the work’s musical language: a strong reliance upon circuitous structures such as ostinatos, the use of a formal design incorporating numerous, recurring short sections, and the presence of an unrelenting kinetic energy achieved through the use of 16th notes at a constant tempo of 152 beats per minute.”

Circuits exhibits a blend of McTee’s European training with American influence, especially her love for jazz. Like big bands of an earlier era, the accompaniment comprises driving rhythmic patterns, repeated exactly or with subtle changes, while soloists seemingly improvise above with atonal melodic snippets. The result is a composition that is both technically complex and very challenging.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor, Op. 1

Rachmaninoff was born in provincial Russia to aristocratic parents. Despite an unhappy childhood marred by a sibling’s death, academic failure, and his parents’ financial misfortunes and ultimate divorce, Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory with honors in piano and the coveted Great Gold Medal in composition.

While still a Conservatory student, Rachmaninoff wrote a piano concerto and dedicated it to his composition teacher who was also his first cousin, Alexander Ziloti. The work was published and performed, but the young composer—still only 19—was dissatisfied and set it aside. During the years that followed, he achieved phenomenal success with two additional piano concertos, orchestral works, songs, chamber music, as well as piano pieces, including the celebrated C-Sharp Minor Prelude.

The composer revised his initial attempt in the concerto genre 25 years later, and this version is known as Piano Concerto No. 1. Rachmaninoff was influenced not by the leading composers of his day, e.g., Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg, but rather by the melodies and structures in Tchaikovsky’s music, leading one scholar to remark that “both [Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff] represented Russian melancholy expressed in German forms.”

Piano Concerto No. 1 follows the traditional fast-slow-fast, three-movement concerto plan. Like many other works by Rachmaninoff, it is in a minor mode, contains intense lyricism and long melodic lines, and displays a sense of drama.

When the composer appeared in concert in Vienna for the first time, the audience

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couldn't help but notice his extremely long arms, unusually large hands, and extended thumbs. One audience member even gasped, "He looks like the missing link between ape and man!" But such seemingly unattractive features enabled Rachmaninoff to effortlessly reach enormous spans of notes on the keyboard. Nowhere is this more evident than in the opening movement's brilliant cadenza, which is filled with fiendishly difficult figurations way beyond the technical abilities of most pianists. The slow middle movement provides a moment of brief relaxation, while the finale is remarkable for its concertato interplay in which the melody is tossed back and forth between the piano and orchestra. Just as Conservatory students and teachers were dazzled by the premiere performance of Concerto No. 1, today's listeners remain in awe of this work. It may not be as well known as the later piano concertos, but it certainly deserves to be performed more often.

Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000) Symphony No. 2, "Mysterious Mountain"

Hovhaness, the son of an Armenian chemistry professor and an American woman of Scottish descent, began composing at the tender age of four. He continued with piano studies and later enrolled at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he received the prestigious Samuel Endicott Prize for Composition. After conducting the U. S. premiere of Hovhaness' first symphony, Leopold Stokowski asked the composer for a second work in that genre. The result was Symphony No. 2, which was broadcast over NBC radio in 1955 to instant acclaim.

The subtitle, "Mysterious Mountain," which the composer added as an afterthought, refers not to a specific place but to mountains in general. In his own program notes, Hovhaness explains that "Mountains

are symbols...of man's attempt to know God [and are] symbolic places between the mundane and spiritual world." The gradual rise and fall of dynamics, along with extensive arching phrases, may thus be viewed as musical metaphors for mountain skylines.

Hovhaness describes the opening of Symphony No. 2 as "hymn-like and lyrical, making use of irregular metrical forms." The second movement is a double fugue based on two themes—one that is very melodic and the other fast and frenetic. Although these imitative ideas reach a dizzying climax, the work does not end here. Instead, Hovhaness, who was strongly influenced by Indian spirituality, follows this movement with a finale filled with contemplation. According to him, the third movement is "a chant in 7/4 time, played softly by muted horns and trombones.

A giant wave in a 13-beat meter rises up to a climax and recedes. After a middle section by oboes and clarinets in quintuple meter, the earlier chant begins in muted violins, which then give it to the whole orchestra for a magnificent conclusion."

In an age of experimental atonal or serial music, Hovhaness was praised by critics for writing a work that "is accessible and pleasing to the ear," full of consonance and colorful orchestrations. Symphony No. 2 not only established his reputation as a composer but also remains a staple in today's orchestral repertoire. When asked years later about the enormous success of his work, Hovhaness commented, "I am mixed—I am happy it is popular but I have written much better work." The composer was undoubtedly referring to his other 69 symphonies (an astonishing number that exceeds the total symphonic output of both Mozart and Beethoven!), which are less familiar to the public.

RACHMANINOFF PROGRAM (continued)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) Suite from *The Firebird* (1919)

In 1910 Sergei Diaghilev, impresario of the newly formed Ballets Russes in Paris, asked a young unknown Russian, Stravinsky, to write an original score for the company's upcoming production. Stravinsky had never received a commission before, but Diaghilev, having previously heard some of the composer's early orchestral pieces in concert, must have detected Stravinsky's enormous talent. Just before final rehearsals for the new production, Diaghilev commented to the ballerina Tamara Karsavina, who created the title role, "Mark him [Stravinsky] well. He is a man on the eve of celebrity."

Russian music had already taken Paris by storm, and the new ballet was precisely what Parisian audiences were waiting for. In June of that year Diaghilev and Stravinsky unleashed the full-length ballet, *The Firebird*, and its immediate success marked not only the beginning of the composer's prestigious international career but also a collaborative relationship with Diaghilev that lasted for many years.

The legend of *The Firebird* is one of the oldest in Slavic mythology. Prince-Tsarevich Ivan accidentally wanders into an enchanted garden, where he captures the Firebird, a beautiful bird of colorful plumage. The bird begs to be released, and the Prince gently acquiesces. In gratitude for her freedom, the bird gives one of her magical feathers to the Prince, who uses it to defeat the evil King Kashchei and win the hand of the beautiful Princess.

Stravinsky had studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov and was a close friend of Debussy, and the musical language of *The Firebird* owes much to both composers. There are dramatic increases in volume and tempo and numerous repetitions of

short melodic fragments, often in a narrow range, but the novel elements in the work are still striking enough to portray a contemporary quality. For example, in the *Infernal Dance of King Kashchei*, the music achieves considerable power through obsessive pounding rhythms, blazing orchestral colors, striking dissonances, and dynamic outbursts that continue to thrill audiences.

There can be little doubt that Stravinsky contributed more to 20th-century music than almost any other composer of that era. There was no other artist of his day more involved in the past; yet in his music he was also profoundly aware of the role art plays not only in understanding the past but also preparing us for the future.

Six years after the premiere, Stravinsky arranged the ballet score as an orchestral suite, and in 1919 he re-orchestrated it, producing the standard concert version. *The Firebird* remains the earliest of Stravinsky's scores to have won and held a place in modern concert repertory.

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