NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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Jean-Yves Thibaudet Plays Ravel

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Donghoon Shin: *Of Rats and Men*

Now in his early 40s, London-based composer Donghoon Shin is at the vanguard of South Korea's younger generation of composers. He is admired for his skill maneuvering orchestral color, and for his exploration of the relationship between music and the other arts, particularly literature. Shin's point of departure for the movements of *Of Rats and Men* were two short stories: Franz Kafka's "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse' ("Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk") and the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's "Police Rat." His composer's note explains.

> The first movement, "The Singer," inspired by Kafka, begins with an oboe solo melody which represents Josefine's song. The melody continues throughout the movement, although it's endlessly threatened by the orchestra tuttis [. . .] which have much wilder characters with darker pitches than the melody line. Bolanõ's "Police Rat". . .is a kind of metafiction based on Kafka's "Josefine." Pepe the Cop, the protagonist, is a police rat and nephew of Josefine. It's a story that reflects fear and violence in our world. . ." "The Cop and Killers" begins with a bassoon melody representing Pepe. While the low register melody continues, many different musical fragments are superimposed on it and they affect each other.

Of Rats and Men is undeniably colorful, making full use of all four instrumental sections, yet maintaining a transparency that allows different layers of sound to emerge. Shin has an ear for suspense and drama, using dissonance less for shock effect and more for atmospheric tension.

Maurice Ravel: Piano Concerto in G Major

As is the case in any instrumental concerto, Maurice Ravel's magical Piano Concerto in G major is intended to show off the piano soloist, in a dialogue with the orchestra that is alternately competitive, heartfelt and

playful. In this particular concerto, Ravel was paying tribute to Mozart, one of his idols, especially in the slow movement. He acknowledged that his inspiration for the central Adagio assai came from the slow movement in Mozart's Clarinet Quintet. The entire concerto certainly evokes Mozart's spirit in its clarity and elegance. The finale revels in Ravel's wit, proving that he often had a twinkle in his eye. At once jazzy and pristine, this concerto is a 20th-century masterpiece.

Jean Sibelius: Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43

The Second Symphony of Jean Sibelius may well be his most popular work apart from the nationalist tone poem *Finlandia.* Certainly, it is the best known of his seven symphonies. A frankly nationalistic work, the Second Symphony is also unusually positive in its musical message. Like Rachmaninoff, Sibelius had a dark side to his personality. This symphony, however, is essentially affirmative, particularly in its finale, a steadfast and patriotic hymn that grips the listener even on the first hearing. Simon Parmet refers to Sibelius in this work as being "in one of those rare moods in which he is in complete harmony with the external world." The Second Symphony's popularity does not hinge solely on its expansive mood. Pastoral elements alternate with intense drama, making for a fully satisfying musical experience.

Donghoon Shin: *Of Rats and Men*

Donghoon Shin
Born: 1983 in Seoul, South Korea
Composed: 2019
World Premiere: December 8, 2019, in Berlin. Peter Eötvos led the Berlin Philharmonic.
Duration: 11 minutes
Instrumentation: flute, piccolo, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon, two horns, trumpet, trombone and strings

London-based composer Donghoon Shin began his formal study of composition at Seoul National University with Sukhi Kang, a master of contemporary Korean music. He subsequently studied with Julian Anderson at London's Guildhall School of Music, and with George Benjamin at King's College London. His other mentors include Unsuk Chin and Peter Eötvös. Now in his early 40s, Donghoon Shin is at the vanguard of South Korea's younger generation of composers. He is admired for his skill maneuvering orchestral color, and for his exploration of the relationship between music and the other arts, particularly literature.

Shin's point of departure for the movements of *Of Rats and Men* were two short stories: Franz Kafka's "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse' ("Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk") and the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's "Police Rat." Kafka's "Josefine. . ." (1924) was his last short story. It is an anthropomorphic tale about a mouse who can sing—a metaphor for the ordinary communicative sounds that

mice make—exploring the power of music and the relationship between an artist and her audience, between memory and reality, between an individual and her community. Bolaño's "Police Rat" is a descendant of the Kafka story. The title character, Pepe the Cop, is Josephine's nephew, and Bolaño's prose discusses Kafka's tale. Set in the subterranean world where rats dwell, "Police Rat" muses on the characteristics that define humanity. Shin's composer's note follows.

> The first movement, "The Singer," inspired by Kafka, begins with an oboe solo melody which represents Josefine's song. The melody continues throughout the movement, although it's endlessly threatened by the orchestra tuttis [...] which have much wilder characters with darker pitches than the melody line. Bolanõ's "Police Rat". . .is a kind of metafiction based on Kafka's "Josefine." Pepe the Cop, the protagonist, is a police rat and nephew of Josefine. It's a story that reflects fear and violence in our world. . . "The Cop and Killers" begins with a bassoon melody representing Pepe. While the low register melody continues, many different musical fragments are superimposed on it and they affect each other.

Shin's piece is undeniably colorful, making full use of all four instrumental sections, yet maintaining a transparency that allows different layers of sound to emerge. The harmonic language is freely atonal, using moments of silence or short cameo solos to shift gears and separate episodes. He has an ear for suspense and drama, using dissonance less for shock effect and more for atmospheric tension. Some listeners may imagine the scurrying of rodents, but Shin's music is also calibrated to explore the philosophical themes that Kafka's and Bolaño's stories share.

Maurice Ravel: Piano Concerto in G Major

Maurice Ravel
Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrenées, France
Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris
Composed: 1929–1931
World Premiere: January 14, 1932, at the Salle Pleyel, Paris. Marguerite Long was the soloist, and the composer conducted the Orchestre Lamoureux.
Duration: 23 minutes
Instrumentation: piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, E-flat clarinet, clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, slapstick, wood block, triangle, snare drum), harp, solo piano and strings

At the outbreak of the First World War, Ravel was forced to set aside a number of active projects as patriotic fervor and military necessity swept the country. According to his friend Gustave Samazeuilh, one of the shelved scores was a Rhapsody based on the Basque music of Ravel's native province. Much of the material from this relatively early, abandoned work was later reworked into the Piano Concerto in G.

By the time Ravel began serious work on his concerto in 1929, more than a dozen years had elapsed. During the intervening time, of course, the war had ended. The composer had traveled to North America, where exposure to American jazz made an enormous impact on him. Further, he was now thinking in terms of a solo vehicle for himself, and began furious practice of difficult piano pieces by Chopin and Liszt in order to refine his technique and stimulate his own musical thinking.

While working on the Concerto in G, Ravel was contacted by an agent of the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm during the war. Remarkably, Wittgenstein resumed a successful career as a concert pianist, despite his amputation. Ravel accepted the commission for a left-handed piano concerto. Fascinated by the possibilities of writing for one hand, he became absorbed in writing the Wittgenstein concerto, fulfilling the commission in less than a year. The entire time, he was also working on the G-major concerto. Upon its completion in 1931, he told Michel Calvocoressi:

> It was an interesting experience to conceive and realize the two concerti at the same time. The first, which I propose to play myself, is a concerto in the strict sense, written in the spirit of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. I believe that a concerto can be both gay and brilliant without necessarily being profound or aiming at dramatic effect. It has been said that the concerti of some great classical composers, far from being written for the piano, have been written against it. And I think that this criticism is quite justified.

The composer's assessment is thought-provoking, but few would think that Ravel wrote "against" the piano. To the contrary: his music makes friends easily. Listeners will have little trouble in pinpointing the Gershwin-like flair with which Ravel assimilated jazz harmony and syncopation. They will love how he merges these elements with unexpected touches like the cadenzas for harp and woodwinds that precede the piano cadenza and the solos for French horn and trumpet. Similarly, they will be enraptured by the simplicity and elegance of the slow-movement waltz, which draws on the understated, proto-minimalist lyricism of Erik Satie and the accompaniment of a Bach aria. Marguerite Long, the pianist who eventually played the first performances of this concerto, later recalled:

> It is a difficult work especially in respect of the second movement where one has no respite. I told Ravel one day how anxious I was, after all the fantasy and brilliant orchestration of the first part, to be able to maintain the *cantabile* of the melody on the piano alone during such a long slow flowing phrase. . ."That flowing phrase!" Ravel cried. "How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!"

The slow movement features the entire wind section, and affords glorious moments for flute and, later, English horn. Ravel's finale opens with a snare drum roll, heralding a rambunctious, good-humored romp that challenges both pianistic technique and ensemble. Opening declarations from a saucy clarinet and slide trombones add piquancy to the whirlwind music. Later, a dazzling bassoon soli contributes its low-register impetus to the headlong rush.

In 1931, shortly before the premiere of the Piano Concerto in G, the French music critic Pierre Leroi interviewed Ravel for *L'Excelsior*. Excerpts from Leroi's article published October 30, 1931, follow.

> My only wish was to write a genuine concerto, that is, a brilliant work, clearly highlighting the soloist's virtuosity, without seeking to show profundity. As a model, I took two musicians who, in my opinion, best illustrated this type of composition: Mozart and Saint-Saëns. This is why the concerto, which I originally thought of entitling Divertissement, contains the three customary parts: the initial Allegro, a compact classical structure, is followed by an Adagio, in which I wanted to render particular homage to "scholasticism" and in which I attempted to write as well as I could; to conclude, a lively movement in Rondo form, likewise conceived in accordance with the most immutable traditions. In order not to needlessly weigh down the orchestral texture, I called for a reduced orchestra.

Five months later, the Dutch composer and critic Jacques Beers published "Ten Opinions of Mr. Ravel on Compositions and Composers" in *De Telegraaf* of April 6, 1932. He asked Ravel about jazz influence in his Violin Sonata and the Piano Concerto in G Major. Ravel responded:

> What is being written today without the influence of jazz? It is not the only influence, however; in the concerto one also finds bass accompaniments from the time of Bach, and a melody that recalls Mozart, the Mozart of the Clarinet Quintet, which by the way is the most beautiful piece he wrote. What I wanted to do in the violin sonata was to accentuate the contrast between the percussive piano accompaniment and the weaker violin melody. In the concerto, I have also tried to realize this, but in a somewhat different way.

Both articles are translated in Arbie Orenstein's *A Ravel Reader*.

Jean Sibelius: Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43

Jean Sibelius
Born: December 8, 1865, in Tavastehus, Finland
Died: September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää, Finland
Composed: 1901–1902
World Premiere: March 8, 1902, in Helsinki; the composer conducted the Helsinki Philharmonic.
Duration: 43 minutes
Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones (third doubling bass trombone), tuba, timpani and strings

Jean Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 in D Major is a perennial audience favorite. Despite its origins in the cold Nordic climate of Finland, this symphony pulsates with the warmth of the brief sub-arctic summer. Listening to the Second Symphony, one senses the composer's love of nature as well as his love for his homeland.

"Organic" is a term frequently applied to Sibelius's symphonic style. You won't hear themes so much as musical gestures: short motives from which larger thematic "paragraphs" evolve. His more substantial forms descend from the Classic-Romantic symphonic structures of Tchaikovsky; however, his harmonic language is less chromatic. Sibelius relies on triads and often uses parallel thirds to state his melodies. He also draws on modal scales common to Finnish folk songs. Always, he favors simpler means to deliver his ideas.

Sibelius was also a fierce nationalist who sought to capture the spirit of Finland in his music. He had a remarkable ability to observe nature and translate his observations into music. Imagine the frozen tundra, and the brilliance of sunshine on a gleaming snowscape: fire and ice commingled.

The Second Symphony overflows with pastoral elements that celebrate Finland's stark natural beauty. The opening triplets of the first movement are pastoral; so is the second theme. An oboe solo in the scherzo—with its famous repeated B-flat—is a clear reference to a bird call. The finale is especially triumphant and majestic, providing a suitable conclusion to this varied and multi-national program.

"Sibelius is an aggravatingly difficult person to catalogue," Lawrence Abbott once said. The Finnish composer has been variously described as late romantic, expressionist, nationalist, spiritual mythologist and futurist. Partly because he enjoyed such a long life and fruitful career, his style evolved and altered, lending some credence to all the aforementioned categories. At the same time, certain common themes—Finnish legend, national pride—recurred throughout his career.

Sibelius's reputation rests primarily on his orchestral works, which consist of seven symphonies and a number of tone poems. Criticism of his music has usually focused on a lack of continuity and a weak command of form. Paradoxically, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* praises his "extraordinary originality as a symphonic thinker." His early works show more influence of the Russian school than of Classical models. But even there, he is difficult to pinpoint: there is a strong relationship to both Borodin and Tchaikovsky, who represent opposite ends of the "Russian" spectrum in the second half of the 19th century. About the only thing that remains consistent is the controversy surrounding his music.

The Second Symphony, which was composed in 1901 and 1902, has achieved a more secure niche in the popular repertoire than any other symphony by Sibelius, perhaps because of its frankly nationalistic stance. In its day, it was considered to be a revolutionary work because of its unconventional first movement form. Basically, Sibelius works with succinct motives that are detached at the beginning and become forged together in the development. At the conclusion of the movement, he breaks the melodic components into fragments again. The entire process is almost the inverse of the conventional approach to musical logic as codified in sonata form, wherein one expects exposition of thematic ideas that are fragmented and developed in a middle section, then unified at the close.

Simon Parmet refers to Sibelius in this work as being "in one of those rare moods in which he is in complete harmony with the external world." The Second Symphony's popularity does not hinge solely on its joyous,

expansive mood. He forged a healthy balance of pastoral elements with intense drama, the latter particularly in the second and fourth movements.

Another fine stroke is his transition from the third movement to the finale. Sibelius fuses scherzo and finale together by repeating the trio section and letting it unfold gradually into his finale. The transition is ingenious, organic and thoroughly convincing. Burnett James has written:

> The finale is a fine paean of praise and strength, a sturdy affirmation of life and vitality. . .The force of nature is given full rein. The winds howl and roar; the tuba emits prodigies of elemental energy; strings scurry and swirl; and once again the great ostinato pedal points in the orchestra hold the foundations firm.

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