Minnesota Orchestra

Vasily Petrenko, conductor
Nikolai Lugansky, piano

Thursday, February 7, 2019, 11 am  Orchestra Hall
Friday, February 8, 2019, 8 pm  Orchestra Hall
Saturday, February 9, 2019, 8 pm  Orchestra Hall

Ludwig van Beethoven
Concerto No. 4 in G major for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 58  ca. 34’
Allegro moderato
Andante con moto
Rondo: Vivace
Nikolai Lugansky, piano

INTERMISSION  ca. 20’

Richard Strauss
Ein Heldenleben (A Hero’s Life), Opus 40  ca. 46’

OH+
Concert Preview and Wine Tasting
Friday, February 8, N. Bud Grossman Mezzanine
Saturday, February 9, N. Bud Grossman Mezzanine
Visit minnesotaorchestra.org/ohplus for details on panelists and start times.

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of Classical Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Artists

Nikolai Lugansky, piano

Highlights of his 2018-19 season include his debut with New York's Metropolitan Opera in a production of Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame*, his debut with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and an appearance with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra at the newly-created Tsinandali Festival. In 2017 he was honored with the Artist of the Year award at the prestigious Gramophone Awards. More: imgartists.com.

Vasily Petrenko, conductor

Vasily Petrenko holds the positions of chief conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, chief conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, chief conductor of the European Union Youth Orchestra and principal guest conductor of the State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia. He last visited the Minnesota Orchestra in 2016, leading works of Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich. In 2021 he will take up the position of music director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London. He has worked with many of the world's most prestigious orchestras, and in recent years he has made a series of highly successful North American debuts, including with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic and Cleveland Orchestra, as well as the San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Montreal and Pittsburgh symphony orchestras.

Nikolai Lugansky, piano

Nikolai Lugansky makes his Minnesota Orchestra debut in these performances. Highlights of his 2018-19 season include concerto performances with the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Russian National Orchestra, Orquesta Nacional de España, and the Iceland and Bamberg symphonies, plus tours with Orchestre National de France and St. Petersburg Philharmonic. He regularly appears at some of the world's most distinguished festivals, including Aspen, Tanglewood, Ravinia and Verbier. His CD featuring Rachmaninoff's piano sonatas won the Diapason d'Or, and his recording of concertos by Grieg and Prokofiev was a Gramophone Editor's Choice. His most recent disc of Rachmaninoff's 24 Preludes was released in April 2018, and his recording of solo piano music by Debussy will be released later this year. He is the artistic director of the Tambov Rachmaninov Festival, and he is also a regular performer at the Rachmaninov Estate and Museum of Ivanovka. He was awarded the honor of People's Artist of Russia in 2013. More: opus3artists.com.

Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4

Beethoven's lyrical Fourth Piano Concerto begins with soloist rather than orchestra, foreshadowing the work's soft-spoken mood. Most striking is the second movement, in which harsh strings are calmed by the gentle piano.

Strauss: *Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life)*

Richard Strauss' epic tone poem contains all the vivid theatricality of an opera, telling the story of a hero, his companion, his struggles and his ultimate fulfillment. Of note are the sweeping hero's theme, introduced by horns, and the virtuosic violin lines that represent the hero's lover—an idealized version of Strauss' wife.
When Beethoven departed for Vienna in November 1792, encouraged by the prospect of becoming a Haydn pupil, Mozart had been dead for only a year. In hindsight, it is hard not to imagine that destiny was compensating for the cruel loss of Mozart by sending this young lion of a pianist to the imperial city, then the musical crossroads of the world.

fragile pianos, stolen cadenzas

Though he had strong roots in 18th-century Classicism, his alliance with Haydn did not last long, and Beethoven soon went his own way. He emerged as Romanticism’s pre-eminent composer for the piano, the age’s iconic musical instrument, which was steadily improving but was not yet strong enough to support all that Beethoven demanded. Plumbing the poetry as well as the power of the tantalizing new pianoforte, Beethoven wrote five piano concertos, along with 32 sonatas and diverse chamber works with piano, and he changed keyboard style forever.

No piano was safe in his hands, as the late Harold C. Schonberg emphasized in “String Snapper, Hands on High,” the Beethoven chapter in The Great Pianists. Still a fragile instrument in those days, with a resonance too small for what the composer heard in his mind’s ear, the lightweight pianoforte proved no match for his power as a performer, or for his conceptions as a composer who thought orchestrally for the instrument. Nobody ever claimed that Beethoven’s playing was perfect, but all agreed that its impact was overwhelming, and that he strove for the big sound.

As an improviser Beethoven was without peer, at least until Liszt came along. He also tended to be pugnacious, and when he realized that would-be rivals were stealing whatever they could recall of his extemporizations, claiming it as their own, he determined to terminate the cadenza thievery by writing the notes down. A few years after completing this concerto, he produced a number of cadenzas for this work. He also began to regulate the performer, cautioning in the finale, “Let the cadenza be short.” No doubt Beethoven would have agreed with Sir Donald Tovey, who said, “A bad cadenza is the very appendicitis of music.”

premiere at a legendary concert

The Concerto in G major was composed in 1805-06, near the end of Beethoven’s career as Vienna’s reigning pianist, when deafness was curtailing his appearances. In 1807 he unveiled it at a private subscription concert, but its public premiere was deferred until December 22, 1808, the legendary Beethoven Akademie (a term for concerts and recitals) that also included the premieres of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the Choral Fantasy, along with other works.

allegro moderato. This most poetic of Beethoven concertos, the fourth work on that marathon program, must have come as a surprise to the listeners. Its start was astonishing: the piano alone presents a sweetly harmonized theme, almost as if in a reverie of improvisation; the first two bars, in fact, consist mostly of repeated notes cast in a rhythmic motif that will pervade the entire movement. All is quiet, introspective. Repeating the thought from a distant key, the orchestral strings hardly dare raise their sound, except for a single emphatic note, one of those sforzandos (sudden loud notes) that intensify expression. This was Romanticism, and it was new, especially in the way it focused on the inner self—restraining the impulse to virtuosity in favor of substance, intimate and serene.

Once the piano has spoken the subdued main thought, affirmed by the orchestra in a brighter key, it drops out for nearly 70 bars before returning to the scene. In the meantime, thanks to the orchestral exposition, the subjects have become very familiar. Returning quietly, the piano soon sweeps into brilliant scales that make way for the principal theme, which now engages orchestra and soloist as equal partners. When the lilting second subject reappears in clear violin and wind tones, the piano supplies a backdrop of rippling figurations—quite virtuosic in fact, without losing sight of the fundamental lyricism. The development culminates in a resounding chordal pronouncement of the principal idea that demonstrates how much power Beethoven demanded from the instrument.

andante con moto. Now follows one of the most striking movements in concerto literature: Franz Liszt compared its dialogue to that of Orpheus taming the wild beasts with his music. The stubborn resistance of the bestial voice, low and rough in the strings, is gradually eroded by the plaintive tones of the piano, which will not give up. Its pleas are rendered in as cantabile (singing) a style as possible. Beethoven’s dramatic scene for keyboard and strings has not one excessive note. The music is lean, and the logic persuasive, as the keyboard’s alluring rhetoric conquers all.

rondo: vivace. Once the luminous E-minor harmonies of the slow movement have dissolved, the concerto forges ahead without a
Strings whisper the vivacious tune that sets the *Rondo* finale in gear, whereupon the piano reappears, adding a syncopated jolt to make the refrain even more pungent. In contrast, the responding strain is songful, without sacrificing speed or playfulness. Nowhere will this finale be shy or subdued. Its abundant ideas propel a development that crackles with wit and imagination. After the cadenza Beethoven insists be short, a gigantic coda continues the boisterous antics, quickened to *presto* and more irrepressible than ever.

**Instrumentation:** solo piano with orchestra comprising flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings

Program note by Mary Ann Feldman.

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**Richard Strauss**

Born: June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

**Ein Heldenleben (A Hero’s Life), Opus 40**

Premiere: March 3, 1899

On the summer of 1898, 34-year-old Richard Strauss set to work on what would be his longest tone poem to date, *Ein Heldenleben*, or *A Hero’s Life*—the musical depiction of the life and struggles of an unnamed hero.

In a letter to a friend that summer, Strauss offered a rather disingenuous explanation of why he had chosen this topic: “Beethoven’s *Eroica* is so little beloved of our conductors, and is on this account now only rarely performed that to fulfill a pressing need I am composing a largeish tone poem titled Heldenleben, admittedly without a funeral march, but yet in E-flat, with lots of horns, which are always a yardstick of heroism.”

But the work that was completed that December and premiered the following March was far indeed from the spirit of the *Eroica*, and Strauss was probably right to note that the only thing the two pieces have in common is the key, E-flat major. While Beethoven’s *Eroica* offers a rather abstract representation of heroism, in *Ein Heldenleben* Strauss paints in microscopic detail portraits of his hero, the hero’s snarling adversaries, a coquettish lover, a terrific battle in which his enemies are chased off the field, and the hero’s reward: a contemplative if not entirely serene retirement.

Scored for massive orchestra and shaped by Strauss’ ingenious transformation of themes across its more than 40-minute span, *Ein Heldenleben* remains, 120 years after its premiere, one of the great showpieces for virtuoso orchestra.

**the hero’s journey: foes, a lover and a battle**

*Ein Heldenleben* has one of the greatest openings in all of music. From the depths of the orchestra, Strauss introduces his hero with a long, sweeping theme whose powerful stride leaps up across three octaves, changing from the dark colors of lower strings and horns to the silvery sound of massed violins as it climbs. Here is a man of force and idealism, constantly striving toward something higher, and the arc of his music is always upward. It is riding a shaft of incandescent energy when it suddenly vanishes in mid-air.

Out of that silence comes something completely different. Here are the hero’s enemies, and their music, twisted and gnarled, is
depicted by ugly, carping solo woodwinds. Each seems to have a particularly nasty character: individual entrances are marked “very sharp and spiky” and “jarring.” (At early performances of *Ein Heldenleben*, outraged music critics felt that Strauss was depicting them in his portrait of the hero’s enemies—and they may well have been right.) The hero’s theme grows somber as he muses on these adversaries, but before he can face them he is interrupted by the other important figure in this music-drama, his lover.

The companion of this powerful hero is a formidable woman in her own right. Strauss confessed that she was modeled on his own wife: “She is very complex, very feminine, a little coquettish, never like herself, at every minute different from how she had been the moment before.” Here she is portrayed by the solo violin, and as he paints her mercurial portrait, Strauss gives the concertmaster some of the most difficult music ever written for that instrument. Individual passages are given markings such as “happy,” “flippant,” “tender,” “insolent,” “lovable” and “scolding” before the union is consummated in soaring G-flat major love music that intertwines the themes of the hero and his love.

Their happiness is brief. Distant trumpets pierce the warm calm of the love scene, calling the hero to battle, where finally he must face his adversaries. Over rattling drums, his enemies attack, their jagged trumpet call a wonderful transformation of the first theme from the adversaries’ section. The battle rages at great length above the clash of spears and glint of swords, and through the smoke of the battlefield Strauss deftly weaves together the hero’s theme, the adversaries’ theme and the love music. Finally the hero triumphs and chases his enemies away (their retreat is a flurry of descending 16th-notes from the woodwinds), and he makes a magnificent entrance on the hero’s theme, now back in the original E-flat major.

**controversy, serenity and repose**

There follows the most controversial section of *Ein Heldenleben*. A recounting of the hero’s “works of peace,” it takes the form of quotations from Strauss’ own music, quotations from *Don Juan*, *Don Quixote*, *Macbeth*, *Guntram*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, the song “Traum durch die Dämmerung” and other works. Critics have been quick, perhaps too quick, to interpret *Ein Heldenleben* as a vehicle for the composer’s ego. Often overlooked in the rush to scold Strauss is his skill: he weaves these themes together so deftly, in such graceful counterpoint, as to (almost) disarm criticism for calling attention to his own accomplishments.

If the battle music runs on a little too long, and if the hero’s works of peace seem self-indulgent, Strauss rewards our patience in the final section, a portrait of the hero in old age. He clearly suffers from bad dreams (memories of his enemies pop up from time to time to disturb his reveries), but the final moments of *Ein Heldenleben* bring serenity, beauty and repose. The enemies have been banished, and now the themes of the hero and his love return, transformed far from their initial hard-edged appearance. Borne along by some wonderful writing for solo violin and solo horn, the hero at last finds peace. At the close, a noble chord for winds (in pure E-flat major) swells to a mighty climax, then falls away to silence as the hero completes his journey.

**Instrumentation:** 3 flutes, piccolo, 4 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, E-flat clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 5 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, tenor tuba, timpani, small military drum, tenor drum, bass drum, cymbals, tamtam, triangle, 2 harps and strings

Program note by **Eric Bromberger**.