Programme

Overture to **The Marriage of Figaro**, K. 492 ---- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Symphony on a Hymn Tune ---- Virgil Thomson
(1896-)

I. Introduction and Allegro
II. Andante cantabile
III. Allegretto
IV. Allegro

INTERMISSION

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18 ---- Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873-1943)

I. Moderato
II. Adagio sostenuto
III. Allegro scherzando

Alexander Peskanov, *Piano*

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

by Jud Barry

Overture to *"The Marriage of Figaro,"* K. 492 ---- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
born Salzburg, January 27, 1756
died Vienna, December 5, 1791

Weddings are joyous occasions that we somehow manage to survive. With so many rehearsals for vows and cake-cuttings, so many costumes to keep unsoiled, so many attendants to keep from knocking over so many candelabras, so many prima donnas to keep from turning the whole affair into a catfight, weddings are also the closest most of us will ever come to the production of a grand opera.

Perhaps that is one reason for the abiding popularity of Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro." Based on a French satire by Beaumarchais subtitled "the crazy day," the opera is the most madcap of matrimonies. Figaro, onetime barber of Seville and now valet to Count Almaviva, is engaged to marry Susanna, personal maid to the Countess Almaviva. The count, however, is infatuated with Susanna, and first tries to remove Figaro from the scene by declaring against him in a claim for a debt owed to Marcellina, an older woman, a chaperone of the court who wants to force Figaro to marry her. Marcellina is discovered to be Figaro's mother, so the suit is dropped, and Figaro and Susanna are married. Not to be deterred, the count presses his lordly "right of the first night" by trying to seduce Susanna in a darkened garden. This time, however, the object of his affections turns out to be his own wife, disguised as Susanna. At the end, of course, everyone is happily reconciled.

The overture overlays bustle with stateliness to set the tone for this compelling mix of romance and buffoonery.

Symphony on a Hymn Tune ---- Virgil Thomson
born Kansas City, November 25, 1896

"Paris is pretty dull," wrote Thomson to a friend in 1927. "1920 is finally demode (out of fashion) and there is nothing to take its place. Everyone has gone out hunting for an idea." From his studio on the left bank of the Seine, Thomson went hunting for his idea and found it in memories of home, in the hymns he grew up with in his Southern Baptist church in Kansas City.

Hymns represented a rich and earthy American musical tradition that included dance music, popular song, and jazz. The prevailing standards of concert music in the early 20th century did not confer much respectability upon that tradition. Its own tradition, Teutonic and romantic, demanded of its composers a striving towards a heroic ideal that was miles above folksiness.

Thomson was steeped in the American tradition, and when he went east to Harvard he took with him years of practical experience as a church organist. College courses in musical composition exposed him to the ideas of Frenchman Erik Satie, ideas of simplicity and clarity that eschewed the Germanic tendency to gigantism and bombast. These ideas gave Thomson a method by which, in his own words, he could "digest" the "gamey nourishment" of the American tradition. He moved to Paris to perfect the method and stayed for twenty years. The symphony, completed in 1928, is one of his earliest compositions from that period.

The hymn tune of the symphony's title, best known as "How Firm a Foundation," appears together with "Jesus Loves Me" and "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." These melodies occur throughout the work, varied and cast in different instrumental settings.

Thomson's method" can be heard in his use of bitonality, that is, using two different keys at the same time. This can be humorous or jarring and is perhaps suggestive of the intrusions of the world into the affairs of the church. Another stylistic peculiarity is the spare orchestration for long stretches and in odd combinations (note the "cadenza" for trombone, piccolo, and violin, and cello), which he uses in order to achieve an expressive directness.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, op. 18 .... Sergei Rachmaninoff
born Oneg, Novgorod, U.S.S.R., April 1, 1873
died Beverly Hills, March 28, 1943

Virgil Thomson, perhaps better known as a musical observer than he is a composer, wrote in 1922 that Paris "was full of Russian refugees, thank God. Italians have fire and a sense of beauty and the French have finesse, but thank God for the Russians with real ecstasy in their souls."

Rachmaninoff was at that time one of those Russian refugees of the Bolshevik revolution, although he made his home in the United States. He made his living as a touring concert pianist—composition couldn't support a family. He was to die in his adopted home after giving his final concert in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Back in the first two years of the new century he composed a concerto that almost immediately became one of the best-loved works of the symphonic repertoire. Some consider it the greatest concerto of the twentieth century. The beauty of its melodies is such that it is even listed among the greatest songs ever written. Other songs have taken their notes and contours from the concerto, most notably the 1946 hit "Full Moon and Empty Arms," but none has captured the breathtaking lyricism of the concerto. It is ironic, in a sense, that for all its greatness, the piece might never have been written were it not for hypnosis.

Rachmaninoff, born into a noble Russian family, embarked on serious musical studies early in life and was destined for a career in the grand European concert tradition. Successful as a concert pianist, he showed a flair for composition that was encouraged by Tchaikovsky, among others. But the premiere of his first symphony, in 1897, was a disaster, one critic calling it a musical setting of "the seven plagues of Egypt."

Shattered, Rachmaninoff lost faith in his ability to compose. His friends did what they could to help him—recommended vacations in the Crimea, brought the great novelist Tolstoy to convince him to compose again—but nothing worked until medical help was brought in. Dr Nikolay Dahl had the composer visit his office every day, and every day repeated the same formula to his hypnotized patient: "You will begin to write your concerto . . . You will work with great facility . . . The concerto will be of excellent quality." Under this treatment, the block was removed, and music poured from Rachmaninoff unabated until he left Russia in 1917.

NEXT CONCERTS

Kingsport Youth Orchestra
Sunday, November 6, 1988 — 3:00 p.m. — Ross N. Robinson Auditorium

Kingsport Symphony Orchestra and Chorus
Saturday, December 2, 1988 — 8:15 p.m. — Ross N. Robinson Auditorium
Christmas Music from Early America