

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW PARALLEL EVENTS

1830

Chopin

Piano Concerto No.2

**MUSIC****Hector Berlioz***Symphonie fantastique***ART****Eugène Delacroix***Liberty Leading the People***LITERATURE****Aleksandr Pushkin***The Stone Guest***HISTORY**

French and Flemish speakers seceded from the Netherlands to create Belgium.

1889

R. Strauss*Don Juan***MUSIC**

First performance of Wagner's Ring Cycle in the U.S.

**ART****Vincent van Gogh***The Starry Night***LITERATURE****August Strindberg***Miss Julie***HISTORY**

The Eiffel Tower is inaugurated, becoming the tallest structure in the world.

1925

Shostakovich

Symphony No.1 in F minor

**MUSIC****Edgard Varèse***Intégrales***ART**

Art Deco style is born

**LITERATURE****F. Scott Fitzgerald***The Great Gatsby***HISTORY**

The Scopes Trial sparks a nationwide debate on evolution and religion in public education.

ROMANTIC CHOPIN

Tonight's program is truly a celebration of youth. As the Rhode Island Philharmonic welcomes its younger counterparts from the Rhode Island Philharmonic Youth Orchestra onto the stage, the program itself features three of the greatest examples of masterpieces by composers at the very beginning of what would become illustrious careers.

The program begins with *Don Juan*, which Richard Strauss composed at just 24. This blazing concert opener is both brilliantly written and fantastically difficult to perform. Strauss's father, Franz Joseph, a musician himself, but with extremely conservative tastes, desperately tried to shield his precocious son from improper musical influences. Fortunately (for us), he failed. When the young Strauss first encountered Wagner's "music of the future," he was at once both perplexed and enthralled. So, "against my father's orders," he wrote, "I studied the score of *Tristan*. I can well remember how, at the age of seventeen, I positively wolfed [it down]." Soon after, the idea of the "tone poem" (of which *Don Juan* is one of the finest examples) was born.

For his part, Shostakovich was only 19 when he completed his first symphony - as a graduation requirement for the St. Petersburg Conservatory. One of the supreme prodigies in the history of music, Shostakovich was known, like Mozart, to have pieces fully formed in his head before he wrote them down. But compared to the first symphonies of Mozart, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1 is a much more polished and mature masterpiece. The wry sense of humor and intensity of expression that would become his hallmarks are already apparent.

And a 20-year-old Chopin, still in school but having just made a successful solo piano debut in Vienna, needed a new concerto for future tours. So, he decided to write one. The result was his Piano Concerto No. 2, in which all of the poetic expressiveness he would become known for is on full display. Robert Schumann's accolade for the young Chopin could easily be applied to all three composers on tonight's program: "Hats off, gentlemen—a genius!"



ROMANTIC CHOPIN

Open Rehearsal: Friday, January 22, 2027

TACO Classical: Saturday, January 23, 2027

***Don Juan*, TrV 156, op.20**

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Last performed May 10, 2014 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.

As a young man, Richard Strauss was captivated by the bold innovations Richard Wagner was bringing not only to opera but to the very language of music. Inspired by that freedom, Strauss set out to create something new himself: the orchestral tone poem. The concept was simple but powerful—use the palette of a full symphony orchestra to render a story or poetic idea in a single movement. Strauss carried it off with such brilliance that the genre did more than succeed; it established him as the most important progressive German composer since Wagner.

Strauss later admitted that he could not, in fact, compose without some kind of dramatic or literary spark. For *Don Juan*, that spark was the play *Don Juans Ende*, itself based on an unfinished 1844 work by the poet Nikolaus Lenau. The central figure—known in Italian as Don Giovanni—was already famous from countless stories and operas. Strauss knew Mozart's opera of the same name especially well, having conducted it in Munich. During rehearsals, he also fell deeply in love with the soprano Pauline de Ahna, whom he later married. That heady experience of youthful passion forms part of the backdrop to what may be Strauss's most romantic work. *Don Juan* brims with grand, heroic, swaggering themes as its legendary seducer pursues one conquest after another.

Strauss included these lines from Lenau's poem in the score: "The charmed circle of many kinds of beautiful, stimulating femininity... I should like to traverse them in a storm of pleasure." Embracing that "storm of pleasure," the composer wrote music rich in orchestral color, with recurring themes that suggest people, places, emotions, and actions. Each woman Don Juan pursues is distinctly characterized. The result is a vivid, wordless drama, felt at a visceral level.

The work opens with one of the repertoire's most electrifying flourishes as the hero bursts onto the scene, proclaiming "Out and away—to new conquests!" in an upward sweep of four unison horns, marked *sehr energisch* ("very energetic"). From there, the music drives forward with exuberant force, though it repeatedly gives way to a more dreamlike, sensual world of love themes, the longest of which is introduced by solo oboe, then passed to clarinet, bassoon, and horn. Yet Don Juan's restlessness always returns, and with another heroic horn gesture he rushes toward his next pursuit. After each of four romantic episodes leaves him unsatisfied, his main theme returns and the chase begins again. In the final moments, the adventure collapses as a disillusioned Don Juan submits to the sword of a father avenging his daughter's honor, bringing the hero's life to a tragic end.

Symphony No.1 in F minor, op.10

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Last performed February 20, 2016 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for two piccolos, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, contralto trumpet, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano and strings.

Shostakovich's artistic life illustrates the painful challenge of remaining true to one's creative vision while simply trying to survive—both as an artist and as a person—under a brutal totalitarian regime. Born in St. Petersburg, he was only ten when the February Revolution ended more than four centuries of Romanov rule. He then witnessed his country's transformation from Tsarist autocracy to Communist dictatorship. So, it is no surprise that even as a teenage student at the conservatory in what was now called Petrograd, during years of famine and civil war, his personal, philosophical, and political struggles were already finding expression in his music.

Although his teachers at the Petrograd Conservatory were deeply conservative—his main teacher (Rimsky-Korsakov's son-in-law) seemed intent on halting music history around 1905—Shostakovich had already studied scores by Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and others, absorbing many of the new century's musical currents. His First Symphony shows signs of these influences, but he is already shaping them into the distinctive voice we now immediately recognize as his own.

The first movement opens almost like chamber music, with muted trumpet and bassoon, before moving into an *allegro non troppo* march reminiscent of the vaudeville music Shostakovich knew well from his work as a licensed silent-film pianist (listen for its unexpected return in the third movement). A seemingly lyrical waltz follows, followed by an off-kilter development section that again evokes vaudeville. The movement ends in classical fashion with a return of the opening theme, first in the flute and then in the clarinet—an unconventional development rounded off with a respectful nod to sonata form.

The second movement is a biting scherzo, famous for its abrupt false start in the cellos and basses. Here the piano appears for the first time, racing through rapid scalar passages. Its blend of wit and mockery recalls moments in the silent movie houses when Shostakovich laughed so hard at his favorite scenes that he had to stop playing. The slow central section—once referred to as music that “would be marked *religioso* if it hadn't been composed in Soviet Russia”—is full of unease and caution. The bassoon then restores the opening *allegro* theme, and the scherzo closes with widely spaced chords in the piano and violins. After finishing the first two movements, Shostakovich wrote to a friend that the piece might better be called a “symphony-grotesque.” “I am in a terrible mood,” he confessed. “Sometimes I just want to shout. To cry out in terror. Doubts and problems. All this darkness suffocates me. From sheer misery, I've started to compose the finale of the symphony. It's turning out pretty gloomy.” As with the composer's own state of mind, the grotesque energy of the first two movements gives way to the darkness of the last two.

The third movement begins with a dark, half-step theme—related to the opening idea of the first movement—introduced by the oboe and then taken up by the cello. It swells to an expressive climax before fading into a distant echo of the opening motif. Suddenly, a snare-drum roll tears the music apart and drives it into the frenzied finale.

The finale weaves together themes heard earlier with new material, creating a relentless sequence of sharp contrasts in texture, timbre, mood, dynamics, and tempo that culminates in a famous timpani solo. After transforming ideas from earlier movements, the symphony ends with trills in the woodwinds and strings and a brilliant, if frantic, brass fanfare.

Piano Concerto No.2 in F minor, op.21

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Last performed January 22, 2011 with Jessie Chang conducting and soloist Jahja Ling. In addition to a solo piano, this piece is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, bass trombone, timpani and strings.

Despite its title, the Piano Concerto No. 2 is actually the first concerto Chopin composed, written while he was still a student at the Warsaw Conservatory. Its premiere performance was so successful that he quickly began writing another concerto, which happened to be published first. This quirk explains the numbering shell game.

Although Chopin wrote almost entirely for piano and had little interest in composing symphonies or operas, writing concertos for piano and orchestra was important for his career. Fortunately, he excelled at it. After the 1832 Paris premiere of this concerto, critic François-Joseph Fétis praised the young composer as someone who “has found, if not a way of reviving piano music completely, at least some of what has so long been vainly sought, that is to say an abundance of original ideas of which the type is nowhere to be discovered.”

The concerto has three movements. The first, *Maestoso*, opens with an extended orchestral introduction presenting two main themes: one dramatic and romantic, marked by sharp dynamic contrasts, and the other more lyrical. When the piano enters, Chopin reshapes both themes with the expressive ornamentation for which he is now famous. The movement alternates between orchestra and soloist, balancing calm passages with more animated ones. After the piano restates both themes in increasingly virtuosic form, a short orchestral coda brings the movement to a close.

Chopin's good friend, Franz Liszt, described the second movement as “... a perfection almost ideal, its expression now radiant with light, now full of tender pathos.” Chopin himself said it was inspired by the fervent but quiet admiration he had for a female classmate. After a brief orchestral introduction, such youthful longing is easily heard as the piano unfolds a lyrical, songlike melody. A contrasting middle section follows, beginning with tremolo strings and an agitated piano line that resembles operatic recitative, almost as if the instrument were speaking. The opening melody then returns, and the movement ends with the same beauty and poise with which it began.

The third movement, *Allegro vivace*, begins with a melody modeled on the Polish mazurka, a lively dance Chopin loved and often used in his solo piano works. After the opening theme and a burst of virtuosity from the pianist, the violins and violas introduce a contrasting rustic idea *col legna*, or playing with the wood of the bow. The mazurka theme then returns, and a horn solo leads into a brilliant, technically demanding final section. The melody here is irresistibly memorable. As musicologist Calvin Dotsey observed, “Chopin's art developed as the years went on, but nothing he wrote surpassed this last movement in simple, direct, healthy charm.”