Soheil Nasseri

Wednesday, July 15, 2009 • 7:30 pm

Portland International Piano Festival
Miller Hall, World Forestry Center

Program

Danielpour — **Three Preludes, from *The Enchanted Garden* (West Coast Premiere)**
- Ancient Memory
- Lean Kat Rag
- Silent Meeting

Beethoven — **Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26**
- Andante con Variazioni
- Scherzo: Allegro molto
- Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe: Maestoso andante
- Allegro

Intermission

Schubert — **Selections from Six Moments musicaux, Op. 94, D. 780**
- No. 1, Moderato in C Major
- No. 3, Allegro moderato in F minor
- No. 5, Allegro vivace in F minor

Rachmaninoff — **Thirteen Preludes, Op. 32**

Program subject to change

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Program Notes

Richard Danielpour

(Born January 28, 1956, in New York City)

Three Preludes, from *The Enchanted Garden*

Born in New York City to Iranian parents, Grammy Award–winning Richard Danielpour is one of the most respected composers of his generation. Much in demand across the globe, Mr. Danielpour has received such prestigious honors as a Lifetime Achievement Award and the Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, a Guggenheim Award, two Rockefeller Foundation grants, the Bearns Prize from Columbia University, and grants and residencies from the Barlow Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Copland House, and the American Academy in Rome.

Mr. Danielpour's work has been performed throughout the world, and his commissions read like a *Who's Who* of the world's leading musical institutions and artists. He has written for the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Orchestre National de France, Stuttgart Radio Orchestra, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, American Composers Orchestra, and the San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Pacific, National, and Baltimore Symphonies, among many others. His music has also been championed by Yo-Yo Ma, Jessye Norman, Dawn Upshaw, Emanuel Ax, Frederica von Stade, Thomas Hampson, Gary Graffman, the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio; the Guarneri, Emerson, Muir, and American String Quartets; and conductors David Zinman, Charles Dutoit, Kurt Masur, Zdenek Macal, Leonard Bernstein, Carl St. Clair, and Leonard Slatkin. Mr. Danielpour has also composed two major scores for the New York City and Pacific Northwest Ballets, and (with Toni Morrison writing the libretto) an opera for the Detroit Opera: *Margaret Garner.*

The Three Preludes (2003) were written for and commissioned by Soheil Nasseri, who had previously premiered another work by Richard Danielpour. The world premiere was given in New York at Alice Tully Hall, and a more recent European premiere was given in Berlin at the Konzerthaus.

Eschewing the often abrasive style of many modern composers, Mr. Danielpour is generally designated a neo-Romantic. The term is misleading, and perhaps a failure on the part of musicologists to find a word for new music that is not atonal. To me, Danielpour's music doesn't sound anything like the music that I play from the Romantic period, or any other period. He clearly has his own style. For that matter, the four style groups don't seem to apply much at all to the music I play — but that is getting off the topic.

The meditative prelude "Ancient Memory" includes a simple childlike melody, and takes a walking pace, set by the left hand's chordal figures. It could perhaps be the composer on a stroll through the streets of New York, thinking back to his youth. "Lean Kat Rag" is an unabashed jazz piece. The term "rag" is derived from *ragged time*, and demands from the performer an ability to play with the rhythm within the 3/4 and 4/4 measures (i.e., purposefully unsteady). It is dedicated to a Kathleen (the composer knew her as "Kat"), and though I haven't confirmed my suspicion, it is interesting to note that two years after this piece was written, Mr. Danielpour married a woman named Kathleen! (And she does seem to be rather lean, from her pictures online.) "Silent Meeting" is even more meditative than the first prelude, and also more complex. The slow meditations are interrupted by outbursts of glissandi and vibrating chords. This piece is a good example of music in which the atmosphere that is set is overwhelmingly more important than any of the specifics. Whereas in the Beethoven Sonata every tiny detail has a huge role to play in the character of the piece, in this prelude I probably could play pretty much anything, keeping true to the general mood, and make the composer's point. (But don't tell him I said that!)

The Three Preludes are intended to later join other preludes (totaling twenty-four) by Richard Danielpour in a two-volume set, *The Enchanted Garden.*

Ludwig van Beethoven

(Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany; died March 26, 1827, in Vienna)

Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26

When Ludwig "Louie" van Beethoven wrote his twelfth

Piano Sonata, Op. 26, in A-flat Major (1800–01), his compositional career had recently reached a level so high that in a letter to his friend Franz Wegeler, Beethoven wrote: "My compositions bring in a good deal of money and I can say that I receive more commissions than I can possibly accept. I have six or seven publishers after every piece, and might have more if I chose; people no longer bargain with me, I demand and they pay." Beethoven had previously won the reputation of being the most sensitive and passionate (if not the flat-out best) of Europe's known piano virtuosos, and as the supreme master of live improvisation. Now he was well on his way to being crowned the reigning king of musical composition, and he was producing new compositions at a terrifically prolific rate: several hours of new music a year, including large orchestral pieces. Also, despite having grown up in a poor family in a much less sophisticated area, he had come to the big capital city, Vienna, and quickly established himself among the social circles of the aristocratic elite, and quite often became romantically involved with beautiful young countesses. So, everything was just splendid...or was it? From the same letter: "That evil demon, my bad health, however, has put a spoke in my wheel, namely: my hearing has grown steadily worse during the last thee years. My ears sing and buzz continually day and night. I can truly say that I am living a wretched life. For two years I have avoided almost all social gatherings because it is impossible for me to say to people, 'I am deaf.'"

Fate's irony of afflictions no doubt being well established in all of our lives, the more interesting question posed becomes, "So, how did Beethoven's impending deafness affect his creative output?" If I may leave my authoritative use of facts aside for a moment, I would suggest the following: All emotion is beneficial to the creative soul, whether that emotion is rapturous ecstasy or hellish despair. When one is susceptible to a particular sentiment, he is also more susceptible to its opposite extreme, and also more appreciative and sensitive to all that would arouse those feelings. So in Beethoven's case, waking up every morning with the despair (of course, also pride) of writing some of the greatest music in existence, and yet not being able to hear it, of loving music as much as anyone ever has, and yet not being able to listen to it, served as a catalyst for him to put even more emotion into the music he was writing. If I may extrapolate: I think therefore I am. I feel therefore I am. I feel therefore I live. And thus: I feel more therefore I live more.

Indeed, Beethoven lived much more because of his affliction; and I would furthermore suggest (as one of many who would suggest the same) that more varying emotions are found in Beethoven's music than in any other composer's. The Op. 26 Sonata is filled with subtle details of huge emotional importance — including Beethoven's ubiquitous *subito piano* (immediately soft) and *subito forte* (immediately loud) that are musical expressions of his often abrupt personality. The first movement is a Theme and Variations form (*Andante con Variazioni*) with a particularly charming subject (I heard it first when I was fifteen and fell in love right away — a long-standing problem, though in this case she loved me back), and then five variations. The second movement is a *Scherzo* (joke), with a *Trio* middle section — and with its abrupt shifts and witty dialogue it provides the highest concentration of lighthearted musical comedy in this sonata. The A-flat minor third movement (a rare case of Beethoven using a seven-flat key signature) is perhaps the most memorable of the Sonata, and was titled *Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe* (Funeral march on the death of a hero). Who the hero is, specifically, must be left to the imagination, but there is an evocative honor guard salute (though, in an outdated eighteenth-century style), complete with timpani and trumpets in the middle of the movement. The last movement, *Allegro*, is in rondo form (A-B-A-C-A, etc.), and its quick and treacherous passagework, according to Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny (who, by the way, taught Leschetizky, who taught A. Schnabel, who taught K. Schnabel, who taught me), was a direct response to another A-flat Major Sonata by one of Beethoven's competitors, Johann Cramer.

— Program notes by Soheil Nasseri © 2009

Franz Schubert

(Born January 31, 1797, in Lichtenthal, Austria; died November 19, 1828, in Vienna)

Selections from Six Moments musicaux, Op. 94, D. 780

Schubert was not unknown during his short lifetime, but never really had an important place in public musical life. He died only sixteen months after Beethoven's death, but each composer inhabited a different Vienna. Schubert, unlike Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, had no support

from wealthy families, although he did spend two summers in Hungary as a music teacher to the Esterházys. Although he had some influential friends, he lived mostly as a lower-class Viennese, and his simple lifestyle might be termed Bohemian. He congregated with friends his age, many talented and some from wealthy families, and they attended public musical events and admired the famous musicians, especially Beethoven, from a distance. In his short life, he wrote about 600 songs and almost 1,000 more compositions — music in almost every form that existed in his time. There is no record of a public performance of any of his symphonies until after his death. The first public performance took place fifty-seven years after its composition, on February 1, 1873, in the Crystal Palace in London.

In the spring of 1828, a Vienna publisher assembled six of Schubert's short piano pieces into two albums that he published as *Moments musicaux*, Op. 94. In O. E. Deutsch's great catalog of Schubert's works, these albums are No. 780. The title, which was probably the publisher's idea and not the composer's, is of no great significance, for it indicated no set form, style, or mood. It is simply one of many designations, such as bagatelle, ballade, capriccio, fantasy, impromptu, and intermezzo, that the nineteenth century applied almost indiscriminately to short, fanciful pieces.

No. 1, in C Major, *Moderato*, opens the set with a gentle fanfare and march. No. 3, in F minor, *Allegro moderato*, a graceful and cheerful rhythmic piece, is a tiny work of great genius and deserves its popularity (it had been published earlier as *Air russe*). No. 5, in F minor, *Allegro vivace*, is a swiftly galloping piece in tense staccato chords that lighten only briefly in the central section.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

(Born April 1, 1873, in Novgorod, Russia; died March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California)

Thirteen Preludes, Op. 32

One of the supreme pianists of his era, Rachmaninoff was also an admired composer and a conductor so talented that he was offered the direction of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Despite having a heavy schedule of concert performances, he composed a great deal of music: four piano concertos, three symphonies, three operas, a large number of works in diverse forms, and a larger number of songs and piano pieces. He left Russia in 1917 and lived in the United States for the rest of his life.

Rachmaninoff was educated at the St. Petersburg and Moscow Conservatories, and after winning a gold medal for composition, set off on his first concert tour in 1892, beginning his long career. The melodic power and the rich, characteristically Russian sonority of his music made him one of the most popular composers of the twentieth century.

A contemporary music critic described the Moscow atmosphere in which Rachmaninoff found himself: "Music here was a terrible narcosis, a sort of intoxication and oblivion, a going off into irrational planes.... It was not form, or harmoniousness, or Apollonic vision that was demanded of music, but passion, feeling, languor, heartache."

It did not take long before Rachmaninoff suffered the heartache music was to bring him. When his Symphony No. 1 had a very poor reception in 1897, he succumbed to a severe depression, and consequently his career was almost cut short. According to his reflections in his *Memoirs*: "I did nothing and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent lying on a couch and sighing over my ruined life." In 1900, his family and friends sent him to Dr. Nicolai Dahl, who specialized in hypnosis, but also was a sophisticated music-lover and talented amateur violinist who held chamber music parties at his home. Some time later Rachmaninoff described his treatment:

> My relations told Dr. Dahl that he must at all costs cure me of my apathetic condition and achieve such results that I would again begin to compose. Dahl asked what kind of composition they wanted, and had received the answer, "A piano concerto," for this is what I had promised to the people in London, and I had given it up in despair. Consequently, I heard the hypnotic formula repeated day after day while I lay half-asleep in an armchair in Dahl's study: "You will begin to write your concerto. You will write with great ease. The concerto

> will be a fine work." It was always the same, without interruption. Although it may sound incredible, this cure really worked.
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> At the start of the summer I began to compose again. The material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me — far more than I needed for my new concerto. By the autumn I had finished two movements of the concerto — the *Andante* and the *Finale*. I played the two movements during that autumn at a charity concert. They had a gratifying success. This buoyed up my self-confidence so much that I began to compose again. By the spring I had already finished the first movement of the concerto and the Suite for Two Pianos, Op. 17. I felt that Dr. Dahl's treatment had strengthened my nervous system to a miraculous degree. Out of gratitude I dedicated my Second Concerto to him.

After he finished the Piano Concerto No. 2, it was performed on November 9, 1901, with Rachmaninoff as soloist with the Moscow Philharmonic. His confidence restored, he was completely buoyed by the positive reception of this concerto.

Rachmaninoff resumed a productive and busy life as a touring performer, yet he made time to write large quantities of music. Increasing civil unrest caused him to flee Russia in 1909, and to establish residence in both Switzerland and the United States. In 1931 he published a letter in the *New York Times* protesting against the Soviet government. After that, the Soviets banned both the performance and study of his works. This action caused Rachmaninoff to make a complete break with his homeland, and he lived in the United States for the rest of his life.

In 1903 Rachmaninoff wrote a set of 10 Preludes, Op. 23; and in 1910, 13 Preludes, Op. 32. Those of Op. 32 are harmonically bolder than the earlier set, and the piano writing more original. In the Op. 23 set, the influence of Chopin is evident and strong, but by the Op. 32 set, it has receded considerably. As in a similar grouping of Chopin's, each prelude is a separate, complete, self-contained work. By combining the preludes from three different opus numbers, Rachmaninoff constructed a grouping of twenty-four works with an underlying stylistic unity, systematically using all the major and minor keys, although he did not arrange them in any progressive order. This device put him in a direct historical line with Bach and Chopin, who had written similar series. The 13 Preludes of Op. 32 are representative of the subtler and more harmonically mature style that Rachmaninoff reached in his middle years, and they are among the most difficult works he wrote. His devilishly difficult Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 30, dates from this time. As a result, the Op. 32 Preludes are definitely more complex and original in their design than the earlier preludes, and are rarely performed in concert together.

Rachmaninoff also used Tchaikovsky, his countryman, as a model and inspiration for his music's melodic power and rich Russian sound. Each complex work exhibits a wide expressive range and invention that is often melodically memorable, as well as dramatic. These preludes attract a listener's attention because of their Russian character and melodic line, as well as their characteristic rhythmic stamp. Each has a distinct theatricality; with Rachmaninoff, the preludes become miniature dramas, and as a result, many annotators try to explain them with programmatic interpretations that Rachmaninoff did not intend. Rachmaninoff, aware of these tendencies, strongly insisted that his works be accepted as absolute music. Notably, the Russian dramatist, Maxim Gorky, Rachmaninoff's contemporary, said simply, "How well he hears silence."

— Program notes by Susan Halpern © 2009