

Matthias Pintscher, conductor
Kirill Gerstein, piano

Friday, February 1, 2019 at 8:00pm
Saturday, February 2, 2019 at 8:00pm

RACHMANINOFF *The Isle of the Dead, op. 29* (1908)
(1873-1943)

SCRIABIN Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor, op. 20 (1853)
(1871-1915)
Allegro
Theme and Variations
Allegro moderato
Kirill Gerstein, piano

INTERMISSION

MENDELSSOHN Symphony No. 3 in A minor, op. 56, "Scottish" (1829-1842)
(1809-1847)
Andante con moto; Allegro un poco agitato -
Vivace non troppo -
Adagio -
Allegro vivacissimo; Allegro maestoso assai

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The 2018/2019 Classical Series is presented by **World Wide Technology** and **The Steward Family Foundation**.

Matthias Pintscher is the **Daniel, Mary and Francis O'Keefe Guest Conductor**.

Kirill Gerstein is the **Mr. and Mrs. Whitney R. Harris Guest Artist**.

The concert of Friday, February 1, is underwritten in part by a generous gift from **Rex and Jeanne Sinquefield**.

The concert of Saturday, February 2, is underwritten in part by a generous gift from **Susan Eickhoff and Family**.

Pre-concert conversations are sponsored by **Washington University Physicians**.

PROGRAM NOTES

BY TIM MUNRO

On its surface, says conductor Matthias Pintscher, the music on this program is beautiful. But, “hidden in a layer beneath,” lies darkness. Pintscher brings up an image of a lotus flower, an aquatic plant whose beautiful pink-and-white petals hide long, thick roots growing in the mud.

Pintscher, a world-traveling conductor, talks over the phone from his home in New York. He speaks quickly, eagerly, barely waiting for a question to be asked.

Mendelssohn, whose music is mostly “lighter, clearer,” says Pintscher, “dares to take a detour” with his “Scottish” symphony. Pintscher refers to the symphony’s “sophisticated complexity of expression,” a quality that he hears in few other Mendelssohn works. This complexity comes from the subtle use of the lower voices, particularly the violas.

“Darkness is something I’m personally attached to,” says Pintscher. A renowned composer in his own right, Pintscher writes music that “has this awareness of the ‘human aspect’ of music. It has complexity, which, like mankind, is not straightforward.”

The end of Mendelssohn’s “Scottish” symphony strikes Pintscher as “odd.” This chorale, or hymn, “is a question mark,” rather than a conclusion that provides certainty, celebration. It is “waving farewell,” and can even be heard as “a *tombeau*,” a sort of funeral music.

Pintscher recalls the experience of seeing the handwritten manuscript of Mendelssohn’s teenaged Octet, a more pristine, even “perfect” work. “Everything is in ink, immaculately notated. It is so accurate and so conscious about the shape. There are no corrections, no scribbling.”

The other works on this program are by Russian composers, “but they don’t sound very Russian to me,” says Pintscher. The Rachmaninoff has “such velvety colors,” while Scriabin’s Piano Concerto is “the most French, Parisian-sounding score ever composed. If you were not to know who wrote the piece, you would fail to identify the composer as Russian.”

Scriabin’s concerto is an underrated work, says Pintscher. “It has one of the most haunting, beautiful slow movements conceived at that time,” with such “complexity of chromatic colors.” He and soloist Kirill Gerstein, regular collaborators, have long been fascinated by the piece. “We kept saying, ‘We should do *that* piece together.’”

Pintscher looks forward to Gerstein bringing “wonderful clarity and sophistication” to the work. In a work like the Scriabin concerto, he says, it is important not to overthink any interpretation. Better “to lean back a little bit, to not be too troubled to *transform* it into something.”



SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born April 1, 1873, Starorussky Uyezd, Russia

Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California

The Isle of the Dead, op. 29

Rachmaninoff was drawn to darkness. He suffered occasionally from depression and shared Russian artists' tendency towards melancholy. A recent opera has been set in Dante's second circle of hell; another told of a miserable knight who foolishly chooses riches over love.

At the time he wrote *The Isle of the Dead*, the 35-year-old Rachmaninoff was living his best creative life. On reprieve from overwhelming performing duties, he was free for several years to write whatever his heart desired. And when he saw a black-and-white print of Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin's painting *The Isle of the Dead*, he was seized by inspiration.

In this large oil painting, a tiny, imposing island juts from still waters on a grey day. The only movement appears to come from a small rowboat, moving steadily towards the island. A tall, white figure stands on the small boat. Before him lies a coffin.

Rachmaninoff's music seems to emerge as if from the mist. Only gradually do we detect its strange pulse, a quiet slap, followed by ripples. *Pa-ba, Pa-ba-ba, Pa-ba, Pa-ba-ba*. A soft, irregular heartbeat? Weakly drawn oars?

This great melodist writes no tunes to conjure Böcklin's bleak landscape. The music simply breathes slowly, in and out, while lonely instruments rise occasionally, single birds in a grey sky. Eventually, fierce climaxes usher in a strange funeral march, which brings the *Dies irae*, a Latin church chant of the dead.

Die Toteninsel became Böcklin's most famous painting. This dreamlike scene caught the imagination of a whole generation, becoming so famous that it was said that a print hung in every home in Berlin.



Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of the Dead* (third version, 1883)

But when he finally saw Böcklin's painting in a gallery, Rachmaninoff was disappointed by the brighter colors of the original. Having produced a musical masterpiece of exquisite greys, Rachmaninoff wrote, simply, "I prefer it in black and white."

First Performance May 1, 1909, Moscow, Rachmaninoff conducting

First SLSO Performance February 24, 1911, Max Zach conducting

Most Recent SLSO Performance October 23, 2011, Vasily Petrenko conducting

Scoring 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum and cymbals), harp, and strings

Performance Time approximately 20 minutes



ALEXANDER SCRIBIN

Born January 6, 1871, Moscow, Russia

Died April 27, 1915, Moscow, Russia

Piano Concerto in F-sharp minor, op. 20

Alexander Scriabin was searching. Freed from the shackles of school, he was on a hunt for his purpose, identity, beliefs.

His 1890s was filled with tours as a virtuoso pianist, with the composition of more than 70 piano works, with the close study of the literature of his native Russia, with his first love affair. Throughout, Scriabin was under extraordinary stress, close to psychological breakdown, debilitated by hand pain.

Amidst this torrent, the Piano Concerto came in a burst of inspiration. Scriabin was a miniaturist whose tiny piano works were, a contemporary wrote, as "short as a sparrow's beak or a bear's tail." But initial work on the concerto, his first work with orchestra, his first giant canvas, poured out of him in less than a week.

Confronting a large-scale work, Scriabin was cautious, carefully fitting his music into conventional, expected structures. Yet the solo piano manages to break free, seeming to improvise spontaneous thoughts, daydreaming over the orchestral fabric beneath.

Scriabin's grand young passion was the music of Chopin, and this concerto shares Chopin's inward-looking nature. Its restrained music allows few outbursts, holding its hand close, asking us as listeners to lean in, to observe closely.

Scriabin was soon to be drawn totally into a supernatural world of his own devising. His search for spiritual ecstasy culminated in *Mysterium*. This all-embracing-artwork, unfinished at the time of Scriabin's death, was to unite text, lights, dance, music, and smells, ending the world in blissful transcendence.

Glimpses of later philosophical beliefs appear in this early concerto. The slow movement is in the key of F-sharp major, which Scriabin associated with mysticism

and a bright blue color. Every facet of its reflective melody is explored in variations that sing, sparkle, mourn, and finally spin in a sort of dreamy dance.

Scriabin believed that humans could fly and tried to achieve *vzlyot* (“upsurge”) in music that reached beyond our physical realm. This concerto has heart-stopping moments, when our heart slows, the music lifts, and we might feel able to shed the heavy coat of the everyday world.

First Performance October 23, 1897, Moscow, Scriabin as soloist

First SLSO Performance this week

Scoring solo piano, 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings

Performance Time approximately 28 minutes



FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany

Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany

Symphony No. 3 in A minor, op. 56, “Scottish”

For ten years, Felix Mendelssohn was haunted. By a castle, a ruined chapel, a melody.

The 20-year-old was touring Europe. After busy months in London he took a walking tour in Scotland. He heard folksong, painted the highlands, and admired the Scottish national dress, with “long red beards, tartan plaids, bonnets and feathers and naked knees, and bagpipes in their hands.”

But one location fascinated him, *haunted* him, more than any other. Holyrood Palace was the home of Mary Queen of Scots during her tumultuous reign. It was at Holyrood that a pregnant Mary watched as David Rizzio, her attendant and lover, was stabbed 56 times.

Mendelssohn was taken to the ruins of Holyrood Chapel. “Everything around is broken and moldering and the bright sky shines in.” A passionate and talented landscape painter, he found “the most music in pictures, ruins, and natural surroundings.”

Visiting the chapel, he jotted down ten bars of music. “I believe I have found the beginning of my ‘Scottish’ symphony,” he wrote. But then something odd happened: Mendelssohn set the work aside. At the time he breezily dismissed the decision, writing that he needed to turn away from his “misty Scotch mood.”

But Mendelssohn didn’t complete his symphony the following year. Or the year after that. In fact, it took Mendelssohn more than a decade to return to his mind’s Holyrood Chapel.

When he did, his inner landscape painter came out. The symphony’s movements run without a break, cutting cinematically between scenes: the storm-

tossed chapel of the first, a sunny country fair of the second, interrupted cathedral prayers of the third, and the finale's field of war.

Mendelssohn paints the orchestra in dusky tones. Right from the symphony's opening, "middle" instruments—violas, clarinets, bassoons, and French horns—darken the texture. At times he seems to rub the orchestra with his thumb, smudging charcoal to capture the smear of grey clouds, the haze of distant hills.

Mendelssohn, restrained in life and art, pushes at extremes here. The first agitated music is played as quietly as possible. (He chides players to play softly not once but twice.) But with stabbing accents the music suddenly overwhelms, surging and cresting with the orchestra's full force.

What kept Mendelssohn away from his "Scottish" symphony for so long? Was it the pressure of living up to the quality of such a fascinating landscape? Was it a fear of nightmares from the darkness of the stories from this place? Or was it simply a desire for distance, a need to let the qualities of this amazing place grow and shape in his head?

First Performance March 3, 1842, Leipzig, Mendelssohn conducting

First SLSO Performance December 6, 1912, Max Zach conducting

Most Recent SLSO Performance February 9, 2014, James Gaffigan conducting

Scoring 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings

Performance Time approximately 40 minutes



Louis Daguerre, The Ruins of Holyrood Chapel (1824)



Nikolai Zverev with his students, including Scriabin (second from left) and Rachmaninoff (fourth from left).

TWINNED TITANS

by Tim Munro

Two Russians stand side-by-side. One born in 1873, one born in 1872. One, Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff, is receiving the Moscow Conservatory's "Great Gold Medal," its highest honor. The other, Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin, is receiving the "Little Gold Medal."

Rachmaninoff's and Scriabin's lives were intertwined almost from the start. The two had similar upbringings, born into aristocratic homes, suffering tragic family deaths early in their lives. As teenagers, they became friends while under the tuition of Nikolai Zverev, a feared teacher who ran a cult-like piano studio.

They remained friends through their Moscow Conservatory studies, but later fell into different camps. Rachmaninoff was linked to the "Nationalists," Scriabin to the "Cosmopolitans." Rumors circulated of tension between the two pianists and composers, that Rachmaninoff had called Scriabin a "swine."

But much evidence exists of mutual respect. In a letter, Scriabin wrote that true Russian music is only to be found when Rachmaninoff plays his own piano works. And they reunited on the concert stage in a performance of Scriabin's Piano Concerto, with Scriabin as soloist and Rachmaninoff on the podium.

Later, after Scriabin's untimely early death, Rachmaninoff played the solo part in Scriabin's Piano Concerto at a tribute concert in New York. Afterwards, as a mark of respect, he refused to play anything but Scriabin's music in concert for several months.



MATTHIAS PINTSCHER

Matthias Pintscher is the Music Director of the Ensemble Intercontemporain, the world's leading contemporary music ensemble founded by Pierre Boulez. In addition to a robust concert season in Paris, he tours extensively with them throughout Europe, Asia, and the United States this season leading concerts in Berlin, Hamburg, and Zurich. Known equally as one of today's foremost composers, Pintscher will have two works premiered in the 2018/2019 season: *Nur*, a new concerto for piano and ensemble will be performed by Daniel Barenboim and the Boulez Ensemble conducted by the composer in January; and a new work for baritone, chorus, and orchestra will be performed by Dietrich Henschel and the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich conducted by maestro Kent Nagano in June.

Pintscher is the 18/19 Season Creative Chair for the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, the Artist-in-Residence at the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and finishes a nine-year term as the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra's Artist-in-Association. This season, Pintscher makes his debuts with the Rotterdam Philharmonic and the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin, where he conducts the world premiere of *Violetter Schnee*, a new opera by Beat Furrer. Return guest engagements include the symphony orchestras of Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, the New York Philharmonic, as well as the New World Symphony in Miami. In Europe, having begun the season conducting the Scottish Chamber Orchestra at the Edinburgh International Festival, Pintscher also returns to the Orchestre de Paris, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, and Helsinki Philharmonic.



KIRILL GERSTEIN

Pianist Kirill Gerstein's curiosity and versatility has led to a powerful engagement with a wide range of repertoire and styles. From Bach to Adès, his playing is distinguished by its clarity of expression, discerning intelligence and virtuosity. Gerstein's energetic and imaginative musical personality has rapidly taken him to the top of his profession.

An American citizen based in Berlin, Gerstein balances his career between the US and Europe. Highlights of his 2018/2019 season in North America include re-engagements with the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras, as well as with the Toronto, Atlanta, Detroit and Cincinnati symphonies, and a tour with the Czech Philharmonic in California. His summer festival appearances include his debut at the Grand Teton Festival and a return to Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival.

Gerstein is also a frequent guest with the Boston Symphony in 18/19. He is the Koussevitzky Resident at Tanglewood this summer and appears four different times throughout the summer, performing Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2 with the BSO; Thomas Adès' piano concerto *In Seven Days* with the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra with Adès on the podium; a two-piano recital with Mr. Adès at Ozawa Hall; and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with the Boston Pops during the Tanglewood on Parade festivities. During the season, he premieres Mr. Adès' second piano concerto, which was commissioned for him by the Boston Symphony, at both Symphony Hall in Boston and in Carnegie Hall in New York and plays two-piano recitals with Mr. Adès in Boston and at Zankel Hall at Carnegie.



SYMPHONY VOLUNTEER ASSOCIATION

BECKY BROWN

**Tours of Powell Hall are given by members of the Symphony Volunteer Association.
What's your role in the SVA?**

Since December 2017, I have been serving as the Group Leader for the Powell Hall Tours group. We now have 35 experienced and in-training guides. I coordinate and schedule the public tours with interested groups and then recruit our volunteers to lead the tours. I also serve on the Advisory, Express the Music, Ambassadors, and One and Done committees.

Why did you join the SVA?

I had retired at an early age and had some “gentle” encouragement from friends Sandy and Ron Charles. (Sandy was President of the SVA at the time.) I had enjoyed attending SLSO concerts over the years and was excited about being involved with one of St. Louis's most prestigious cultural institutions. I was unaware of all the ways the SVA contributed to the orchestra, so I decided to join and get involved. Within a few years, I was chairing Gypsy Caravan and then became President of the SVA in 2011.

What about tours appealed to you?

Once my two-year term concluded as President, I was eager to get involved with the Powell Hall Tours group. Fellow SVA members told me how much fun it was. I enjoy meeting new people (especially SLSO supporters!) and sharing the history and spectacular beauty of Powell Hall with them.

What's your favorite fact to share about this building?

Many people are unaware that Powell Hall was originally the St. Louis Theatre, built in 1925, and was an important venue for watching vaudeville acts and later movies. I always like to ask participants if they can guess the last movie that played for an entire year before the transition to Powell Hall occurred. It was *The Sound of Music*! Isn't that fitting that the SLSO had Powell Hall as its home for more than 50 years?

What are the reactions at the end of the tour?

From young children to senior citizens, the reaction is virtually the same. There are so many lovely architectural gems to observe along the tour and everyone can appreciate the elegant details. Being on the stage is a special treat and our participants can then say they have made their debut on the Powell Hall stage.

For additional information on Powell Hall tours, email LauraD@slo.org or visit slo.org/publictours.

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Avoid traffic and parking before our Coffee Concerts. Hop aboard our SLSO Shuttle and enjoy a Q&A with a retired SLSO musician on the ride to Powell Hall. Shuttle tickets are \$15 per passenger, per concert. The motor coach departs the St. Louis County Library Headquarters (1640 S. Lindbergh Blvd) promptly at 9:15am and returns by 1:30pm. All passengers must have both a Shuttle and Coffee Concert ticket.

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