Quad City Symphony Orchestra

PROGRAM NOTES

Masterworks II: Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto

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JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)
Symphony No. 104 in D major ("London"), Hob. I:104

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Premiere: May 4, 1795. King's Theatre, London, with the composer conducting.

QCSO Performance History: The QCSO's sole prior performance of Haydn's "London" Symphony was in 1964, with Charles Gigante conducting.

One might reasonably argue that Franz Joseph Haydn was the most consequential composer of symphonies in history. That distinction is usually afforded to Beethoven, but so many of the salient and lasting features of Beethoven's symphonies were pioneered by Haydn: slow introductions; long, carefully-developed first movements in sonata form; overall four-movement structure; high premiums placed on motivic consistency and development; and a generally grandiose "mood" intended for listening by a large, middle- and upper-class audience. When Haydn first approached the genre in 1759, none of this was the case. The earliest symphonies were brief, fully interchangeable opera overtures, and were generally heard in small (if lavish) concert halls, often for just a handful of listeners, all aristocrats. By the time of the premiere of the "London" Symphony less than four decades later, Hadyn had elevated and transformed the genre entirely. And since then, aside from increases in auxiliary instrumentation and overall duration (and some interesting anomalies), very little has substantively changed about the genre, even through the two centuries that gave us the symphonies of Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Dvorak, Mahler, Sibelius, and Shostakovich.

Haydn was able to develop the symphony thanks both to his extraordinary genius and the highly favorable circumstances of his career, most especially his long-held post in the court of Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, the music-loving Hungarian nobleman who employed Haydn as *Kapellmeister* (music director) for over 30 years. Amid his many, often demanding duties, Haydn enjoyed tremendous artistic freedom in his post. "I received approval for anything I did," he mused later. "As head of an orchestra, I could make experiments, observe what enhanced an effect, and what weakened it, thus improving, adding to it, taking away from it, and running risks." Thanks to this inspiring environment, and the brilliant composer who inhabited it, we have the symphony as we know it today.

Yet nothing lasts forever. When Prince Nikolaus died in 1790, his heir Prince Anton Esterházy, no lover of music, dismantled

the large the court orchestra his father had fostered. But far from being a disastrous development for Haydn, this disbanding proved to be fortuitous: his pension, and a new-found freedom to explore projects of personal interest, afforded him the opportunity to build his already-burgeoning international reputation. In the years that followed and until his death, Haydn was indisputably the most famous living European musician.

This fame spread well beyond German-speaking lands, and grew especially in Great Britain, a nation that had previously adopted another German genius, George Frederic Handel, a half century before. Haydn enjoyed major successes in London over two major visits to the city, first in 1791 (the year of his friend Mozart's death) and then in 1794-95, where he came to the attention of none other than King George III. Earning previously-unthinkable amounts of money, Haydn performed public concerts to enraptured audiences and composed many of his most enduring works, including twelve symphonies, collectively known, plural, as the "London" symphonies. In the singular, the "London" is his 104th and last symphony.

Things to Listen for in Haydn's *London* Symphony

First movement (Adagio – Allegro):

- ♬ Haydn provides us with an overwhelming first moment, with very loud, stark unisons. Such a gesture might have been shocking or uncouth if played at an elegant Esterházy soirée, but this was written for a big concert in London and Haydn knew how to get the public's attention.
- ♬ Note the contrast of soft and loud passages in Haydn's slow introduction, anticipating the wild variety in dynamics that his student Beethoven would immortalize.
- ♬ The slow introduction closes on a **half** cadence, or a musical "question mark", leaving us looking for the next chord. This particular cadence is preceded by the particularly colorful **Neapolitan sixth chord**.
- ♬ The symphony itself is designated "in D major", though the introduction was in D minor. The happy change of key that accompanies the change in tempo is called a move to the **parallel** key: different mode (minor to major), with same **tonic** or "home note" (D).
- ♬ Many commentators label this symphony as "monothematic", meaning there is no highly-contrasting second theme. Where that second theme might have gone, Haydn restates his first theme but in a different key.
- ♬ This movement's **development section** is largely focused on a mere fragment of the main theme (four short notes and two long ones).
- ♬ As usual, the movement closes with a **recapitulation** of the opening section, and as had become the fashion, Haydn doesn't simply repeat himself, but rather subtly re-orchestrates the opening material.

Second movement (Andante):

- ♬ The main theme of the slow movement is tidy and careful, but with warm and expressive harmonic gestures. The most pungent chords are under-laden with heavy accents.
- ♬ The whole first section of this movement is in **rounded binary** form: specifically, it has two repeated sections, the second of which recalls the

first at its conclusion. You'll hear everything twice in this opening section, so listen for the repeats.

♬ Thereafter Haydn shifts suddenly to a much more sparse texture, and to two flats (a rather drastic move from G major). This passage ends up in D-flat major, perhaps the furthest possible we can get from G major.

♬ In another move to a **parallel** key, Haydn then shifts from D-flat major to C-sharp minor, for a rather quizzical flute solo.

Third movement (Minuet and Trio):

♬ A minuet and trio is overall a **ternary** form (three-part, ABA or minuet-trio-minuet). But each large section is itself a smaller **binary** form (two-part, AB, often with a little of A at the end).

♬ The "Trio" (a confusing name, since it always uses more than three instruments) is in B-flat major, rather remote from our opening key of D major. You'll know the trio has begun when you hear the oboe and violin wistfully calling with an ascending melodic third.

♬ **Contrapuntal** writing, where instruments have highly independent parts, is typical of trios.

♬ Though in other works the return of the minuet can follow the trio abruptly, Haydn chose to write a brief, somewhat enervating transition at the end of the trio.

Fourth movement (Spiritoso):

♬ The energetic, festive final movement begins with a long-held, low note (or **pedal tone**), over which a sprightly, folkish theme sets an anticipating, celebratory mood.

♬ Like the first movement, the Finale is in sonata-allegro form. Whereas the opening movement was "monothematic", here the second theme, made of quiet, slowly-descending half notes, is quite distinct from the first theme.

♬ Thunderous timpani signal the beginning of an intense coda.

♬ The final cadence is a bold and straightforward **authentic** cadence (5 leading to 1 in the bass, or a "musical exclamation point"). Beethoven would later take such final gestures and extend them for pages on end.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)
Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33a

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet), 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, 2 percussion, harp, and strings.

Premiere: Full opera: June 7, 1945, Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, Reginald Goodall conducting. Interludes: June 13, 1945, Cheltenham Town Hall, London Philharmonic Orchestra, the composer conducting.

QCSO Performance History: James Dixon conducting in 1987, 1992; David Loebel (guest) conducting in 2008.

Active during the middle years of the twentieth century, British composer Benjamin Britten wrote works of extraordinary musical and psychological depth, often centered on themes of social alienation. Explanations for his dedication to such ideas are many, ranging from his politics (he was a pacifist during Britain's bloodiest and most-celebrated war) to his sexuality (he and tenor Peter Pears were lifetime partners and collaborators). He also faced much derision from the modernist musical establishment for his persistent (if highly personal) use of tonality and his refusal to adopt

then-fashionable techniques of serial (i.e., twelve-tone) composition. He certainly had many reasons see himself as an outsider, and an awareness of this seems to permeate much of his music.

But a further, often-overlooked explanation for his focus on social disaffection is that he was, in contemporary terms, a committed "localist", who saw the isolation of the individual as a tragic feature of modern life. "I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships," he said in an address to the Aspen Institute in 1963. Referring to an epiphany he experienced during his own travels to California in 1941, he recalled, "I suddenly realised where I belonged and what I lacked. I had become without roots." On returning to Britain, he settled permanently in his native East Anglia. He would have many international travels thereafter, but he remained constantly devoted to his place of origin. "I belong at home–there–in Aldeburgh."

With all of this in mind, it is easy to see the grand opera *Peter Grimes* as Britten's defining work: a tragedy fixated on social estrangement, set in a village that might well have been Aldeburgh itself. Based on a work by local poet George Crabbe (1754-1832), *Peter Grimes* dramatizes the story of a reclusive fisherman who lives under the constant distrust of his neighbors. Initially suspected of murdering his apprentice, over the course of the opera his attempts to form human relationships fail. His estrangement from the townspeople eventually drives him to increasingly violent behavior, ultimately resulting in the death of yet another apprentice and his own suicide at sea. In Britten's telling, Grimes is the archetype of the modern social outcast, both victim of and aggressor toward his highly judgmental community. Or, as the composer himself explained: "The more vicious the society, the more vicious the individual."

Not unlike Wagner before him, Britten oversaw the separate publication of orchestral passages from *Peter Grimes,* hoping to reach a wider audience than the opera alone would have allowed. This "suite" has become perhaps Britten's most-often performed purely orchestral work, under the title *Four Sea Interludes*.

Things to Listen for in the *Four Sea Interludes*

First interlude (Dawn):

- During this relatively brief interlude, listen for the interaction of three distinct orchestral layers: high violins and flutes in unison, gurgling violas and clarinets, and an imposing brass choir. Over the course of this interlude, each layer follows its own dramatic arc.
- The high violin layer in particular, mostly "diatonic", has a chromatic outburst that sounds almost like the blues.
- After the brass's own moment of churning fury, the interlude ends quietly and mysteriously.

Second interlude (Sunday Morning):

- Britten uses overlapping horn thirds at this interlude's opening, perhaps evoking church bells (without the actual bells, which come in later).
- Like so many British musicians in the twentieth century, Britten's music here clearly owes something to American music, particularly the panoramic ballet scores of Aaron Copland.
- Listen for the same tune played with

the bow in some strings while simultaneously played **pizzicato** (plucked) by others.

♬ At one point, Britten almost certainly aims to depict a chirpy bird overhead.

♬ The eerie juxtaposition of stark, dissonant, chords is pure Britten. For him (and really for all Western composers before him), dissonance is used for expressive purposes.

Third interlude (Moonlight):

♬ This interlude begins with gently pulsing chords and strikingly expressive silences.

♬ Real emotional warmth such as this passage exudes is relatively rare in Britten's music. Indeed, he always finds a way to disturb our reverie; here he does so with the hiccup-like interjections of the flute, xylophone, and harp.

♬ Later, after a severely dissonant climax, the trumpets temporarily join the hiccups, which seems to have a calming effect.

Fourth interlude (Storm):

♬ As always, Britten combines traditional tonal gestures (in this case, the relentless 5 to 1 motion in the bass) with more shockingly modern ones (a virtual hurricane of furious dissonance).

♬ The middle section provides an odd sort of relief, in the form of a demonic dance, supported by the snare drum.

♬ Near the end, Britten gives us a near-Hollywood moment: a series of long harp glissandos, merging with trilling winds and soupy strings. This gives the impression that perhaps a peaceful resolution is possible, but like Grimes himself, the final interlude suffers a violent ending.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943)

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

Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings.

Premiere: November 28, 1909, with the composer as soloist, New York Symphony Society, Walter Damrosch, conducting, New York City.

QCSO Performance History: Harry John Brown conducting in 1949; Charles Gigante conducting in 1963; James Dixon conducting in 1967, 1971, 1976, 1989 (Garrick Ohlsson, piano); Donald Schleicher conducting in 2003 (Ralph Votapek, piano); Mark Russell Smith conducting in 2011 (Haochen Zhang, piano).

As one might guess from his passionate music, Sergei Rachmaninoff was himself a highly emotional person, and especially prone to self-doubt. Most famously, he considered his first symphony so inferior that he found it impossible to compose another note for four years. Though with the help of psychotherapy he eventually overcame his inability to write (subsequently dedicating his second piano concerto to his therapist), nagging insecurity plagued him for life.

"I have never been quite able to make up my mind as to which was my true calling—that of a composer, pianist, or conductor," he wrote at the height of his fame. "Today, when the greater part of my life is over, I am constantly troubled by the misgiving that, in venturing into too many fields, I may have failed to make the best use of my life. In the old Russian phrase, I have 'hunt-

ed three hares.' Can I be sure that I have killed one of them?"

He may not have been sure, but we certainly can be. Amid an age of unprecedented alienation between composers and audiences, Rachmaninoff managed to write universally-accessible music, premiering many of these works himself, either at the keyboard or on the podium, to great acclaim. His harmonic and orchestral vocabularies were widely imitated, especially in Hollywood film scores. His only persistent detractors were the same purveyors of the *avant-garde* who panned the work of Benjamin Britten, considering both composers' works *passé*, unworthy of the turbulent twentieth century. Against these critics, Rachmaninoff was uncharacteristically self-assured and entirely unapologetic. "I have no sympathy with the composer who produces works according to preconceived formulas or theories," he wrote, "or with the composer who writes in a certain style because it is the fashion to do so. Great music has never been produced in that way—and I dare say it never will."

Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto came during a period of relative peace in the composer's life and career: by 1901 he had overcome the writer's block that followed the first symphony, but was not yet cataclysmically affected by political turmoil in Russia. Written as his international fame was steadily on the rise, the third concerto was composed specifically for his American tour of 1909-10, in a manner reminiscent of Haydn's works for premiere in London. The success of the concerto in America (including performances with Gustav Mahler at the podium) might have shown Rachmaninoff that he could find a receptive audience in the United States. What he would not have foreseen, however, was his own emigration to New York within less than a decade. Like Igor Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff was of aristocratic lineage and lost both status and property in the October Revolution of 1917.

Things to Listen for in Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto

For several reasons, you might want to approach listening to this work somewhat differently than the other works on the program. Each of Rachmaninoff's three movements are at least twice as long as any of Haydn's or Britten's, and following a form longer than 10 minutes can be frustrating, especially in a concerto. Rather than attempting to trace long-term trajectories, Rachmaninoff's work might be better grasped from moment-to-moment. Ask yourself questions like: (1) what is the general texture of the piano part (blocked chords, broken chords, etc.)? (2) is the pianist playing more than one "thing" (a melody plus arpeggios, a slow bass melody under crashing chords, etc.) (3) how do the orchestral parts fit into the piano part? (4) what general "mood" or "affect" does Rachmaninoff seem to be evoking here? The answers to such questions vary extremely widely over the course of a work such as this, and following features from passage to passage might provide insight in how Rachmaninoff wanted the work to be heard overall.

First movement (Allegro ma non tanto):

- A beginner could play the unassuming octave melody the piano presents at the work's outset. Having established this lovely, simple tune, the pia-

nistic fireworks begin in earnest.

♬ As the pianist takes off, listen for that same tune, this time played in the orchestra.

♬ Rachmaninoff was a master of orchestration, especially in his piano concertos; pay especially close attention to how elegantly he folds the piano and orchestra into each other.

♬ The first movement's second theme is of a more martial character, with lots of **staccatos**, or short notes. Following this, Rachmaninoff gives us one of his achingly tender, pop-ballad-ready melodies.

♬ This movement contains an extremely lengthy cadenza, which covers a lot of emotional ground. Indeed, the orchestra seems somewhat stunned; the relatively short post-cadenza is somewhat understated, particularly as the movement comes to an unassuming close.

Second movement (Adagio):

♬ The pianist is allowed a long rest at the beginning of the slow movement while the orchestra undertakes a long introduction. The winds begin, followed by the strings, then both groups play together.

♬ The pianist seems to be in a very different mood than the orchestra, judging from the agitated entrance following the introduction.

♬ Listen for often simply-stated tunes surrounded by arpeggios and other, sometimes elaborate figuration. Rachmaninoff's melodies are famously simple, and his piano textures are famously ornate.

♬ Just as at the opening, the orchestra brings things the movement to a close without the soloist. Once the pianist seizes the reins again, we have entered the third movement.

Third movement (Alla breve):

♬ Contrasted with the first movement, notice that the **surface rhythm** (i.e., foreground rhythmic figures) is faster, but the **harmonic rhythm** (i.e., how often the chords change) is actually slower.

♬ In his apparent first use of humor in this concerto, Rachmaninoff sets off the fierce opening section with a passage marked **Scherzando** (i.e., joke-like).

♬ Another diversion follows, marked "Lento" (i.e., slow). Listen for the shared melodies between the piano, the solo flute, the solo horn.

♬ Such melodies continue as the joke-like textures resume, thus combining the two diversions.

♬ The concerto's closing minutes are an overwhelming, inexorable boiling-over of energy.