

RACHMANINOFF AND RAVEL

Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)—*Francesca da Rimini*

Tchaikovsky was among the high-profile guests at the inaugural Bayreuth Festival in 1876, where Wagner's *Ring Cycle* was first performed in its entirety. The vanguard of modern music, both Wagner's intense operas and Franz Liszt's dramatic symphonic poems inspired a fit of creativity for Tchaikovsky, who, upon his return to Moscow, immediately created a musical depiction of a story from Dante's *Inferno*. Francesca da Rimini, caught committing adultery with her violent husband's brother, is killed for her actions. Forever condemned to hell, the two would-be lovers whirl about in a perpetual tempest. The musical picture is painted with thick, tense harmonies and swirling lines, as Russian-sounding melodies kindle a heightened emotional state. The brutality of the parable is shocking, and Tchaikovsky expresses empathy for the lovers' appalling fate.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)—*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43*

Sergei Rachmaninoff spent the majority of his life in Russia as a composer with renowned facility at the keyboard, but the political turmoil of the Russian Revolution prompted him to flee with his family to the United States in 1918, where he spent the rest of his life. An adept performer, he earned a living as a touring concert pianist specializing in music he composed for himself, and although his production waned amidst a demanding schedule, his professional connections led to great opportunities in his later years.

Among his final works was his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Although in one movement, the work is nearly a concerto, divided into three demanding sections. Rachmaninoff received high praise after premiering his new work in 1934 with Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra. Comprised of 24 variations, the work draws its theme from Niccolò Paganini's virtuosic yet alluring 24th *Caprice* for solo violin. The *Rhapsody* is one of Rachmaninoff's most celebrated works and has been set as a ballet and used in numerous films. The famous 18th variation presents Paganini's theme slowly and in inversion (or "upside-down"), and Rachmaninoff acknowledged its popular appeal, commenting "this one is for my agent."

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)—*Daphnis et Chloé Suites 1 and 2*

Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev capitalized on France's obsession with all things Russian when he opened the Ballet Russes in Paris in 1909 with a nearly all-Russian season. However, he was always looking ahead, and he immediately began engaging the most prominent composers and artists for new works. Maurice Ravel, a popular composer prone to controversy, was renowned for keyboard works and his own brilliant orchestrations of them, and Diaghilev approached him in 1909 to compose a new work based on an ancient Greek romance, conceived of by choreographer Michel Fokine.

Second-century poet Longus' *Daphnis et Chloé* is an erotic tale of two companions from childhood, who, raised in a peaceful pastoral setting, fall in love as they grow. However, Chloé becomes jealous as Daphnis is enthralled by the dancing of another. While distracted, Daphnis is unable to save Chloé as she is abducted by pirates. The middle scene of the Ballet is a descent into darkness and the supernatural as

Chloé is held by the pirates and forced to dance for their amusement, but is saved when Pan intervenes and returns her to safety. In the final scene, the two lovers are reunited. In celebration, the two reenact the story of Pan, who, when rejected by the nymph Syrinx, plays a reed flute to win her favor. As Daphnis and Chloé embrace, a raucous bacchanale erupts in celebration.

Ravel's methodical diligence and language barriers pushed the premiere of *Daphnis et Chloé* to 1912, and it was the second work on the Ballet's season, performed days after Debussy's own Greek ballet *L'Après-midi d'un faune* caused a distracting scandal. Ravel's new work was buried and suffered from a tepid response, but it was eventually recognized for its ecstatic score. Considered Ravel's greatest masterpiece, *Daphnis et Chloé* is his longest work and is composed for his largest orchestra. The lush orchestration and whimsical harmonies are heard most often today in the two orchestral suites the composer derived from the original score.

Chaz Stuart, 2019