

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
RACHMANINOFF AND BEETHOVEN  
A Jacobs Masterworks Concert  
Cristian Măcelaru, conductor**

May 24, 25 and 26, 2019

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**      **Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18**  
Moderato  
Adagio sostenuto  
Allegro scherzando  
Simon Trpčeski, piano

INTERMISSION

**SEAN SHEPHERD**      *Melt*

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**      **Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93**  
Allegro vivace con brio  
Allegretto scherzando  
Tempo di menuetto  
Allegro vivace

## **Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18**

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born April 1, 1873, Oneg, Novgorod

Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills

Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto may be the best-loved piano concerto on the planet, but it almost did not get written, and the tale of its creation is one of the most remarkable in all of music. Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892 with its highest award, the gold medal, and quickly embarked on a career as a touring pianist. But he wanted to compose. He had written a piano concerto while still a conservatory student, and early in 1895 the 21-year-old composer took on the most challenging of orchestral compositions, a symphony. The premiere of that symphony, on March 27, 1897, was a catastrophe. Conductor Alexander Glazunov was unprepared (some said drunk), the orchestra played badly, and young Rachmaninoff saw the disaster coming. Unwilling to enter the hall, he sat hunched in a stairwell of the auditorium with his fists clenched against the sides of his head. Inside, it was as bad as he feared: audience and critics alike hated the music; César Cui describing it as a "program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt ... [music that would give] acute delight to the inhabitants of Hell." What should have been a moment of triumph for the young composer instead brought humiliation.

Rachmaninoff may have been a powerful performer, but he was a vulnerable personality, and the disaster of the premiere plunged him into a deep depression. His first act was to destroy the score to the symphony. It was never performed again during his lifetime, though after his death it was reassembled from the orchestral parts. (Painful irony – his First Symphony is now admired as one of the finest works of his youth.) But in the aftermath of the fiasco of its premiere, Rachmaninoff lost confidence in himself – for the next three years he wrote no music at all.

Alarmed, the composer's family and friends arranged for him to see Dr. Nicholas Dahl, an internal medicine specialist who sometimes treated patients through hypnosis. Dahl was also an extremely cultured man – he was an amateur cellist – and Rachmaninoff's friends were hopeful that contact with such a man would improve the composer's spirits. During a lengthy series of visits, the composer heard a steady message of encouragement from the doctor: "You will begin to write your concerto ... You will work with great facility ... The concerto will be of excellent quality." To the composer's astonishment, Dahl's treatment worked. He later said: "Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me. By the beginning of summer I again began to compose. The material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me – more than enough for my concerto." With the

dam broken, new music rushed out of the rejuvenated composer. Across the summer and fall of 1900, Rachmaninoff composed what became the second and third movements of his Second Piano Concerto. These were performed successfully that December, and Rachmaninoff composed the opening movement the following spring. The first performance of the complete concerto, in Moscow on November 9, 1901, was a triumph. Not surprisingly, Rachmaninoff dedicated the concerto to Dr. Dahl.

The very beginning of the concerto seems so “right” that it is hard to believe that this movement was written last. Throughout his life Rachmaninoff loved the sound of Russian church bells. He once noted: “The sound of church bells dominated all the cities of Russia I used to know – Novgorod, Kiev, Moscow. They accompanied every Russian from childhood to the grave, and no composer could escape their influence ... All my life I have taken pleasure in the differing moods and music of gladly chiming or mournfully tolling bells...” Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto begins with the sound of those bells, as – all alone – the solo piano echoes their tolling. Into that swirling sound, the orchestra stamps out the impassioned main theme, one of those powerful Slavic melodies that instantly haunts the mind; the solo piano has the yearning second subject. This music demands a pianist of extraordinary ability (this is one of the most difficult concertos in the literature), and Rachmaninoff writes with imagination throughout this movement: the orchestra reprises the main theme beneath the soloist’s dancing chordal accompaniment, while the solo horn recalls the second subject in a haunting passage marked *dolce*.

A soft chorale for muted strings introduces the *Adagio sostenuto*, but – in a wonderful touch – the solo flute sings the main theme as the pianist accompanies. The theme is repeated, first by the clarinet and then the strings, growing more elaborate as it proceeds, and only then is the piano allowed to take the lead. A brief but spectacular cadenza leads to a recall of the tolling bells from the very beginning and a quiet close. The *Allegro scherzando* begins quietly as well, but this march-like opening is full of suppressed rhythmic energy. Rachmaninoff makes effective contrast between the orchestra’s opening – powerful but controlled with an almost military precision – and the piano’s entrance, which explodes with an extraordinary wildness. The second theme, broadly sung by the violas, has become one of those Big Tunes for which Rachmaninoff was famous. Unfortunately, this wonderful melody would become an inspiration for countless Hollywood composers and – many years later – it was used to set the words “Full moon and empty arms.” If one can escape those associations and listen with fresh ears, this remains lovely music, a reminder of Rachmaninoff’s considerable melodic gift. The concerto rushes to its conclusion on a no-holds-barred coda (another Rachmaninoff specialty) that resounds in every measure with the young composer’s recently-restored health.

## *Melt*

SEAN SHEPHERD

Born July 1, 1979, Reno, NV

### *A program note from the composer:*

It is rarely simple to speak to questions of “how” and “why” regarding the music one writes, but the impetus behind *Melt* is one I can describe with relative ease. The places – Jackson Hole and Santa Cruz – in which *Melt* was first performed are both very special to me, and while I’ve written pieces that are a response of one kind or another to various places, this piece, this response, and in the end, this message, is different.

Glaciers are profoundly elemental to the development of the landscapes of Northern California and Western Wyoming; it need not be said to any native. And it’s one of the most obvious signs for any visitor that the mountains that they’ve carved like the most noble of sculptures are no mere hills. The great naturalist John Muir was the first to point this geological reality out, to initial derision from scientists of his day, and the great surveyor of Yellowstone, Ferdinand V. Hayden, began taking steps to protect the area immediately upon seeing it. And while 11 glaciers (ice that never fully melts with the changing seasons, usually in alpine or arctic climates) still currently exist in Grand Teton National Park, the vast changes that have already occurred within just a few lifetimes means that, in places like California and Wyoming, the mighty ice-scoop of nature will *for certain* go The Way of the Dodo.

*Melt* is, plainly and simply, a lament, from no more than a powerless bystander. The tempo indications in this single slow movement are marked “Frozen,” “Drowning,” “Liquid” and “Final,” and may or may not be taken literally. As a result, the piece might be heard as program music – a musical melting, chaos, and reformation in an altered state – or, in purely emotional terms: an exploration of feelings about these lands I have known my whole life. I myself have found my agony over ice turning to water in itself a kind of personal surprise, but when I think of the glacially slow tragedy unfolding before our eyes, all I can do is put my head down and cry.

*Melt* is dedicated to my friend Cristi Măcelaru, who gave the West Coast premiere with at the Cabrillo Festival on August 11, 2018. Donald Runnicles and the Grand Teton Music Festival presented the world premiere on July 27, 2018. I am grateful to both of these organizations for jointly inviting me to expound on a topic (in every way) so near to me.

## **Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93**

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

The Eighth has always seemed out of place in the progression of Beethoven's symphonies. It comes after the dramatic Fifth, expansive Sixth and powerful Seventh, and it precedes the grand Ninth. Within this sequence, the Eighth seems all wrong: it is (relatively) brief, relaxed, and – in form and its use of a small orchestra – apparently a conscious throwback to the manner of Haydn and Mozart. But the unexpectedness of the Eighth Symphony is also the source of its charm. Two things in particular mark this music: its energy (it has no slow movement) and its humor. The Eighth Symphony is one of those very rare things: a genuinely funny piece of music, full of high spirits, what (at first) seem wrong notes, unusual instrumental sounds and sly jokes. Beethoven wrote the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies at exactly the same time – in 1812 – and the Seventh Symphony has universally been judged one of the Beethoven's greatest creations. The composer, though, became angry when early audiences showered that work with praise – he felt the *Eighth* was the better symphony.

The *Allegro vivace* explodes to life with a six-note figure stamped out by the whole orchestra – this figure will give rhythmic impulse to the opening movement and function as its central melodic idea. A second subject – flowing, elegant and waltz-like – quickly arrives in the violins. What distinguishes this movement is its incredible energy – this music seems always to be pressing forward, sometimes spilling over itself with scarcely-restrained power, sometimes erupting violently. At the very end, the pace slows, things grow quiet, and matters conclude gracefully with the opening figure, now heard very softly in the strings. Even when quiet, that figure feels full of coiled energy.

The aptly-named *Allegretto scherzando* brings some of the symphony's best humor. Beethoven's friend Johann Nepomuk Maelzel had invented a metronome, and the woodwinds' steady *tick-tick-tick* at the beginning is Beethoven's rendering of the metronome's sound. Over this mechanical ticking, the violins dance happily until the music explodes in a shower of 64th-notes; some have felt that here Beethoven shows us the metronome – wound too tight – suddenly blowing its spring and flying to pieces. These catastrophes occur throughout the movement, and the loudest brings it to a close.

The *Tempo di minuetto* seems at first very much in the manner of the third movement of a Haydn or Mozart symphony, rather than the scherzo we have come to expect from Beethoven in such a position. Once again Beethoven delights in the unexpected: the outer sections of this “minuet” feature stirring fanfares from brass and timpani (try dancing to *this* minuet!), while the trio section brings a moment of unexpected beauty. Scored at first for just two horns, clarinet, and accompanying cellos, the

trio seems like some nocturne from deep within the forest. Over murmuring lower strings, the two horns sing their haunting song (Beethoven marks it *dolce*) and the clarinet quickly takes up their theme and makes it sing in new ways.

The blistering *Allegro vivace* finale is full of jokes. Racing violins present the main idea – built on both triple and duple rhythms – and this opening section zips to what should be a moment of repose on the strings' unison C, the expected dominant – but instantly Beethoven slams that C aside with a crashing C-sharp, and the symphony heads off in the “wrong” key. The jokes come so quickly in this movement that many of them pass unnoticed: the “wrong” notes, the “oom-pah” transitions scored for just timpani and bassoon, and so forth. The very ending brings the best joke of all, for the coda almost refuses to quit. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony had concluded with a coda that seemed stretched beyond reason, but in his Eighth Symphony he delays the final cadence to the point where one wonders if this symphony will *ever* end. It eventually does, and with massive chords for full orchestra Beethoven at last wrenches this most good-natured and energetic music to a resounding close.

**-Program notes by Eric Bromberger**

**PERFORMANCE HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist**

*Melt* by Sean Shepherd is being given its first San Diego hearing at these concerts. The very famous and popular Rachmaninoff Second Piano Concerto has been given in San Diego 17 times, beginning with Robert Shaw's conducting and George Sementovsky's playing the piece in the summer season of 1957. Lang Lang soloed in the work when Jahja Ling took the SDSO to Carnegie Hall for their debut and then to China on a tour, all in Fall of 2013. Most recently, Joyce Yang performed the work with the orchestra under the baton of Johannes Debus in the 2016-17 season.

Earl Bernard Murray led the SDSO's first presentation of the Beethoven Eighth Symphony during the 1961-62 season. Jahja Ling led the orchestra's most recent outing of the work during the 2009-10 season, its sixth presentation here.