

Thursday, July 15, 2010

Cuesta College

Chamber 1

Trio élégiaque No. 2 in D minor, op. 9 (1893)

Serge Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Moderato

Quasi variazione

Allegro risoluto

Suite No. 2 for Two Pianos in C major, op. 17 (1900–1901)

Rachmaninoff

Introduction: Alla marcia

Waltz

Romance

Tarantella

Variations on a Theme by Paganini (1941)

Witold Lutosławski (1913–1994)

Serge Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)—*Trio élégiaque No. 2 in D minor*, op. 9 (1893)

The twenty-year-old Serge Rachmaninoff must have felt on top of the world: he had been named to the Moscow Conservatory's Roll of Honor *and* had been awarded the Great Gold Medal (being only the third student to receive that prize); he had already signed a publishing contract; and new music was almost pouring out of him. In September 1893, he attended a gathering in Moscow with other musicians to get a “sneak preview” of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, the famous *Pathétique*, which was to have its public premiere in St. Petersburg the next month. Before the evening ended, Rachmaninoff was able to present a keyboard version of his own new tone poem, *The Rock*—and he was enormously flattered by Tchaikovsky's reaction: the older composer asked if he might include *The Rock* on an upcoming concert tour.

Scarcely a month later, Rachmaninoff got shocking news: just days after the *Pathétique*'s premiere, Tchaikovsky had succumbed to a cholera epidemic. Rachmaninoff had missed the premiere because he had been conducting his new opera *Aleko* in Kiev—an opera that had already enjoyed a prestigious Bolshoi performance, thanks in part to Tchaikovsky's support. Almost beside himself with grief, Rachmaninoff sat down that very evening and started work on a memorial piece—the *Trio élégiaque No. 2*.

Tchaikovsky cast his shadow over the trio in several ways. Scarcely a decade earlier, Tchaikovsky had written a memorial trio himself (for Nikolai Rubinstein). His second movement was a set of variations, and Rachmaninoff followed that same approach. Moreover, both works carried the same dedication: “To the Memory of a Great Man.” Nevertheless, the later trio is very much a product of Rachmaninoff, with its demanding, virtuosic piano part and its harsh, powerful outpouring of grief.

Rachmaninoff—*Suite No. 2 for Two Pianos in C major, op. 17 (1900–1901)*

In the years following Tchaikovsky's death, Rachmaninoff tackled the challenge that has intimidated nearly every composer since Beethoven's time: his first symphony. It was gratifying that his piece would be presented in March 1897 at one of the prestigious "Russian Symphony Concerts"—but the work failed miserably. One colleague described it as "a program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt." After this debacle, Rachmaninoff was understandably downcast, but with the help of encouraging friends and family, plus restorative visits with Dr. Nikolai Dahl (a hypnotherapist), Rachmaninoff gradually picked up his pen once more. Among his first products was *Suite No. 2 for Two Pianos*.

One of Rachmaninoff's other works from this time was his second piano concerto, and perhaps that orchestral work influenced *Suite No. 2*, which has a symphonic sweep of its own. The suite is in four movements, like most symphonies, whereas many chamber works employ only three movements. Rachmaninoff also has a harmonic surprise in store. Many listeners know that certain works in the minor mode—such as Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*—conclude in the more upbeat major mode. In *Suite No. 2*, however, Rachmaninoff turns that expectation on its head: the opening movement is in C major, and after excursions to G major for the energetic "Waltz" and the more distant key of A-flat major for the graceful "Romance," Rachmaninoff takes us to C *minor* for the concluding wild "Tarantella"—and he stays in minor at the end, rather than returning us to the major key in which we started.

Witold Lutosławski (1913–1994)—*Variations on a Theme by Paganini (1941)*

For Witold Lutosławski, music was a rare stable element in an uncertain world. His activist father Józef had moved his family from Warsaw to Moscow, but when the Bolsheviks gained power in 1917, Józef was arrested and executed by firing squad. Józef's widow Maria took her young sons back to Poland, where—despite the devastations wreaked upon their family fortune—she arranged for six-year-old Witold to begin piano lessons. By age nine, he began to compose; he eventually earned degrees in both piano and composition from the Warsaw Conservatory. He was planning to study in Paris with the internationally regarded Nadia Boulanger, but he was mobilized into military service in 1939. After capture by the Germans, he managed to escape, making his way (on foot) 400 kilometers to Warsaw. The city was under martial law, and the Nazis had forbidden public performances, but Lutosławski and his fellow pianist Andrzej Panufnik found a solution: they made a living playing piano duos in Warsaw cafés.

Since repertory for two pianos was hard to come by, Panufnik and Lutosławski arranged some 200 pre-existing works themselves; one of Lutosławski's transcriptions was the *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*. He called it a "paraphrase," not only of Paganini's 24th Caprice for Violin, but also an adaptation of Paganini's own variations. Lutosławski applied pianistic techniques to substitute for various violin features; he told an interviewer, "It was very fun to write." Fortunately, it was one of the few pieces Lutosławski was able to rescue as he fled Warsaw in 1944.