Viola Concerto, BB 128
BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)
Last performed March 14, 1998 with Larry Rachleff conducting and soloist Roberto Díaz. In addition to a solo viola, this piece is scored for three flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

In the mid-1940s, Béla Bartók's body was failing him. But thanks to a timely commission from Serge Koussevitsky, the visionary music director of the Boston Symphony at the time, the composer's creative energies were at an all-time high. The commission resulted in the monumental Concerto for Orchestra, a joyous and brilliant piece universally acknowledged as one of the masterpieces of the 20th Century. Bartók found the mere process of writing it so healing and energizing , that he soon immersed himself in composing two more major concertos in quick succession: A third Piano Concerto (written as a showcase and potential income stream for his wife, Ditta, a renowned concert pianist in her own right), and a Viola Concerto, written for the widely revered violist William Primrose.

In a letter to Primrose, penned only a few weeks before the composer's death, Bartók wrote

> *I am very glad to tell you that your viola concerto is ready in draft…Many interesting problems arose in composing this work. The orchestration will be rather transparent, more transparent than in a violin concerto. Also, the somber, more masculine character of your instrument exerted some influence on the general character of the work...It is conceived in a rather virtuoso style. Most probably some passages will prove to be uncomfortable or unplayable…*

Primrose himself, in his autobiography, recalls this letter and the unfortunate series of events that soon followed:

> *It was my intention…to stop on my way north to see Bartók in New York City. But as it was raining heavily on that day and parking was an insoluble problem, I decided to proceed to my destination and see him on my return.*
>
> *It was a deplorable decision, one which we all experience when we put off until tomorrow… On a beautiful day about two weeks later, on my way back from Maine, I stopped outside New York for lunch, picked up the New York Times, and read that Bartók had died the preceding day.*

As the orchestrations for the viola concerto were left incomplete, Tibor Serly, an apprentice and good friend of Bartók's, was tapped to prepare the highly anticipated work for performance and publication. Serly shared his own memories of the circumstances surrounding the Viola Concerto in a tribute published in the *New York Times:*

> *When I last talked with Béla Bartók, he was lying in bed, quite ill. Nevertheless, on and around his bed were sheets of score and sketch manuscript papers...my attention was drawn to the night table beside his bed where I noticed, underneath several half-empty medicine bottles, some pages of sketches. There was a reason for my curiosity, for it was known that earlier in the year he had accepted a commission to write a concerto for viola and orchestra for William Primrose…*

Bartók nodded wearily toward the night table, saying: "Yes, that is the viola concerto." To my question as to whether it was completed, his reply was, "Yes and no." He explained that while in sketches the work was by and large finished, the details and scoring had not yet been worked out.

In this concerto, Serly, Primrose, Antal Dorati (who conducted the premiere in December of 1949), and countless music lovers to follow, discovered a profoundly lyrical, spiritual and life affirming work. Tonight, we will hear the final two movements, performed by RI Phil Music School Alumnus Matthew Sinno, as they evolve from moments of great reverence and pathos to infectious expressions of folk-inspired exuberance. Listen for what just might be a Scottish-inspired tune and bagpipe-like drones (a possible nod to William Primrose's heritage), as seen through a Central European 20th century lens. There is good reason that this is the most performed and recorded viola concerto in history.

The Firebird: Suite (1919)
IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)
Last performed June 1, 2014 with Larry Rachleff conducting. This piece is scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano and strings.

Igor Stravinsky, though irrefutably known today, alongside Bartók, as one of the giants of modern music, was not Sergei Diaghilev's first choice for an ambitious new project designed to the centerpiece for 1910 Paris season of the newly formed Ballet Russes. The Firebird, based on a character from Russian folklore symbolizing rebirth, beauty, and magic, was to be a comprehensive, seamlessly integrated work of art encompassing music, theater, and visual design, so not any composer would do.

But Diaghilev's first choice, Alexander Tcherepnin, dropped out due to artistic differences with the choreographer, Michael Fokine. So he offered the work to an extremely busy Anatoly Lyadov, who never seemed to get around to it and was basically fired. Diaghilev briefly considered Alexander Glazunov, then Russia's leading composer, but he didn't bite either. So, pressed for time, Diaghilev gambled on a young, unknown Igor Stravinsky, who had only orchestrated two pieces by Chopin for Diaghilev the year before. But even this young journeyman had his doubts: "The Firebird did not attract me as a subject. Like all story ballets it demanded descriptive music of a kind I did not want to write. I had not yet proved myself as a composer…in truth my reservations about the subject were a defense for my not being sure I could… I was flattered, of course, by the promise of a performance of my music in Paris…"

Fortunately, in the end, he could not turn the offer down and, in the course of a single night, Stravinsky's star became a supernova. Having been a protégé of Rimsky-Korsakov, master teacher, one of the most adroit orchestrators in musical history, Stravinsky had an instinct for creating dazzling orchestral colors that were perfect for the exotic Russian story assembled by designer, Alexandre Benois and choreographer, Michel Fokine. The title character, whose feathers flow with iridescent luminosity and can serve both good and evil, depending on its mood, is depicted musically by virtuoso figurations in the woodwinds and harp *glissandi*. Listen for the ethereal sound of violins playing *sul ponticello* (near the bridge) and shuddering with anxious tremolos. Then allow yourself to be entranced by the irredeemably evil magician, Kashchei, who is depicted with chromatic complexities that lead to an "Infernal Dance," replete with snarling brass, angular, jagged motifs, and pounding, insistent, off-kilter rhythms.

In the midst of the chaos, the Firebird swoops in again to lull Kashchei and his minions into deep slumber with an entrancing “Berceuse” (listen for the famous languid bassoon solo). While they sleep, the Firebird gives a prince who has fallen in love with one of the princesses held captive by Kashchei the secret to killing the evil magician (destroying the giant egg in which his soul resides). That done, a solo horn dramatically intones an evocation of the arrival of the sun and the triumph of good over evil. In time, the whole orchestra takes up its tune, accompanied by slow, rising scales and, finally, pounding brass chords lead to the grand, immortal ending.

Piano Concerto No.3 in D minor, op.30
SERGEI RACHMANINOFF *(1873-1943)*

Last performed February 10, 2024 with José Luis Gomez conducting and soloist Garrick Ohlsson. 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.

As Stravinsky was planting seeds that would eventually change the course of music forever, his compatriot, Rachmaninoff was preparing to set sail for his first American Tour. With him, he carried not only an enormous amount of luggage, but also a “silent keyboard,” on which he could practice his brand-new concerto. The exceptionally demanding solo part of what he called his “elephant concerto,” posed a real challenge even for a pianist of his extraordinary skill and attributes (he had unbelievably large hands – his thumb and pinkie could span 12 inches, more than most NBA players!).

Of all the great piano concertos, “Rach 3” contains the highest number of notes per second in the solo part. Yet its extraordinary demands go far beyond mere mechanical virtuosity – this arguably last great romantic piano concerto is also steeped in introspection and nuance. The melody in the opening bars, reminiscent of an ancient Russian liturgical chant, was meant, in Rachmaninoff’s own words, to “sing on the piano as a singer would.”

Over the course of its three movements, the concerto unfolds on a grand scale, with a sweeping lyricism and emotional range. The opening pianistic chant sets the stage for a series of furious climaxes from the soloist, followed by a middle movement that revolves around a beautifully developed melody in F sharp minor, offering refuge after the storm before rhythmic tensions return. But rather than quietly resolving into a traditional adagio, Rachmaninoff takes us without pause into the finale - a set of vigorous variations on themes introduced earlier, lending an organic wholeness to the entire work while it simultaneously exploits every inch of the keyboard.