



# BILLINGS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA & CHORALE

*Inspire your Imagination*

## **Program Notes**

*By Chris Morrison*

September 19, 2009

### **Opening Night with Alisa Weilerstein**

*Anne Harrigan, conductor*

*Alisa Weilerstein, cello*

Gioachino Rossini: Overture to *La gazza ladra*

*Ernest Bloch: Schelomo (Hebraic Rhapsody for Solo Cello and Large Orchestra)*

#### ***Intermission***

Sergei Rachmaninov: Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

I. Largo – Allegro moderato

II. Allegro molto

III. Adagio

IV. Allegro vivace

## **Overture to *La gazza ladra*** **Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)**

Rossini was the most popular opera composer of his time. He was also unbelievably prolific, producing some forty operas in a twenty-year career for theaters in Italy and elsewhere. Among these were masterpieces like *The Italian Woman in Algiers*, *Otello*, *Cinderella*, and perhaps the most famous of all, *The Barber of Seville*. He retired as an opera composer at the age of thirty-seven, and in his remaining years lived comfortably while writing the occasional piano piece, song, or sacred work.

*La gazza ladra* (*The Thieving Magpie*), Rossini's twenty-first opera, was premiered on May 31, 1817 at Milan's Teatro alla Scala. Despite its whimsical title, the opera is rather a serious affair concerning a servant girl, Ninetta, who is accused of stealing a silver spoon. Through a misunderstanding she is imprisoned, tried, found guilty, and condemned to death, only to be saved at the last minute when the actual thief, the magpie of the title, is found. (Incidentally, Rossini superimposed this happy ending onto the original, true story. In what became a notorious case, the girl's innocence was only discovered after her execution, and her village subsequently instituted an annual "Magpie Mass" in her honor.)

The overture to the opera has become a great favorite. A pair of snare drums provides an opening call to attention, leading into the following march theme, which evokes Ninetta's lover Giannetto, a soldier soon to return from battle. Then an oboe introduces an especially lovely tune, which returns later in the opera as a love scene between Ninetta and Giannetto in the prison. After a spectacular crescendo and a tumultuous development, the main themes return for a lively coda.

## ***Schelomo*** **Ernest Bloch (1880-1959)**

The Swiss-American composer Ernest Bloch's musical style shifted rather dramatically around 1915, when he started to incorporate aspects of his Jewish heritage – Biblical characters and concepts, melodies reminiscent of Jewish liturgical and folk music – into compositions like the *Israel Symphony* (1916), *Avodath Hakodesh* (*Sacred Service*, 1933), and *Schelomo*. Subtitled "Hebraic Rhapsody for Solo Cello and Large Orchestra," *Schelomo* was written early in 1916 and given its premiere in New York on May 3, 1917, with cellist Hans Kindler and Bloch conducting.

Troubled by the outbreak of World War I, Bloch started sketching a setting of Ecclesiastes 1:2–9 for voice and orchestra, finding resonant the words attributed to King Solomon (or Schelomo in Hebrew) – "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity ... One generation passeth away and another generation cometh, and the Earth abideth forever." Then he met the cellist Alexander Barjansky, to whom *Schelomo* is dedicated, and Bloch came to feel that the cello might be the more appropriate voice for Solomon – "instead of a human voice, limited by a text ... an infinitely grander and more profound voice that could speak all languages."

Bloch wrote, “The cello represents a meditative voice, tragically alone. The complex voice of the orchestra is the voice of his age ... his world ... his experience.” *Schelomo* can be divided roughly into three sections. The cello begins with Solomon’s lamentation, sounded over sustained chords from the orchestra. The violas then take up the melody, and the cello line spirals into its lowest register (which we hear again dramatically at the conclusion of the work). Initially the orchestra’s colors are delicate – string tremolos, harp and celesta, woodwind decorations. These ruminations are interrupted by a couple of big cinematic climaxes. The music then turns mysterious as woodwinds take up another melody, reminiscent of a Jewish melody from Bloch’s youth. The cello merges with the woodwinds and the music mounts to another turbulent climax, with declamatory brass and swirling strings. This gradually dissipates, though, and the cello returns in the third and final section to its dark lamentation. In Bloch’s words, “Even the darkest of my works ends with hope. This work alone concludes in a complete negation. But the subject demanded it!”

### **Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27** **Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943)**

Remembered as one of the great pianists of the twentieth century, Sergei Rachmaninov is also one of the most performed of Russian composers. Building on his early musical studies with his mother, Rachmaninov attended both the St. Petersburg and Moscow Conservatories. In Moscow he met the legendary Piotr Tchaikovsky, who became a mentor to the young musician. Rachmaninov soon attracted attention, leading to a furious round of concert appearances, including tours of the United States and Europe. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, he left Russia for good, and eventually made the United States his home. The power, clarity, and lyricism of his piano playing (abetted by his huge hands) became legendary, and concert performances eventually became his main focus – to the exclusion of composing, as he completed just six works in the last quarter century of his life. He became an American citizen just before his death in Beverly Hills in 1943.

Rachmaninov’s First Symphony was almost his last. Composed in 1895 when he was twenty-two years old, the work’s first performance two years later was a disaster. The conductor was ill-prepared (and according to some, drunk), the audience confused, the critics devastating, and Rachmaninov himself embarrassed and depressed. He took to drink, and didn’t compose for the next three years. Only after numerous consultations and hypnosis sessions with psychologist Dr. Nikolai Dahl was Rachmaninov able to overcome his depression and compose his Piano Concerto No. 2. The Concerto was a huge success, and his career was back on track.

For the next several years he was much in demand as a piano virtuoso, conductor, and composer. The work load got so severe that he decided to go into hiding for a time in Dresden – as he wrote to a colleague, “I have escaped from my friends. Please don’t give me away!” His time there was productive: in three years he composed his tone poem *The Isle of the Dead* and the famous Piano Concerto No. 3. And it was in this relative seclusion that Rachmaninov finally returned to symphonic writing, starting work on the Symphony No. 2 in October 1906 and completing it the following fall. Rachmaninov traveled to St. Petersburg to conduct the Symphony’s premiere, on February 8, 1908. Although the work was a hit, Rachmaninov insisted that he really didn’t enjoy

the experience of creating it – “the work became terribly boring and repulsive to me” – and vowed that he would never again write a symphony. (He did eventually produce a Third Symphony, but not until 28 years later!)

The slow introduction to the first movement opens with a short, brooding motive in the cellos and basses that takes a variety of forms throughout the symphony. Portentous wind and brass chords punctuate the imitative development of this idea. The theme builds, then subsides, and a solo by the English horn introduces the main body of the movement, which is based on two new themes. The first is an elaboration by the violins of the slow introduction’s main motive. Then a short clarinet solo introduces the second subject, a sigh-like figure for woodwinds, answered by the strings. Introduced by a short violin solo, the development of these two ideas – by turns moody, stormy, and passionate – features several impressive climaxes. Eventually the music settles into a reprise of the sighing theme, before the storms return for a powerful coda.

The brilliant second movement opens with a descending idea for the four French horns, colored intermittently by the glockenspiel. A second idea, lyric and heartfelt, appears from nowhere, but is quickly interrupted by a big chord from the orchestra. A *perpetuum mobile* breaks out in the strings, with one choir imitating another. The energy continues to build, leading to a restatement of the two main themes of the movement and an appearance in the brass instruments of the *Dies irae*, the medieval “Day of Wrath” theme that was such an obsession for Rachmaninov.

Violins open the third movement with one of Rachmaninov’s “big tunes,” a series of descending phrases that leads into a lovely solo for the clarinet. Then the opening motive from the first movement reappears, faster this time, and is developed. When the “big tune” finally recurs, it isn’t the full-throated statement one might expect. Instead the mood is mysterious, as solo instruments – French horn, violin, English horn, flute, oboe and clarinet – play with bits of the melody. The strings proceed to take up the clarinet’s melody from earlier in the movement, with fragments of the “big tune” weaving in and out of the texture. The music builds passionately, then subsides into a peaceful coda.

By contrast, the final movement launches ahead with a swirling, almost tarantella-like theme. Pizzicato strings lead into a second idea, a march, and a third, a passionate lyric outburst. The previous movement’s big tune is briefly recalled, then fragments of the finale’s three main themes are tossed about within the orchestra. A swirl of descending scales gains momentum, leading into a mighty restatement of the movement’s three main themes and an exciting, brass-filled coda.