

Minnesota Orchestra

Juanjo Mena, conductor
Kirill Gerstein, piano

Friday, March 13, 2020, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Saturday, March 14, 2020, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Sunday, March 15, 2020, 2 pm | Orchestra Hall

*We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of Allen and Kathy Lenzmeier
in the presentation of these concerts.*

Sergei Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18 ca. 36'
Moderato
Adagio sostenuto
Allegro scherzando
Kirill Gerstein, piano

I N T E R M I S S I O N ca. 20'

Dmitri Shostakovich Symphony No. 7 in C major, Opus 60, *Leningrad* ca. 70'
Allegretto
Moderato – Poco allegretto
Adagio
Allegro non troppo
[There is no pause before the final movement.]

pre-concert

Concert Preview

Friday, March 13, 7:15 pm, Target Atrium
Saturday, March 14, 7:15 pm, N. Bud Grossman Mezzanine
Sunday, March 15, 1:15 pm, N. Bud Grossman Mezzanine

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.





Juanjo Mena, conductor

Juanjo Mena, one of Spain's most distinguished international conductors, is currently principal conductor of the Cincinnati May Festival and associate conductor of the Spanish National Orchestra. He has been chief conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, artistic director of the Bilbao Symphony Orchestra, chief guest conductor of the Orchestra del Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa, and principal guest conductor of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra. He has worked with all the leading orchestras in North America, including the Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Montreal and Toronto symphony orchestras, the New York and Los Angeles philharmonics, the Cleveland

Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra, as well as prestigious European orchestras such as the Berlin Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre National de France, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich and Bavarian Radio Orchestra, along with all the major orchestras in Spain. He has made recordings with the BBC Philharmonic and Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra to critical acclaim. More: columbia-artists.com, juanjomena.com.



Kirill Gerstein, piano

American pianist Kirill Gerstein's solo and concerto engagements take him across North America, Europe, Asia and

Australia. An important focus of his last season was the world premiere of Thomas Adès' Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and composed especially for him. His 2019-20 season includes returns to the Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and San Diego symphonies. His recent North American engagements include performances with the New York Philharmonic, as well as the Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, National, Detroit, Toronto and Cincinnati symphonies. In Europe he has played with such prominent orchestras as the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, the Munich, London and Oslo Philharmonics, and the Finnish Radio Orchestra. Keenly aware of the importance of working with young musicians, he taught at the Stuttgart Hochschule Musik from 2007-2017, and in the fall of 2018 began teaching at the Kronberg Academy's newly announced Sir Andrés Schiff Performance Program for Young Artists. This week's concerts launch a project for Gerstein to perform all five of Rachmaninoff's works for piano and orchestra with the Minnesota Orchestra in 2020. More: csmartists.com.

one-minute notes

Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 2

The solo piano is heard almost continuously in this very challenging concerto. Deep chords in a haunting opening theme give way to a meditative second movement (flute, clarinet and strings carry the theme in turn), followed by a vigorous, aggressive march.

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 7, Leningrad

In June 1941 Hitler's troops invaded the Soviet Union; this vast symphony is Shostakovich's response. The composer dedicated the work to "our coming victory over the enemy" and to his besieged native city, Leningrad. Recurring throughout the symphony is a heroic theme introduced early in the massive first movement, before a jaunty marching tune signals the approach of an invading force and the destruction to follow. Nostalgic central movements depict a way of life now lost forever, and despite the tension in the finale, the heroic theme returns, heralding victory.





Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873,
Semyonovo, district of
Starorusky, Russia

Died: March 28, 1943,
Beverly Hills, California

Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18

Premiered: November 9, 1901

Sergei Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto may be one of the world's best-loved piano concertos, but it almost didn't get written, and the tale of its creation is one of the most remarkable in all of music. Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892 with its highest award, the gold medal, and quickly embarked on a career as a touring pianist. But he wanted to compose. He had written a piano concerto while still a conservatory student, and early in 1895 the 21-year-old composer took on the most challenging of orchestral compositions, a symphony. Its premiere, on March 27, 1897, was a catastrophe. Conductor Alexander Glazunov was unprepared, the orchestra played badly, and audience and critics alike hated the music, César Cui describing it as a "program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt...[music that would give] acute delight to the inhabitants of Hell." What should have been a moment of triumph for the young composer instead brought humiliation.

Rachmaninoff may have been a powerful performer, but he was a vulnerable personality, and the disaster of the premiere plunged him into a deep depression. His first act was to destroy the score to the symphony. It was never performed again during his lifetime, but after his death it was reassembled from the orchestral parts, and the painful irony is that this work is now admired as one of the finest works of his youth. However, in the aftermath of the fiasco of its premiere, Rachmaninoff lost confidence in himself and wrote no music at all for the next three years.

the doctor steps in

Alarmed, the composer's family and friends arranged for him to see Dr. Nicholas Dahl, an internal medicine specialist who sometimes treated patients through hypnosis. Dahl was also extremely cultured—he was an amateur cellist—and Rachmaninoff's friends were hopeful that contact with such a man would improve the composer's spirits. During a lengthy series of visits, the composer heard a steady message of encouragement from the doctor: "You will begin to write your concerto....You will work with great facility....The concerto will be of excellent

quality." To the composer's astonishment, Dahl's treatment worked. He later said: "Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me. By the beginning of summer I again began to compose. The material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me—more than enough for my concerto."

With the dam broken, new music rushed out of the rejuvenated composer. Across the summer and fall of 1900, Rachmaninoff composed what would become the second and third movements of his Second Piano Concerto. These were performed successfully that December, and Rachmaninoff composed the opening movement the following spring. The first performance of the complete concerto, in Moscow on November 9, 1901, was a triumph. Not surprisingly, Rachmaninoff dedicated the concerto to Dr. Dahl.

the music: virtuosic and rich with melodies

moderato. The very beginning of the concerto seems so "right" that it is hard to believe that this movement was written last. Throughout his life Rachmaninoff loved the sound of Russian church bells. The concerto begins with the sound of those bells, as the solo piano alone echoes their tolling. Into that swirling sound, the orchestra stamps out the impassioned main theme, one of those powerful Slavic melodies that instantly haunt the mind; the solo piano has the yearning second subject. Rachmaninoff writes with imagination throughout this movement: the orchestra reprises the main theme beneath the soloist's dancing chordal accompaniment, while the solo horn recalls the second subject in a haunting passage marked *dolce*. The music demands a pianist of extraordinary ability.

adagio sostenuto. A soft chorale for muted strings introduces the second movement, but in a wonderful touch the solo flute sings the main theme as the pianist accompanies. The theme is repeated, first by the clarinet and then the strings, growing more elaborate as it proceeds, and only then is the piano allowed to take the lead. A brief but spectacular cadenza leads to a recall of the tolling bells from the very beginning and a quiet close.

allegro scherzando. The final movement begins quietly as well, but in a march-like manner full of suppressed rhythmic energy. Rachmaninoff makes effective contrast between the orchestra's opening—powerful but controlled with an almost military precision—and the piano's entrance, which explodes with an extraordinary wildness. The second theme, broadly sung by the violas, has become one of those Big Tunes for which Rachmaninoff was famous. This wonderful melody would become an inspiration for countless Hollywood composers and, many years later, would be used to set the words "Full moon and empty arms." If one can escape such associations and listen with fresh ears, this lovely

music is an excellent reminder of Rachmaninoff's considerable melodic gift. The concerto rushes to its conclusion on a no-holds-barred coda (another Rachmaninoff specialty) that resounds in every measure with the young composer's recently restored health.

Instrumentation: solo piano with orchestra comprising 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, bass drum, cymbals, timpani and strings



Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: September 25, 1906,
St. Petersburg, Russia
Died: August 9, 1975,
Moscow, Russia

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Opus 60, Leningrad

Premiered: March 5, 1942

On June 21, 1941, Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia, and specified to his generals that it would “have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful and unrelenting harshness.” He kept his word: over the next four years 20 million Russians would be killed.

Dmitri Shostakovich was on his way to a soccer double-header when he heard the news that would transform his life and that of his nation. When his attempt to enlist in the army was rejected, he contributed to the war effort by writing patriotic songs and marches and joined the fire-fighting brigade at the Leningrad Conservatory. They did not have long to wait. The Germans began shelling Leningrad on September 1, beginning one of the most horrifying sieges in history, lasting almost three years and killing nearly one million residents of the city.

commemorating Leningrad and its struggle

That July, even before Nazi shells fell on Leningrad, Shostakovich had set out on a vast musical project in response to the invasion—a work that would become the longest, most famous and most notorious of his 15 symphonies. He completed the huge first movement on August 29 as the German army approached and had the second done on September 17. By September 29, when he completed the third, Leningrad had been completely cut off. He and his family were flown over enemy lines to Moscow and then, along with many other Soviet artists, evacuated to Kyubishev, 600 miles east of Moscow. He completed the Seventh Symphony there on December 27, and the premiere followed

on March 5, 1942, also in Kyubishev. He dedicated the Seventh Symphony “to our struggle with fascism, to our coming victory over the enemy, and to my native city, Leningrad.”

allegretto. The *Leningrad* Symphony, as the Seventh inevitably became known, spans some 70 minutes. The massive first movement, which gives the symphony its distinctive character, is a drama that seems to be a complete emotional journey in itself. Its powerful opening, in C major, establishes a heroic character; Shostakovich described it as “the happy, peaceful life of people sure of themselves and their future.” The violins’ lyric second subject and the exposition’s closing theme, imaginatively assigned to a solitary piccolo, offer fleeting glimpses of a peaceful life.

When war suddenly intrudes into this almost pastoral world, the invaders arrive not as cataclysmic horror, but as a faint presence on the most distant horizon. Over a faint snare drum tattoo, strings pluck out a jaunty little tune, almost banal in its simplicity. The sting comes in the closing phrase, taken from “Da geh’ ich zu Maxim’s”—an aria from Franz Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*, which ironically was among Hitler’s favorites. Over the incessant snare drum, this little tune repeats 12 times, growing louder and beginning to swagger as the enemy approaches. Then the tune, having reached steamroller proportions, is assaulted by a mighty “Russian”-sounding theme, and a noisy musical battle erupts. After Shostakovich reintroduces his heroic opening theme, we hear what might be described as a battered recapitulation, and solo bassoon sings a long threnody on the violins’ second subject. What earlier sounded so peaceful is now spare and grim. The movement concludes in near silence, as fragments of the invader theme lie shattered in the ditch.

moderato - poco allegretto. The composer referred to the second movement, a scherzo, as “a lyrical respite,” recalling “pleasant events and past joys,” after the violence of the first. Second violins announce a tart little dance, full of ironic turns, and the strident central episode, which moves in 3/8 and C-sharp minor, rides along the piercing sound of solo woodwinds. The opening dance returns, accompanied by wonderful sounds, pulsing quietly, from two flutes and alto flute.

adagio. The spare wind chorale that opens the *Adagio* alternates with a cadenza-like recitative for violins, and this in turn is followed by a lyric idea for flute. This, some of the most appealing music in the symphony, is rudely shouldered aside as the music accelerates into a raucous, troubled central section. Shostakovich recalls his opening material briefly before proceeding directly into the finale.

allegro non troppo. “Victory” was the composer’s original name for the last movement, which he described more fully as “the victory

of light over darkness, wisdom over frenzy, lofty humanism over monstrous tyranny.” The music begins in harmonic uncertainty and takes a firm direction only when the strings stride out purposefully with the movement’s main theme. This is a long, tense movement, with ten extra brass players; and despite a quiet central episode, the music often feels more tortured than triumphant. Even the last-minute return of the heroic opening theme does not dispel this tension, and Shostakovich wrenches the music into unequivocal C major only for the final chord. Written from the depths of war, this is a finale that celebrates the expectation of victory rather than its finality.

an unprecedented impact

No other symphony in history has had such an immediate impact as the *Leningrad* Symphony. Its premiere was broadcast throughout Russia, and the Leningrad premiere—on August 9, 1942, in the midst of the siege—was so important to the beleaguered city that its only surviving orchestra, a radio orchestra of barely 50 players, was augmented by musicians pulled from military units, even including some who were called back from the front to participate.

The score was microfilmed, driven to Tehran, then flown to Cairo and on to the West. Sir Henry Wood led the British premiere on June 29, and Arturo Toscanini led the NBC Symphony in the American premiere on July 19, which was broadcast nationally. That same week, Shostakovich appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, improbably wearing the hat of the Leningrad Conservatory’s fire brigade. The symphony was performed more than 60 times in its first season, unheard of for any symphony, before or since. This music had become *the* cultural symbol of the struggle against Hitler and the Nazis.

Inevitably, a reaction set in. English critic Ernest Newman contributed a memorable barb, saying that if one “wished to locate this symphony on the musical map, he should look along the 70th degree of longitude and the last degree of platitude,” and Bartók—perhaps unwisely—sneered at the invader theme in his Concerto for Orchestra. After its excessive popularity, the *Leningrad* Symphony virtually dropped out of sight in the years following the war.

What sense are we to make of the Shostakovich Seventh Symphony, close to seven decades after its premiere? The conditions that gave rise to its creation have long since faded into history, and this work might have been expected to vanish along with them. Yet it has reestablished itself to some degree in recent years, and it continues to engage audiences.

Perhaps, like a faded snapshot or a uniform found in a closet, it draws on simple nostalgia to evoke another era. But the music’s

passion and heroism are powerful as well. American writer and poet Carl Sandburg said that this symphony was “written in the heart’s blood,” and while its rawness and immediacy may be the source of some of its problems, they are also the source of its strength. Sentiments that sound tinny and jingoistic during moments of ease can take on renewed meaning during times of national emergency, as the events of September 2001 reminded us. In its stark power, broad strokes and unconflicted emotions, Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony speaks of a less complicated time, and it truly is music written “in the heart’s blood.”

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1 each doubling alto flute and piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (1 doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 6 trumpets, 6 trombones, tuba, bass drum, cymbal, field drum, tam-tam, tambourine, triangle, xylophone, timpani, 2 harps, piano and strings

Program notes by **Eric Bromberger**.



The Minnesota Orchestra, then known as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, added **Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto** to its repertoire on January 4, 1914, at the Minneapolis Auditorium, with the Orchestra’s founding Music Director Emil Oberhoffer conducting and Wilma Anderson Gilman as soloist. Gilman had studied piano in Belgium, then taught music in the Minneapolis public school system and at the MacPhail School of Music. Rachmaninoff himself performed his Second Piano Concerto with the Orchestra on four occasions, in 1920, 1932, 1937 and 1942.

The Orchestra’s initial performance of **Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 7, *Leningrad***, came on November 27, 1942, at Northrop Auditorium, with Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting, and an intermission placed halfway through the lengthy symphony. The performance came just eight months after the work’s world premiere, with contemporary developments in World War II including U.S. troops landing in French North Africa, the ongoing battle for Guadalcanal between U.S. and Japanese forces, and the German siege of Stalingrad. The Orchestra’s own ranks were impacted by the war, as some musicians were called to service, and several women were among their replacements.

