SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
“SIBELIUS & RACHMANINOFF”
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT
Eun Sun Kim, conductor

February 28 and 29, 2020

TEXU KIM

Spin-Flip

JEAN SIBELIUS

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47
Allegro moderato
Adagio di molto
Allegro; ma non tanto
Nancy Zhou, violin

INTERMISSION

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 44
Lento; Allegro moderato
Adagio ma non troppo
Allegro
Spin-Flip
TEXU KIM
Born 1980, Seoul

Texu Kim had his early training at Seoul National University, then came to the United States for graduate work: he studied with Unsuk Chin and David Dzubay and received his Doctor of Music from Indiana University. Kim taught at Portland State University and Lewis and Clark College, and he currently teaches at Syracuse University’s Setnor School of Music. Kim was composer-in-residence with the Korean Symphony Orchestra from 2014 until 2018, and his music has been performed by the Minnesota Orchestra, Seoul Philharmonic, National Orchestra of Korea, Ensemble Intercontemporain, New York Classical Players, the Verona Quartet and many others.

Kim has said that when he composes, he likes to take “ideas from my ordinary life,” and Spin-Flip is a perfect example of this. It was premiered on April 1, 2015, in Seoul by the Korean Symphony Orchestra under Hung-Juong Lim. The composer has provided a program note:

The proton and the electron in a hydrogen atom spin permanently with having their rotation axis parallel to each other. That being said, they could rotate in the same direction (clockwise-clockwise, for example) or the other way. When the directional relationship changes due to absorption or emission of a certain type of energy, it is called Spin-Flip. The same term could also mean a sudden change of a rotating Black Hole’s spin axis, mostly when it merges with another one. Regardless its use in physics, I titled my piece Spin-Flip, simply because of the image it gives: of table tennis, with spin serve and flip shot being ping-pong techniques.

I happened to share my name (spelled differently in English) with a legendary Korean table tennis player, Taek-soo Kim (b.1970), who coached the Korean National Team of table tennis. For this reason, when meeting new people in Korea, I am often asked if I am good at table tennis. Though the answer is “No,” this silly coincidence has led me to write a musical piece about it.

Spin-Flip is an eight-minute overture which is all about Ping-Pong: it conveys the driving energy of a (good) Ping-Pong match; its primary motives are derived from the sound of a cheering crowd and balls bouncing around on the table (and occasionally on the floor); its alternating harmonic pattern and somewhat random form reflect the
alternation of service and unpredictable result, respectively.

Sometimes academic terms that are hard to explain, are easily understood by intuition. Wouldn’t it be true for music, too? I only hope that I can share the sheer fun I have with the audience through this piece.

-Texu Kim

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47
JEAN SIBELIUS
Born December 8, 1865, Tavastehus, Finland
Died September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland

Sibelius composed his Violin Concerto – his only concerto – in 1903, between his Second and Third Symphonies. This was a time of transition for the 38-year-old composer, who was moving away from an early romantic style influenced by Tchaikovsky and toward a leaner, more concise language. Sibelius was dissatisfied when he heard the concerto premiered in Helsinki in 1904 by Viktor Novácek, and he revised it completely. The final version was first performed in Berlin on October 19, 1905, with Karl Halir as soloist and Richard Strauss conducting.

It is difficult to characterize this haunting music. The second movement may sing gracefully and the finale is full of energy, but the prevailing impression the concerto makes is of an icy brilliance, a craggy strength. Sibelius’ orchestral sonority emphasizes the darker lower voices – cellos, violas and bassoons – so that the violin, which often plays high in its range, sounds even more brilliant by contrast. Sibelius himself was a violinist who had hoped to make a career as a soloist before he (fortunately) gave up that dream and turned to composition, and he fills the solo part with complex technical hurdles. Long passages played in octaves, great leaps, sustained writing in the violin’s highest register, and such knotty problems as trilling on one string while simultaneously playing a melodic line on another make this one of the most difficult of all violin concertos.

The Allegro moderato opens with a quiet mist of string sound, and over this the solo violin presents the long, rhapsodic main theme: singing, dark, surging. Certain features of this theme – a triplet tag and a pattern of three descending notes – will assume important thematic functions as the movement develops. The originality of this movement appears in many ways.
There are three main theme-groups instead of the expected two, but before we get to the second, Sibelius defies all expectations by giving the soloist a brief cadenza. The sober and steady second subject arrives in the dark sound of bassoons and cellos, while the vigorous third is stamped out by the violin sections. And then, another surprise: Sibelius presents the main cadenza – long and phenomenally difficult – before the development begins. After this lengthy and unusual exposition, the development and recapitulation are truncated, and the ending is abrupt: Sibelius drives with unremitting energy to the close, where the solo violin catapults to the top of its range as the orchestra seals off the cadence with fierce attacks.

Woodwind duets introduce the second movement before the violin enters with the intense main theme, played entirely on the G-string. This movement, in ternary form, rises to a climax and falls back to end quietly and gently. The tempo indication for the last movement – Allegro; ma non tanto (fast, but not too fast) – is crucial: timpani and low strings set the steady tread that marches along firmly throughout much of this movement. The violin’s vigorous dotted melody dominates this rondo, but even here the mood remains somber. This movement has been described in quite different ways. The English musicologist Donald Francis Tovey called it “a polonaise for polar bears,” while Sibelius is reported to have referred to it as a “danse macabre.” The concerto concludes as the violin climbs into its highest register and – with the entire orchestra – stamps out the concluding D.

Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 44
SERGE RACHMANINOFF
Born April 1, 1873, Semyonovo
Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills

In the spring of 1935 Rachmaninoff and his wife fled to Senar, the opulent villa they had constructed looking out over Lake Lucerne. Rachmaninoff was drained. He had just completed an exhausting concert tour that included recitals in Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Manchester, London, Zurich, Paris, Spain and many other places. Now he lamented: “In the future I must cut down the number of concerts or find some remedy against old age.” But the 62-year-old Rachmaninoff had other plans for that summer than just rest – he wanted to write a new symphony. Now, looking out at the serene beauty of Lake Lucerne, he set to work. But still there were interruptions: he suffered from arthritis, and his doctor sent him off for two weeks of what
the composer described as “pine-electrical baths.” Despite all this, he had the first two movements complete by the end of the summer. Then it was back to the grueling concert season: recitals in Paris, then on to the United States, where he played in Chicago, Minneapolis and New York, then back to Europe where he gave recitals in Poland, Vienna and London. Finally in the spring of 1936 he could escape to Senar, and there he completed the third and final movement of his Third Symphony. On June 30 he wrote to a friend: “Yesterday morning I finished my work of which you are the first to be informed. It is a symphony…With all my thoughts I thank God that I was able to do it!”

Leopold Stokowski led the premiere with the Philadelphia Orchestra on November 6, 1936, and the symphony was widely performed in the United States and Europe. The reaction, however, was not what the composer had hoped. He described it: “Both audiences and critics responded sourly. Personally, I’m firmly convinced that this is a good work. But – sometimes the author is wrong, too! However, I maintain my opinion.” The Third Symphony has always been the dark swan among Rachmaninoff’s major works, but it has had many enthusiastic champions, including such conductors as Stokowski (who recorded it in 1975 at age 93), Koussevitzky, Ormandy, Previn, Ashkenazy, Slatkin, Zinman, Gergiev and many more.

The vast majority of Rachmaninoff’s works were composed before he was 45. These include his most popular works: the Second and Third Piano Concertos, his Second Symphony, and almost all his solo piano music. But when Rachmaninoff fled Russia in 1917 to escape the Communist Revolution, he lost everything, and he spent the next decade recovering his fortune by playing the piano. Between 1917 and 1926 Rachmaninoff composed nothing, and over the remaining 17 years of his life he composed only six more pieces. These late pieces are quite different from the popular early works, with their big tunes and dramatic rhetoric. In his later years, Rachmaninoff wrote a much different sort of music: leaner in sonority, more focused in construction, and not so dependent on the great soaring melody.

Rachmaninoff’s late music is also more concerned with subtle instrumental color, and we sense that from the first instant of his Third Symphony. With a huge orchestra onstage, he begins with just four instruments, all playing *pianissimo*: clarinet, two muted horns, and muted cello. Their quiet introductory chant will return at moments in the symphony that follows but now they give way to a great rip for that full orchestra as the *Allegro moderato* bursts to life. The movement is built on two themes: a lean woodwind chorale and a big soaring cello melody. This
is dramatic music, full of excitement and color, and after all its energy, the opening chant returns to draw the movement to its subdued conclusion. The central Adagio ma non troppo is in ternary form, and it functions as both slow movement and scherzo. Once again, Rachmaninoff surprises us with his scoring: the opening belongs to just two instruments – horn and harp, soon joined by solo violin; only gradually does the rest of the orchestra join them. Rachmaninoff places the symphony’s scherzo in the middle of this slow movement: the music leaps ahead at the Allegro vivace, which features some brilliant writing for the trumpets, and the movement winds down on a brief return of its opening material. Out of this calm, the finale explodes. This is a high-energy movement, and at its center comes a blistering fugato introduced by the strings. Calmer episodes intrude on all this activity, but the music’s seething energy always manages to break free, and an Allegro vivace coda hurtles the Third Symphony to its sudden, violent conclusion.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

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

The music of Texu Kim has never before been played or heard at these concerts. In contrast, the Sibelius Violin Concerto has been heard at these concerts ten times since it was initially performed here by Ruggiero Ricci, under the direction of Earl Bernard Murray, in the 1961-62 season. (Incidentally, that was the initial season of the San Diego Symphony's playing winter season concerts – prior to that, this had been a mostly summer orchestra only.) Most recently, Karen Gomyo played it under guest conductor Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla’s direction during the 2015-16 season.

Long overshadowed by the composer's great Second Symphony, Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony is often overlooked by program planners. It has, in fact, been played by the San Diego Symphony on only one previous program, during the 1989-90 season, with Jansug Kakhidze conducting. In cooperation with the San Diego Opera, that distinguished Russian/Georgian conductor came to San Diego to conduct a pair of Symphony programs (one featuring this Rachmaninoff work) and also a San Diego Opera production of *Boris Godunov*. 