

Rockford Symphony Orchestra

Steven Larsen, Music Director

ComEd Classics Series

“Russian Reflections”

November 19, 2006

8:00 PM

Enrique Bátiz, guest conductor

Modeste Mussorgsky

*Hopak, from *The Fair at Sorochinsk**

Sergei Prokofiev

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16

Andantino – Allegretto

Scherzo: Vivace

Intermezzo: Allegro moderato

Finale: Allegro tempestoso

Yuja Wang, piano

INTERMISSION

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Overture, *The Russian Easter*, Op. 36

Igor Stravinsky

Suite from *The Firebird* (1945 revision)

Introduction

Prelude, Dance of the Firebird and Variations

Pantomime

Pas de deux

Pantomime II

Scherzo (Round Dance of the Princesses)

Rondo

Infernal Dance

Lullaby (Berceuse)

Final Hymn

This concert is graciously sponsored by Engman Taylor.

This concert will be broadcast by WNIU/105.7 on January 8, 2007.

Program Notes by Steve Larsen

Hopak, from *The Fair at Sorochinsk*

Modeste Petrovich Mussorgsky (b. Karesk, Russia, 1839; d. St. Petersburg, 1881)

Seldom does anyone notice that Mussorgsky lived only seven years longer than Mozart, whose premature death at age 35 is universally lamented. Mussorgsky was hardly a prodigy. Although he studied piano as a child, he rebelled against his teachers, and was put into a military academy at age ten. At age 17 he joined a Guards Regiment, where he indulged himself in hobbies of composing and heavy drinking. Perhaps the latter had something to do with the surprising originality of the former, but his innovations were not well received. He left the Guard to pursue a career as a composer; however, when he was 25 the government liberated the serfs, with the result that his family lost its landholdings.

Forced to take a menial clerical job, Mussorgsky drank more heavily, worsened by the negative reaction to his operas. He died of alcoholism in a military hospital.

His contemporaries viewed him as an inept, illiterate but brilliant dilettante who inevitably sabotaged good ideas with clumsy orchestration. However, future generations recognized him as a highly intellectual composer who forged a distinctive individual style. That style grew out of Mussorgsky's passion for replicating the distinctive rhythms and stresses of the Russian language, and thereby creating portraits of his homeland that transcended mere folk-song quotation.

The *Hopak* (or *Gopak*, in some transliterations) is a lively, traditional Ukrainian dance performed by men. Part of his comic opera *The Fair at Sorochinsk*, it was so popular that he had it published in a version for piano solo, which has remained an often-played part of the piano repertory.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16

Sergei Prokofiev (b. Sontsovka, Ukraine, 1891; d. Moscow, 1953)

Of Prokofiev's five piano concertos, the Second is the least frequently performed. Perhaps Prokofiev himself summed up the reason for its neglect when he described it to Stravinsky as being "full of splinters." Splinters? From the composer of *Peter and the Wolf* and the *Classical Symphony*?

But splinters, as well as an occasional torn fingernail and broken piano string, were an occupational hazard for the young Prokofiev. A child prodigy and a brilliant pianist who wrote his first opera at age nine and entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory at age 13, he quickly became known as a "futurist" who

sought to redefine the course of music. Rejecting romantic themes and notions, he favored the ironic, grotesque, primitive and barbaric. Not surprising, then, was Prokofiev's approach to the piano. Throughout the 19th century, artists sought to coax the sound of hammer-striking-string into lyrical poetry. Prokofiev's approach to the instrument stunned listeners. In his book, *The Great Pianists*, Harold Schonberg described Prokofiev as "the pianist of steel," who "attacked the music with a controlled fury, blasting out savage and complicated rhythms, giving or asking no mercy. . . . Prokofiev decided that the piano was a percussive instrument, and there's no use trying to disguise the fact that it had hammers. So let's face up to it and treat the piano as a percussive instrument."

Prokofiev and his Second Concerto were both hissed and booed at the 1913 premiere. Responding totally in character, the 22-year-old composer/soloist treated them to an encore that was even more dissonant, percussive and bombastic. If, however, after hearing the concerto you wonder what the fuss was all about, the answer may possibly be found ten years later, when Prokofiev "revised" the work for publication after the original was destroyed in a fire. He claimed there were only minor changes, but others believe that its sharper edges may have been smoothed a bit by its author – still haughtily self-assured, but a decade older, wiser and more experienced.

The concerto breaks ground by its assertion of the soloist's supremacy, pushing the orchestra into the background. Its first movement is the most complex and lyrical, while the second, a Scherzo, is a motor-driven *modo perpetuo* in which the soloist never stops. The third relaxes, allowing the pianist to provocatively "thumb her nose" in Prokofiev's characteristic "wrong-note" style. The Finale is a dazzling *tour de force* showcase in which the orchestra frequently steps aside as the pianist unleashes thundering pyrotechnical displays.

Overture, *The Russian Easter*, op. 36

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (b. Tikhvin, Russia, 1844; d. St. Petersburg, 1908)

It is ironic that Rimsky-Korsakov, a career naval officer whose musical skills were self-taught, should have become the most respected figure in Russian music by the end of the 19th century. He entered the Russian Naval College at age 12, where he took up the piano as a hobby, and in his late teens began dabbling in composition. After three years duty, the 21 year-old sailor took a leave in order to more seriously pursue music. To his astonishment, he was appointed professor of composition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory at age 27. His pupils included Prokofiev and Stravinsky.

The years 1887 and 1888 produced three of his greatest works: *Capriccio espagnol*, *Scheherazade*, and *Russian Easter Overture*. The first two travel far for their inspiration (Spain and the *1001 Arabian Nights*), but as may be inferred from its title, *Russian Easter* is homespun. Easter, in Russia, is more than the holiest day of Orthodox Church year; over centuries it assimilated pagan festivities celebrating the arrival of Spring after the long, dark winter, and is therefore a doubly joyous occasion.

Easter celebrations left an indelible impression on him. Tikhvin was the location of a famous Russian Orthodox monastery, and years later he vividly recalled pealing of the monastery bells, the solemn chants of the priests and choir and the folk traditions of his village. In his autobiography, he eagerly explained the liturgical hymns included in the overture, as well as his attempts to recreate the joy of the people as they celebrated the risen Christ, both as Savior and symbol of Spring's rebirth from the tomb of winter.

Suite from the ballet, *The Firebird (L'oiseau de feu)*, 1945 revision
Igor Stravinsky (b. Oranienbaum, Russia, 1882; d. New York, 1971)

Literally, it can be said that Igor Stravinsky's illustrious career was launched with "fireworks." In 1908, the daughter of his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov, was married, and in honor of the occasion Stravinsky wrote an orchestral fantasy he called *Feu d'artifice*, or *Fireworks*. In it he proudly displayed the dazzling orchestration techniques he had learned under Rimsky-Korsakov's tutelage. Its debut the next February met with a chilly reception, but caught the attention of Sergei Diaghilev, the choreographer who was then forming his Ballet Russes, who commissioned Stravinsky to orchestrate some short pieces by Chopin and Grieg for the inaugural season.

Diaghilev then wanted to create a substantial ballet based on Russian legend and fantasy. Looking to the established "masters," he first asked Nicolai Tcherepnin, then Anton Liadov. The first showed no interest, the second procrastinated. Remembering Stravinsky's eagerness and promptness, he turned to him. By the time Diaghilev persuaded Liadov to give up the project, Stravinsky had already been composing *The Firebird* for a month!

The 1910 premiere was a stunning success. Stravinsky's score, telling a story based on Russian folklore, glowed with brilliant orchestral effects and harmonies that brought its fairy-tale aura to vivid life. Diaghilev predicted a brilliant future for the 28 year-old composer; even Stravinsky, not usually given to understatement, wrote that "it radically altered my life."

The work's success prompted Stravinsky to create a suite of music from the ballet in 1919, and he would go on to personally conduct the various forms of the work nearly a thousand times. One of its themes even found its way into a 1946 maudlin foxtrot called "Summer Moon." Perhaps the greatest anecdote attesting to its popularity was Stravinsky's recollection that a man in a railroad dining car addressed him in all seriousness as "Mr. Fireberg."

In the story, Prince Ivan chases after the Firebird, and wanders into the garden of an ogre, the Immortal Kastchei. This evil creature captures maidens and turns men into stone. His immortality has a catch: he will die if an egg that contains his soul is broken. The Prince captures the Firebird, and receives a magic feather in return for releasing it. Ivan then meets a group of Kastchei's captive maidens and falls in love with one of them. When the women return to Kastchei's palace, Ivan breaks open the gates to follow them, but he is captured by the ogre's guardian monsters. In his direst moment, Ivan waves the magic feather; the

Firebird appears, smashes Kastchei's egg, and the ogre dies. All of the captives are instantly freed, and Ivan and his chosen princess are wed.

Stravinsky moved to France, becoming a citizen there in 1934, but the ominous events of 1939 sent him to the United States, where he became a citizen in 1945. Always a savvy businessman, Stravinsky revised many of his most successful works in the 1940s as their copyrights were running out. The 1945 revision, performed here, adds some music lacking in the earlier suite, corrects many mistakes and clarifies some details.

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