1865

Wagner

***Tristan and Isolde* – Prelude and Liebestod**

MUSIC
Dvořák
Symphony No.2

ART
Manet
The Mocking of Christ

LITERATURE
Carroll
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

HISTORY
Assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

1898

Suk

A Fairy Tale

MUSIC
Fauré
Pelléas et Mélisande

ART
Renoir
Yvonne and Christine Lerolle at the Piano

LITERATURE
Wells
The War of the Worlds

HISTORY
The United States captures Guam, making it the first U.S. overseas territory.

1901

Rachmaninoff

Piano Concerto No. 2

MUSIC
Elgar
Pomp and Circumstance Marches

ART
Klimt
Judith I

LITERATURE
Strindberg
A Dream Play

HISTORY
The Commonwealth of Australia is established.

ROMANTIC RACHMANINOFF

To celebrate Valentine's Day, Maestro Reinhardt has asked her good friend and colleague, Alessio Bax for help in presenting some of the most daringly romantic and sumptuous music ever written. Together, they have frequently appeared on stages from Dallas to Helsinki, and always with astounding results.

Tonight's program begins with a suite that follows the plight of a pair of star-crossed lovers, by a composer with a unique gift for conjuring up vivid images with his music, Josef Suk. While this name may be unfamiliar to you, it was quite familiar to his fellow composer and Czech compatriot, Antonín Dvořák, who described this piece as "music from heaven". Professional admiration aside, Dvořák was, in fact, both Suk's mentor and father-in-law, so their relationship was quite close, and it was from Dvořák that Suk inherited a particular gift for orchestral color – a gift on full display in this dramatic romp involving rival kingdoms and evil sorceresses.

Equally dramatic, though altogether more revolutionary, are the Prelude and Liebestod from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Within the first few measures of the Prelude of Wagner's sensual opera on desire, illicit love and the fatal, inextricable combination of love and death, the music slowly fuses, note by note, into a dissonant chord (known as the "Tristan" chord). Refusing to behave like any chord yet written, Wagner's music relentlessly sets up harmonic expectations, only to defy them all. Instead of resolving, the chord builds dissonance upon dissonance until all one is left with is nothing but pure color and tension. So powerful is this music's impact that early audience members were known to faint upon hearing it for the first time. This is music of stunning sensuality, instability, and danger - all feelings which become characters in and of themselves, ultimately usurping the importance of even the title figures themselves.

Another one to ignore trends was Sergei Rachmaninoff. Writing at a time when contemporary trends tended toward the more cerebral, he rightfully holds a place in music history as one of the most romantic of all composers. A "sumptuous, a sonic wash of emotion," his second piano concerto was the composer's breakthrough work, catapulting him to international success, and cementing his place as an icon of not just Russian music, but the entire pantheon of western music. Tunes from this concerto have found their way into many films, as well as popular songs recorded by everyone from Frank Sinatra and Sarah Vaughan to Bob Dylan.

ROMANTIC RACHMANINOFF
Amica Rush Hour: Friday, February 13, 2026
TACO Classical: Saturday, February 14, 2026

***A Fairy Tale*, op.16**
JOSEF SUK *(1874-1935)*
This is a RI Philharmonic Orchestra premiere. This piece is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

Suk's musical fairy tale is divided into 4 parts. Their titles are self-explanatory:

I. About the Constant Love of Raduz and Mahulena and Their Trials
II. Playing at Swans and Peacocks
III. Funeral Music
IV. Runa's Curse and How It was Broken by True Love

At its essence, one might say the work begins with love, moves to play, then to death, and finally back to the healing power of love. Its original source material is incidental music Suk had composed for a play that weaves classic fairy-tale motifs with mythology in a distinctly Bohemian way. He was so taken with what he wrote for the play that he immediately set out to distill the best of what he had written into an orchestral suite. For better or for worse the original play never gained more than local fame, but the suite continues to capture the hearts of audiences throughout the world. It is that suite that we hear tonight.

Much like the music of his mentor and father-in-law, Antonín Dvořák, Suk's music tends to revel in the infinite color possibilities of the orchestra. Like other tone poets of his generation, Suk uses these colors to conjure the most vivid of images. And with a yarn about royal lovers from rival kingdoms, and their disastrous run-ins with an evil sorceress, there are plenty of rich images to go around. In the hands of a finely honed orchestra, such as the RI Philharmonic, this fantastical story not only comes to life, but fairly jumps off the stage.

Tristan and Isolde – Prelude and Liebestod

RICHARD WAGNER *(1813-1883)*

Last performed February 15, 2020 with Alexander Mickelthwate conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet in A, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, harp and strings.

Standing at the beginning and end of Wagner's sensual masterpiece *Tristan und Isolde*, the Prelude and Liebestod have enjoyed lives as independent concert pieces since even before the opera's premiere in 1865. Taken together as one, their fusion remains today one of Wagner's most beautiful and acclaimed works.

From the very outset of the Prelude, as celli and winds dovetail upon each other to build a series of shape-shifting chords, one can sense that Wagner is casting a new spell. In these first few measures, Wagner has been credited with nothing less than "reinventing the art of music." Apparent dissonances do not "behave" as they should. Indeed, the entire concept of dissonance seems to be irrelevant as chords move with their own internal sense of gravity, each one leading inexorably to the next in a manner that sets the stage for an entire century of new ideas in music.

Traditional harmony is all about expectations. Certain progressions set up expectations for a particular conclusion, and it is the composer's decision to fulfill that expectation or not. But the story of *Tristan und Isolde* is all about (in Wagner's own words) "hopes and fears, laments and desires, bliss and torment." These are not emotions that are easily resolved, so Wagner makes the deliberate choice to confound expectations in a way that is equal parts tantalizing and revolutionary. No longer does a chord have to move in a limited number of ways. It can simply exist as coloration or, in this case, the stress of insatiable longing. The effect of this new view of harmony was so shocking to its first audiences that people were said to have fainted on the spot. This is music of instability and danger – exactly what Wagner was hoping to achieve. Only music this extreme could adequately represent the angst and torture of unfilled love experienced by the opera's title characters.

The orchestral Liebestod ("love-death"), begins with soft, tentative echoes of the Prelude. A bass clarinet moves in slow-moving waves with the horns, as trembling strings enhance a palpable sense of yearning, and beautifully written harp arpeggios herald a thickening of the orchestral texture. In time, the opening material is transformed into a passionate rhapsody, ultimately accelerating to a massive climax. At this point in the opera Tristan has died, and Isolde falls over his body. Bliss, for them, is only attainable through death. The Liebestod concludes with a musical acceptance of this reality, gradually fading into one final, glimmering chord.

Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor, op.18

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF *(1873-1943)*

Last performed February 17, 2018 with Michael Christie conducting and soloist William Wolfram. In addition to a solo piano, this piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

One of the few serious composers of the early twentieth century that eschewed contemporary trends was the Russian great Sergei Rachmaninoff. Anachronistically, he retains a place in music history as one of the most romantic of all composers.

Spurred on by his hypnotherapist with mantras such as "You will begin to write your concerto," "You will work with great facility," and "Your concerto will be of excellent quality," Rachmaninoff managed to pull himself out of the creative slump he'd experienced during the last three years of the 19th century, and created a sumptuous, sonic wash of emotion that he, fittingly, dedicated to the encouraging doctor.

A performer of some acclaim already, Rachmaninoff premiered the new concerto with the Moscow Philharmonic in 1901. It quickly became a breakthrough showcase for the composer, catapulting him into the international spotlight, and providing memorable melodies for countless film scores and popular songs.

On the one hand, it's a virtuoso showpiece. On the other hand, it is remarkably subtle and transparent, almost chamber-like in fact. At several points, the piano even melts into the orchestra, becoming just another textural ingredient in the main course.

The compact three movements demand from the soloist speed, dexterity, and endurance, as well as sensitivity to subtle dynamic and rhythmic shadings. The opening Moderato starts with the pianist chiming chords as if he were ringing a bell, calling the orchestra to join in the music making. Once all the forces are gathered, the piano leads everyone in a Russian folk–flavored motive until a solo horn ventures into unexpected harmonic terrain. But the errant horn is quickly reigned in as pianist and orchestra gallop together to a resounding finish.

The Adagio sostenuto, one of many passages to find themselves enshrined in pop culture, opens with a series of slow chords in the strings which modulate from the C minor of the previous movement to the E major of this movement. Bach-like arpeggios in the piano invite the flute and clarinet to introduce the main theme, who then respectfully pass it off to the piano and strings until the soloist uses it as fodder for a fearsome cadenza. Eventually, things calm back down, and the pianist begins to channel the spirit of Bach once more while the rest of the instruments, one by one, stop to listen.

The Allegro scherzando opens with a short orchestral introduction that modulates from E major back to C minor, before a series of elaborate flourishes in the piano lead us to an agitated first theme. The oboe and violas then introduce the unforgettable melody that would eventually become known as "Full Moon and Empty Arms," recorded by Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan, and many others. The melody continues to bloom and blossom with suspense and anticipation until the first theme returns as the basis for a stormy, almost improvisatory development. The movement closes with a kaleidoscopic play of light and dark that exposes as yet unexplored elements of all we've heard before with such grace that contemporary piano great Steven Hough once mused "It sounds as if it wrote itself, so naturally does the music flow".