

Yūzō Toyama, *Rhapsody for Orchestra*
Ruth Gipps, *Death on the Pale Horse*
Jeff Scott, *Paradise Valley Serenade*
Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27*

We celebrate the life of Yūzō Toyama (1931-2023) who passed away one year ago, at the age of 92, at his home in Nagano, Japan. He was considered one of the greatest post-war Japanese conductors, leading several of Japan's top orchestras, among them the NHK Symphony Orchestra, perhaps the best orchestra in all of Asia. In 1982, he was awarded the reputable Suntory Music Award, which recognizes outstanding achievements in Western and contemporary music in Japan. In addition to an illustrious conducting career, Toyama also found time to compose, with over 200 works to his credit.

Rhapsody for Orchestra was written for the occasion of the NHK Orchestra's 1960 international tour, for which he seized the opportunity to showcase the traditional melodies and instruments of Japan. You will notice many percussion instruments not typical of a Western orchestra, such as the *surigane*, a small gong that is hand held with a string; the *shime-daiko*, a small, wide drum that is played on both sides; the *uchiwa-daiko*, a drum that looks similar to a badminton racket with a skin stretched over the round section; and the *yagura-daiko* (tower drum), a large 2-sided drum that is mounted on a tall wooden stand.

Toyama uses several traditional Japanese melodies in his *Rhapsody*. The first you'll hear is *Anta gata doko sa*, a children's ball-bouncing song. Toyama displays his counterpoint expertise by skillfully superimposing *Sōran Bushi*, a fishermen's song, upon the other melody. Other traditional melodies that Toyama introduces include *Tankō Bushi*, a coal miner's song, *Shinano Oiwake*, a packhorse driver's song, and the *Yagi Bushi*, an energetic group dance. The lyrics of these folk melodies reference Japan's geographical and scenic beauty, akin to America's "amber waves of grain" and "purple mountains majesty." Toyama skillfully weaves the traditional timbres and melodies of Japan into an affecting orchestral journey back to his homeland.

Ruth Gipps (1921-1999) was a British musician with a lifetime of impressive accomplishments. As a student at the Royal Conservatory of Music, she won several prizes for her compositions, and was the youngest woman to have earned a doctorate in music. In addition to performing piano and oboe, she pivoted towards conducting, and founded the London Repertoire Orchestra, which she ran for 30 years. She was also an active teacher, serving as music professor at Trinity College of Music and the Royal Conservatory of Music. For her significant artistic endeavors, she was awarded the prestigious Order of the British Empire in 1981.

Death on the Pale Horse is a haunting and majestic tone poem written in 1943 by the 22-year-old Gipps, at a time when British and American forces were bombing German cities in an effort to break the economy and morale of the Axis aggressors. The piece was inspired by a drawing by William Blake, depicting a ghostly bearded man, wielding a sword, and riding a terrifying white steed. While Blake's drawing is a wild and energetic work, Gipps' tone poem is quite the opposite, being slower and more contemplative in character. The musical *Death on the Pale Horse* is in a post-Romantic vein, with long melodic lines, rich harmonies, and powerful orchestral culminations.

Jeff Scott grew up in Queens, NY, with dreams of becoming a baseball player. That is until he was given a French horn and a scholarship to study at Brooklyn College's prep program. Scott completed his academics with a bachelor's degree from the Manhattan School of Music and a master's at SUNY Stony Brook. Since then, he has performed on Broadway (*Showboat*, *Lion King*), with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, as a movie soundtrack studio musician, and on tour with Barbra Streisand. He is also an avid composer, arranger, and educator, with a 12-year appointment at Montclair State University in New Jersey, and currently serving as Professor of French Horn at Oberlin College. Earlier this year he and the Imani Winds won a Grammy award for their album of Scott's *Passion for Bach and Coltrane*.

Tonight's concert features the Imani Winds performing Scott's powerful and sensuous *Paradise Valley Serenade*. In the composer's own words:

Paradise Valley and Black Bottom, Detroit. For me it wasn't a question of whether I knew the history, but rather, why I didn't. As I toured through the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, I thought... Motown, check. Ford Motor Company, check. The Flame Show Bar? The Gotham Hotel? For me, not a notion. Paradise Theater? The very venue that this newly commissioned work will premiere, or Orchestra Hall as we know it. I had no clue that it once operated as a Jazz venue under this name. From 1941-1951 the Paradise Theater hosted the who's who of jazz royalty. Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Count Basie and more. This piece of local history was an entryway to a much larger story. A story of a once thriving African American community. A community that grew from extremely humble beginnings during the Great Migration and out of the Great Depression.

Only to be razed in favor of "Urban Renewal" projects in the 50's, 60's and 70's. This work, *Paradise Valley Serenade*, opens with a morning yawn and sunrise in "Dawn and Dusk". The day has begun like most others and there is work to be done, like in any other urban American community. But unlike most communities, there is a cultural hub within, that spews musical fire by night and draws the culturally curious to witness the flames. In

the second movement, “Paradise, Razed but not Forgotten”, I envisioned an elder from the Paradise Valley or Black Bottom community, in a docile voice, telling the story to a grandchild. The story is told with great melancholy and even describes his/her witnessing of the demolition of the neighborhoods. That said, there is pride in the telling. A feeling of fortitude and resilience. For the last movement, “A Hug for Cab”, I envisioned what it might have been like to see Cab Calloway live at the Paradise Theater. With his swinging big band, double entendre lyrics, high energy dancing and stage antics.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943), one of the best pianists of his day, is time and time again beloved in today’s orchestral halls for his expression, lyricism, and evocative use of orchestral color. But make no mistake: Rachmaninoff’s path to awesomeness was not a smooth one. He began composing his first symphony in 1895, and when it finally premiered under the baton of Alexander Glazunov two years later, it was a total failure. Russian composer and music critic César Cui called it “a programme symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt,” while others more kindly attributed the fiasco to the orchestra’s poor performance as much as Rachmaninoff’s composing. Rachmaninoff’s wife remarked that Glazunov had been drunk while conducting the premiere, which seems entirely plausible, considering that he was known to keep a “secret” bottle in his desk with a straw that he nursed while giving instruction to students. Regardless, the failure of Rachmaninoff’s first symphony took a toll on the composer, shaking a confidence that would not be restored until the enormous success of his 2nd piano concerto in 1901.

If Rachmaninoff’s 1st symphony was a rough start, the 2nd symphony (1907) is anything but. Perhaps, more than any other work, the 2nd symphony quintessentially exemplifies Russian late Romanticism. The first movement, *Largo – Allegro moderato*, begins dark and lugubrious, with continuously rising intensities leading into menacing storms. The second movement, *Allegro molto*, cranks up the energy with driving rhythms that eventually make way for soaring lyricism. The third movement, *Adagio*, is one of the most tender, melodic love-letters one could hope for in the slow movement of a symphony. And the fourth and final movement, *Allegro vivace*, is pure celebration. The ending of this symphony is unmatched in its excitement: on a 1-10 passion scale, Rachmaninoff dials it up to an 11.

The 1908 premiere of the 2nd symphony featured Rachmaninoff himself at the orchestral podium. The performance was met with enthusiasm from the St. Petersburg audience, and music critic Joel Engel proclaimed Rachmaninoff to be a worthy successor to Tchaikovsky—“how fresh, how beautiful it is!” Months later, the work was awarded the prestigious Glinka prize, cementing the legacy of a great composer.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.