

CLASSICAL SIX

Poem of Ecstasy

SATURDAY, MAY 2, 2020 • 7:30 p.m. • MARK C. SMITH CONCERT HALL, VON BRAUN CENTER

Yevgeny Kutik, *violin* • **Emilio Colón**, *cello* • **James Dick**, *piano*

Huntsville Symphony Orchestra • **GREGORY VAJDA**, *Music Director & Conductor*

Franz Schubert

(1797–1828)

Overture to Fierabras, D. 796

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770–1827)

“Triple” Concerto for violin, cello,
and piano in C major, op. 56

I. Allegro

II. Largo

III. Rondo alla polacca

Yevgeny Kutik, *violin*

Emilio Colón, *cello*

James Dick, *piano*

INTERMISSION

Sergei Prokofiev

(1891–1953)

Lieutenant Kijé (Suite), op. 60

I. The Birth of Kijé

II. Romance

III. Kijé’s Wedding

IV. Troika (Sleigh Ride)

V. The Burial of Kijé

Alexander Scriabin

(1872–1915)

Poem of Ecstasy, op. 54

Davidson Classical Series

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Program Notes

SCHUBERT

Overture to *Fierabras*, D. 796

Vienna's Hotel Sacher, famous for the chocolate cake which (contentiously) shares its name, stands on hallowed ground for lovers of classical music: this was once the site of the Theater am Kärntnertor, which hosted the premiere of numerous Mozart pieces, Beethoven symphonies (including the Ninth), and other masterworks. Schubert's opera *Fierrabras* should have premiered there late in 1823, but an Italian impresario overran the theater with wildly popular Rossini productions. The clamor for more was such that Schubert's offering—ironically commissioned by the same venue to help soften the dominance of Italian repertoire—was canceled.

He had never been lucky in the theater. His *Alfonso und Estrella* was refused by every house approached. Schubert was a great melodist, a capable orchestrator, and a marvelous friend to singers. His scenes hit their marks, but he did not excel at stringing the bits together into a coherent whole. In this he was further hindered by partnerships with lackluster, inexperienced librettists.

Fierrabras was already an old tale by the time it fell into the composer's hands. The titular character, a Moorish soldier, is captured during a campaign of Charlemagne. Unwittingly, he becomes entangled as witness and mediator to a complicated assortment of conflicting love interests among the Frankish knights. One certainly gets a sense of the drama from the delightful overture. Here Schubert harnesses the power of symphonic form for a real tempest in a teapot, a terse conflict between desire and duty. [ca. 9']

BEETHOVEN

"Triple" Concerto, op. 56

The only Beethoven concerto to involve more than one soloist, this interesting work juxtaposes a typical piano trio—violin, cello and piano—with orchestral forces.

The piano trio, a common chamber configuration from Haydn forward, can be a problematic medium for composers because the makeup of the group easily presents issues of sonic balance and ambiguity of musical role. To avoid muddying the waters further, Beethoven here allows his trio ample breathing room such that they often play alone or with only minimal accompaniment from the orchestra. Soloists and ensemble are held in careful balance not by blend, but by clear distinction.

This music, penned in 1803–04, marks the beginning of the composer's "Middle Period," along with works like the "Waldstein" piano sonata and the "Eroica" Symphony No. 3. While expansive and imaginatively developed, the Triple Concerto is in most outward respects a strongly conservative work. It's a jaunty and melodious piece for polite company. There is an almost Rococo character to the themes of the first movement, while the concluding rondo is cast in the form of a courtly Polish dance, the polonaise.

Anton Schindler attested that the original intent was dedication to the Archduke Rudolph, Beethoven's most important patron and a keen pianist and composer himself, but this is not corroborated by hard evidence. Upon publication, the score was dedicated to another benefactor, Prince Lobkowitz. One of Beethoven's lengthiest, most discursive works in the genre, the Triple Concerto was first heard at an outdoor concert in Vienna's Augarten in 1808. [ca. 35']

PROKOFIEV

Lieutenant Kijé (Suite), op. 60

Maurice Jarre, Elmer Bernstein, James Horner, Hanz Zimmer, and John Williams are recognized as great film composers. Before all of them, the Soviet master Sergei Prokofiev was among the very first to work in this twentieth-century art form, and *Lieutenant Kijé* was his inaugural foray.

This 1934 comedy, set in the year 1800, tells the story of an Imperial Army officer who attracts the interest of the czar Paul I. The catch is that Kijé doesn't exist; he is the product of the czar's misreading of a military report. Instead of *poruchiki, zhe* ("the lieutenant, however..."), he reads *Poruchik Kizhe* ("Lieutenant Kijé"). Rather than

daring to suggest that the Czar of All Russias has made a mistake, His Majesty's subordinates script an entire life story. They then capitalize on their invention, blaming Kijé for numerous problems actually of their own doing. Their good fortune is foiled when, at the request of a princess who wishes to marry Kijé, the czar promotes him to the top of the stack. When at last Paul I asks to meet his newest general, the military chiefs must hurriedly think of a way to kill off Kijé. There follows a state funeral with an empty coffin. "*Sic transit gloria mundi*," the grief-stricken emperor cries to heaven.

Prokofiev's score humorously illustrates several chapters of Kijé's bogus biography. The composer was unhappy with the piece as a film soundtrack, though he thought well enough of the music to extract five movements as a concert suite for orchestra. The tenor saxophone is prominently featured, especially in the Romance, where it replaces the baritone singer heard in the film. The "Burial" of Kijé is a musical eulogy, a sort of overture-in-reverse which recounts various episodes in the context of a somber, stately funeral march. [ca. 20']

SCRIABIN

Poem of Ecstasy, op. 54

He was an interesting character. An inconsolable germophobe, Alexander Scriabin had a habit of refusing to remove his gloves except when playing the piano. He so idolized Chopin that for years he slept with a volume of the master's music underneath his pillow.

He was an ardent proponent and organizer of Madame Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical movement; by the end of his life, Scriabin sincerely believed it was his role to create a piece of music—the *Mysterium*—the performance of which, somewhere high in the Himalayas, would mark the apotheosis of humanity and physically unmake the world.

But Scriabin's voice as a composer is one of the most distinctive, colorful, and expressive in the history of Western music. It is marked by a gradual transition from the attenuated elaborations on Chopin which occupied his youth to the highly concentrated, harmonically ambiguous music written in his maturity. Much of this metamorphosis was informed by his deepening commitment to the occult. Sensuous in the extreme, Scriabin's language was at first reviled by Soviet authorities in the years after his 1915 death but was later fetishized by the Party for its originality; thus Shostakovich, who in the 1930s had characterized Scriabin as "our enemy," was eventually appointed Chairman of the Scriabin Centennial Committee.

Though he is most celebrated for his many piano works, Scriabin was a genius of orchestration, producing several symphonies and concertos. Unofficially his "Fourth Symphony," the *Poem of Ecstasy*, written between 1905–08, is a symphonic poem based on a lengthy text of Scriabin's own creation. *I call you to life, mysterious forces!* he exclaims. The overall program is meant to represent the "ascent" of a spirit into the material world, which Scriabin viewed as metaphor for the creative process of an artist and in which he found strong sexual undertones. "The *Poem of Ecstasy* is the Joy of Liberated Action," Scriabin writes in his own program notes for the piece. "When the Spirit has exhausted completely its substance, the Time of Ecstasy will arrive." [ca. 22']

Guest Artists

Yevgeny Kutik, *violin*

- Solo performances with The Boston Pops, Rochester Philharmonic, Cape Town Philharmonic, and WDR Rundfunk Köln
- Appearances at Tanglewood, Verbier, Ravinia, and Cape Cod Festivals; Kennedy Center, 2019
- Recordings on Marquis label



Emilio Colón, *cello*

- Solo performances with The National Symphony of Ukraine, Puerto Rico Symphony, National Symphony of Istanbul, and Casals Festival
- Founder, International Chamber Orchestra of Puerto Rico; U.S. Ambassador's Cultural Diplomacy Award
- Courses offered at Paris Conservatoire, Franz Liszt Academy, and Toho Gakuen Tokyo



James Dick, *piano*

- Solo performances with The National Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony, and Philadelphia Orchestra
- Appearances at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Wigmore Hall, and Kennedy Center
- Founder, Round Top Festival Institute, Texas; Texas Medal of Arts, Chevalier des Arts et Lettres

