

Rachmaninoff Symphony No. 2

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Claude Debussy / André Caplet: *Clair de Lune*

Perhaps no piano solo is more beloved to listeners than Claude Debussy's *Clair de Lune*. With its ingratiating grace and subtle understatement, this lovely piece lures us into a magical world of tranquillity and nocturnal magic. The piece is actually part of a larger whole, serving as the third movement in Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque*, originally composed in 1889 and revised for publication in 1903. The original is said to have been inspired by an eponymous poem by Paul Verlaine, which alludes to both the sadness and the beauty of moonlight.

Debussy's middle section, with its flowing arpeggiated chords, helps to capture the shimmering transparency of moonlight with an essentially simple texture and idiomatic writing. The piece has become so beloved that numerous arrangements have been made, many for solo instrument with piano, and at least six for orchestra. André Caplet's version, which the New Jersey Symphony performs, is deservedly popular.

Nico Muhly: *Sounding* for Piano and Orchestra after Justin Morgan

The New Jersey Symphony is proud to feature pianist Adam Tandler this weekend in Nico Muhly's new piano concerto, *Sounding*. The NJ Symphony and the Vermont Symphony co-commissioned this work. Tandler played the premiere in Burlington last May, and is the dedicatee of the concerto. Muhly based the work on four hymns by Justin Morgan (1747–1798), a horse breeder and composer who settled in Vermont—which is both Muhly's and Tandler's home state—in the late 1780s. Muhly uses Morgan's hymns as a springboard for free variations that embroider each tune without obscuring its essence. The result is an amalgam of moods: often reverent, sometimes playful, always respectful of tradition, but unafraid to transform the 'bones' of the hymns by cloaking them in new colors and textures. The solo piano role ranges from headstrong—Muhly's directive—to intimate to sparkling and is beautifully integrated with the orchestra.

Sergei Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 27

Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony is a mature work: expansive, leisurely, and unapologetically romantic. The Expressionist statements of his contemporaries Strauss, Schoenberg, and Bartók might as well not have existed. Rachmaninoff looked to Tchaikovsky for his inspiration, rather than to currents during his lifetime. While we may associate him most closely with works for piano solo or piano and orchestra, we must not overlook his importance as a conductor and orchestrator. This symphony attests to his skill in handling a large orchestra without benefit of the contrast afforded by a solo instrument. It is a milestone in Russian symphonic literature.

The music is lush and relaxed. This is an expansive symphony in the late Romantic vein: heartfelt, emotional, and long. More than one writer has compared it to the Schubert Ninth, the "Great" C Major. It shares with that work an embarrassment of melodic riches, including at least one Rachmaninoff theme that has found its way into the popular canon via Eric Carmen's 1976 hit "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again." (Carmen lifted his theme from Rachmaninoff's slow movement). Raw emotional power in this work points to mature Rachmaninoff; at the same time, it links him more strongly to his predecessor Tchaikovsky than probably any other composition.

Claude Debussy: *Clair de Lune*

Claude Debussy / André Caplet

Born: August 22, 1862, in St-Germain-en-Laye, France

Died: March 25, 1918, in Paris

Composed: 1890; final revisions in 1905

World Premiere: Undocumented, but probably in Paris in 1905.

Duration: 5 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, harp, and strings

Perhaps no piano solo is more beloved to listeners than *Clair de Lune*. With its ingratiating grace and subtle understatement, this lovely piece lures us into a magical world of tranquility, and nocturnal magic. The piece is actually part of a larger whole, serving as the third movement in Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque*, originally composed in 1889 and revised for publication in 1903. The original is said to have been inspired by an eponymous poem by Paul Verlaine, which alludes to both the sadness and the beauty of moonlight. In his book on the composer's piano music, E. Robert Schmitz has written:

Filled with delicate, romantic feeling, it conveys through its precious harmonies the silvery atmosphere

of the moonlight. Its elusive before-the-beat and after-the-beat yearnings spirit us away from the matter-of-fact reality of noontide and its vertically blazing light.

Biographer Paul Roberts points out the absences of emphases on individual syllables in French, which is quite different from English. That, and Debussy's middle section, with its flowing arpeggiated chords, helps to capture the shimmering transparency of moonlight with an essentially simple texture and idiomatic writing. The piece has become so beloved that numerous arrangements have been made, many for solo instruments with piano, and at least six for orchestra. André Caplet's version is deservedly popular.

Nico Muhly: *Sounding* for Piano and Orchestra

Nico Muhly

Born: August 26, 1981, in Randolph, Vermont

Composed: 2023–24

World Premiere: May 4, 2024, in Burlington, Vermont. Adam Tandler was the soloist.

Duration: 43 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon), two horns, two trumpets, trombone, bass trombones, percussion (three triangles, three woodblocks, kick drum, bass drum, tam tam, chimes, glockenspiel, and vibraphone), solo piano, and strings

The New Jersey Symphony and the Vermont Symphony co-commissioned *Sounding*. This weekend's performances are the mid-Atlantic premiere.

Though he is barely in his mid-40s, Nico Muhly has rocketed to the forefront of American music. The Metropolitan Opera has already commissioned him twice, for *Two Boys* (2011) and *Marnie* (2018). Other commissions have come in from Carnegie Hall, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Tallis Scholars, and King's College Cambridge. Muhly has collaborated with major choreographers in France and the USA and is also active as a film composer.

The son of an art professor at Wellesley and a documentary filmmaker, Muhly grew up in Providence, RI. He holds dual degrees in English from Columbia and in music from Juilliard, where his principal teachers were John Corigliano and Christopher Rouse. While pursuing his master's at Juilliard, he began an eight-year artistic collaboration with Philip Glass. Now, based in New York, Muhly has a major international career.

Sounding, however, took him back to his Vermont roots. The single-movement concerto, written for and dedicated to fellow Vermont native Adam Tandler, incorporates four hymn tunes by Justin Morgan (1747–1798), a horse breeder and composer who settled in Vermont in the late 1780s. The hymns—"Amanda," based on Psalm 90; "Montgomery," (after Psalm 63); "Huntington," (Psalm 73; transcribed from Asahel Benham's *Federal Harmony*, 1793), and "Sounding Joy," (Psalm 95; also transcribed from Benham)—are

reproduced in full four-part harmony at the front of Muhly's orchestral score. His performance note—also printed in the score—states: "Throughout *Sounding*, these hymn tunes by Justin Morgan appear in various guises, and should be brought out whenever possible."

The piece comprises four sections, performed without pause. Each one takes the Morgan hymn as a springboard, setting it in free variations that embroider the tune without obscuring its essence. The result is an amalgam of moods: often reverent, sometimes playful, always respectful of tradition but unafraid to transform the 'bones' of the hymns by cloaking them in new colors and textures. The solo piano role ranges from headstrong—Muhly's directive—to intimate to sparkling and is beautifully integrated with the orchestra.

Sergei Rachmaninoff: Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 27

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: April 1, 1873, in Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia

Died: March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills

Composed: October 1906–April 1907

World Premiere: January 26, 1908, in St. Petersburg. The composer conducted.

Duration: 43 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes, piccolo, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, side drum, glockenspiel, and strings

Sergei Rachmaninoff is deservedly celebrated for his splendid contribution to the piano literature, both solo works—notably two sets each of *Préludes* and *Etudes-tableaux*—and concerted ones. His Second Piano Concerto (1901) and the *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* for piano and orchestra remain perennial favorites. Somewhat lesser known are Rachmaninoff's strictly orchestral compositions, which include two undisputed masterpieces: the late *Symphonic Dances*, Op. 45 (1940) and the symphony we hear at these performances.

The Second Symphony was an easy sell for Rachmaninoff, and one that he badly needed to assuage damaged self-confidence. Excepting an unfinished youthful symphony, his first effort in the genre was a Symphony in D Minor from 1895. Its failure was so disastrous that Rachmaninoff hardly composed for three years following, and it was nearly twelve years before he saw fit to complete another symphony. Fortunately, the success of the Second Piano Concerto and a number of smaller works did much to restore his faith in his own talent.

He began work on the Second Symphony in October 1906 while living in Dresden, where he and his family had moved in the aftermath of the failed Russian revolution of 1905. The piece gave him problems. He composed it with difficulty, laboring over the first movement alone for nearly three months. He spoke little of the work; most of his friends believed him to be immersed in a new opera. Somewhat frustrated by symphonic form, Rachmaninoff set the manuscript aside after completing the draft in April 1907.

Back in Russia during the summer, he turned to orchestration, but remained very tight-lipped about having completed the score, and confiding to friends in letters that he was displeased with it. He managed to work through his dissatisfaction and returned to St. Petersburg to conduct the premiere early in 1908. A Moscow premiere followed in mid-February. The Symphony was a great success in both cities, and the Russian academy hastened to formally recognize Rachmaninoff's achievement by awarding him the Glinka Prize in December 1908.

The music is lush and relaxed. This is an expansive symphony in the late Romantic vein: heartfelt, emotional, and long. More than one writer has compared it to the Schubert Ninth, the "Great" C Major. It shares with that work an embarrassment of melodic riches, including at least one Rachmaninoff theme that has found its way into the popular canon via Eric Carmen's 1976 hit "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again." (Carmen lifted his theme from Rachmaninoff's slow movement). Raw emotional power in this work points to mature Rachmaninoff; at the same time, it links him more strongly to his predecessor Tchaikovsky than probably any other composition.

While each movement has its share of the broad lines, arching melodies, and sometimes ecstatic expression that characterize this work, the brilliant Scherzo merits special mention. At approximately nine minutes, it is the shortest of the four, but the composer has compressed a wealth of ideas in that brief span. The orchestration is impeccable (listen for the sparkle of the glockenspiel), and Rachmaninoff's command of counterpoint in the central *fugato* is impressive. Also noteworthy is the exuberant opening of the finale, which matches the opening to Strauss' *Don Juan* in its evocation of newly-popped champagne bubbling over.

Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony remained one of his principal vehicles for promoting his own music as a guest conductor; however, he did not conduct it after 1914. It was the longest symphony to come out of Russia prior to the era of Soviet music. Perhaps because of that, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, it was routinely and extensively cut in concert. Xian Zhang observes the cuts taken by Eugene Ormandy in Minneapolis and Philadelphia. The beauty and splendor of Rachmaninoff's music remains.

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