

**Concert of February 27, 2010**

**Daniel Meyer, Conductor**

**Di Wu, Piano**

**George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)**

**Overture, from *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749)**

**George Gershwin (1898-1937)**

***Rhapsody in Blue* (1924)**

**Di Wu, Piano**

**Intermission**

**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)**

**Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Opus 95 (1953)**

*I. Moderato*

*II. Allegro*

*III. Allegretto*

*IV. Andante; Allegro*

## Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

### Overture, from *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749)

**George Frideric Handel was born in Halle, Germany, on February 23, 1685, and died in London, England, on April 14, 1759. The first official performance of *Music for the Royal Fireworks* took place on April 27, 1749, in Green Park, London. The *Music for the Royal Fireworks* is scored for three oboes, three bassoons, contrabassoon, three horns, three trumpets, timpani, continuo and strings. Approximate performance time of the Overture is nine minutes.**

In October 1748, the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle brought the eight-year War of Austrian Succession to a close. England's King George II decided to commemorate the event with a series of public celebrations, culminating with a magnificent fireworks display in London's Green Park on April 27, 1749. The King commissioned the Florentine architect Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni, scenic artist to the French court and the creator of the St. Sulpice church in Paris, to design a grand pavilion for the event. The ornately decorated structure, completed the day before the ceremonies, stood 114 feet high and 410 feet long.

The individuals in charge of the celebration were Charles Frederick, "Comptroller of his Majesty's Fireworks as well for War as for Triumph," Captain Thomas Desaguliers, Chief Fire Master of the Royal Laboratory and the Duke of Montague, Master of the Ordinance. They commissioned Handel, England's foremost composer, to fashion musical accompaniment to the fireworks display. The King agreed, so long as the music was scored for "warlike instruments" (i.e., woodwinds, brass and drums) and further "said he hoped there would be no fiddles (violins)." Conversely, Handel very much desired the inclusion of violins. The Duke of Montague worried:

Now Handel proposes to lessen the number of trumpets, &c and to have violins. I don't at all doubt but when the King hears it he will be very much displeas'd...I am sure it behooves Handel to have as many trumpets, and other martial instruments, as possible, though he don't retrench the violins...though I believe he will never be persuaded to do it.

There is some dispute as to whether strings were included in the "band of 100 musicians" that took part in the premiere of *Music for the Royal Fireworks*. However, we do know that Handel's authorized score and later composer-directed performances included strings.

*Music for the Royal Fireworks* was first presented (against the composer's wishes) at a public rehearsal on April 21, 1749 in Vauxhall Gardens. An estimated 12,000 people attended the rehearsal, creating a traffic jam that blocked London Bridge for three hours.

The first official performance of *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, Handel's last major orchestral composition, occurred at the April 27, 1749 fireworks celebration. Another tremendous gathering, this time in Green Park, prompted one man to inform his wife: "I

have never before my eyes such a concourse of people as to be sure I never have or shall see again.” The evening was hardly the triumph envisioned by King George II. Several of the fireworks failed to ignite and finally, a portion of the scaffolding caught fire, causing injury to several people. An enraged Servandoni drew his sword on Charles Frederick and escaped incarceration only after he made the appropriate apologies.

Handel's magnificent score, one of the orchestral glories of the Baroque era, was well received despite the confusion and it remains a perennial concert favorite. This concert opens with the work's *Overture*.

I. *Ouverture (Adagio—Allegro—Lentement—Allegro)*—The *Overture* is by far the longest of the six movements, and is divided into four sections. A stately and extended *Adagio* features dotted rhythms. The energetic *Allegro*, set in 3/4 time, makes dramatic use of antiphonal effects. A brief slow passage (*Lentement*) is followed by a reprise of a portion of the *Allegro*, bringing the *Overture* to a rousing close.

### ***Rhapsody in Blue* (instrumentation by Ferde Grofé) (1924)**

**George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York, on September 26, 1898, and died in Hollywood, California on July 11, 1937. The first performance of the *Rhapsody in Blue* took place at Aeolian Hall in New York City on February 12, 1924, with the composer as soloist and Paul Whiteman conducting the Palais Royal Orchestra. In addition to the solo piano, the *Rhapsody in Blue* is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, gong, snare drum, triangle and strings. Approximate performance time is sixteen minutes.**

#### **“A jazz concerto”**

George Gershwin composed his *Rhapsody in Blue* at the request of his friend, bandleader Paul Whiteman. Whiteman planned to stage a concert in New York to demonstrate that American jazz “had come to stay and deserved recognition.” Gershwin, who was busy with the preparations for his newest musical, *Sweet Little Devil*, was hesitant to become involved in such a project. However, in early January of 1924, Gershwin was in midtown Manhattan, shooting pool at the Ambassador Billiard Parlor. George's brother, Ira, who was also at the billiard club, picked up a copy of the January 4 issue of the *Herald Tribune*. The paper contained an article announcing that Paul Whiteman had scheduled a New York concert for February 12. The article further reported that, “George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto” to be featured at the Whiteman concert.

A rather surprised Gershwin called Whiteman the following day. Finally, after much persuasion by Whiteman, Gershwin agreed to compose a rhapsody for piano and orchestra that he conceived of as “a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, of our metropolitan madness.” Gershwin composed this rhapsody at a furious pace, completing the work in about three weeks.

Ferde Grofé, who orchestrated the work, was an almost constant presence in the Gershwin apartment, adapting each new page of the score as soon as it left the

composer's hand. Grofé's original version, performed at the premiere, was for jazz band. Later, Grofé orchestrated the work for a large symphonic ensemble.

George Gershwin planned to entitle his new work *American Rhapsody*. But Ira Gershwin, inspired by an exhibition of paintings by the American painter James McNeill Whistler—including *Nocturne in Gold* and *Arrangement in Gray and Black (Whistler's Mother)*—suggested the work's famous title, *Rhapsody in Blue*.

### **The premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue***

On February 12, 1924, a capacity audience filled New York's Aeolian Hall to hear Paul Whiteman's concert, entitled, "An Experiment in Modern Music." Among the distinguished attendees were Ernest Bloch, Walter Damrosch, Mischa Elman, Jascha Heifetz, Victor Herbert, Fritz Kreisler, Willem Mengelberg, Sergei Rachmaninov, Moritz Rosenthal, John Philip Sousa, Leopold Stokowski and Igor Stravinsky. As the concert proceeded, the attention of the audience began to flag. But, as Olin Downes reported the next day for the *New York Times*: "Then stepped upon the stage, sheepishly, a lank and dark young man—George Gershwin. He was to play the piano part in the first performance of his *Rhapsody in Blue* for piano and orchestra."

From the very first notes of the opening clarinet solo, the audience was spellbound. Here was a work that offered a beguiling synthesis of the classical tradition—long believed to be the province of European composers—and America's own music, jazz. When the majestic final chord sounded, the audience erupted with an ovation described by critics as "tumultuous," "wild and even frantic." From that day, George Gershwin became recognized not only as an important composer of Broadway and popular melodies, but also a force to be reckoned with in classical music. More than eighty years after its premiere, George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* remains one of the most beloved and performed concert works by an American composer.

### **Musical Analysis**

*Molto moderato*—The *Rhapsody in Blue* opens with the famous clarinet solo that moves from its brazen ascent to the introduction of the first of several themes that appear throughout the work. The pianist enters, soon embarking on a solo turn. As is implied by the title, the *Rhapsody* is a rather free-form work that offers diverse and often virtuosic treatments of the thematic material by the soloist and orchestra. Toward the latter part of the *Rhapsody*, the orchestra introduces a majestic theme, capped by some jazzy commentary by the horns (*Andantino moderato, con espressione*). From there, the *Rhapsody in Blue* proceeds to its brilliant climax, concluding with a final statement of the opening clarinet theme.

### **Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Opus 93 (1953)**

**Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow, Russia, on August 9, 1975. The first performance of the Symphony No. 10 took place in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) on December 17, 1953, with Evgeny Mravinsky conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic. The Symphony No. 10 is scored for two piccolos, two flutes, three oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, three clarinets, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets,**

**three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, military drum, snare drum, tam tam, triangle, xylophone and strings. Approximate performance time is forty-five minutes.**

### **Shostakovich and Stalin**

Dmitri Shostakovich was one of the greatest and most prolific symphonic composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In all, he composed fifteen Symphonies during a period that spanned the years 1925 to 1971. From 1936 to 1945, Shostakovich composed six Symphonies (Nos. 4—9). However, eight years elapsed between the creation of the Ninth and Shostakovich's return to symphonic composition.

For more than half of his artistic life, Shostakovich was forced to contend with the tyranny of Joseph Stalin, Secretary General of the Communist Party from 1922-1953 and Premier of the U.S.S.R. from 1941-1953. Stalin's paranoid obsession with control extended to all areas of Soviet life, including music. Soviet musicians were compelled to fashion works that glorified Socialism and more importantly, Stalin. Failure to do so placed the artist in legitimate fear of the loss of his livelihood, if not his life.

Shostakovich experienced the full brunt of Stalin's anger in 1936, when an anonymously penned article entitled "Muddle Instead of Music" appeared in *Pravda*, the official Communist newspaper. The article denounced the composer's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, a work that Shostakovich described as a "tragedy-satire" and one that could be viewed as critical of Stalin's brutal police tactics. Shostakovich clearly understood that if Stalin didn't write the *Pravda* article, it most certainly reflected the leader's views. Shostakovich attempted to placate Stalin and the Soviet regime with his Fifth Symphony (1937), a work the composer subtitled "A Soviet Artist's Reply to Just Criticism." Despite the enigmatic nature of the closing pages, the Fifth Symphony generally pleased Soviet critics, thereby redeeming Shostakovich, at least temporarily.

#### **"A frog puffing himself up to the size of an ox"**

Following the surrender of Germany in May of 1945, Shostakovich announced that he would write his Ninth Symphony—a "Victory Symphony" with a grand "apotheosis." Stalin anticipated that the Symphony would emulate Beethoven's Ninth and would be an epic work, culminating with a choral finale singing his praises. What Shostakovich penned instead was a satirical, and at times acerbic, twenty-five-minute composition, featuring conventional orchestral forces. Stalin viewed the Ninth Symphony as a personal insult, and was furious.

It may well be that Stalin's perceptions were accurate. In *Testimony: the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, the composer—at least, according to his friend and student Solomon Volkov—offered these comments about the circumstances surrounding the composition of the Ninth Symphony:

I doubt Stalin ever questioned his own genius or greatness. But when the war against Hitler was won, Stalin went off the deep end. He was like a frog puffing himself up to the size of an ox, with the difference that

everyone around him already considered Stalin to be the ox and gave him an ox's due...Stalin always listened to experts and specialists carefully. The experts told him I knew my work and therefore Stalin assumed the symphony in his honor would be a quality piece of music. He would be able to say, "There it is, our national Ninth."...I confess that I gave hope to the leader and the teacher's dreams. I announced that I was writing an apotheosis. I was trying to get them off my back but it turned against me...I couldn't write an apotheosis to Stalin, I simply couldn't. I knew what I was in for when I wrote the Ninth.

### **The Tenth Symphony**

Joseph Stalin died on March 5, 1953. In the summer and autumn of that year, Shostakovich returned to symphonic composition for the first time since 1945. Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony received its premiere on December 17, 1953, with Evgeny Mravinsky, the composer's longtime friend and interpreter, conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic. Shostakovich refused to provide a public explanation of the Tenth Symphony, curtly stating: "Let them work it out for themselves." However, the Shostakovich of Volkov's *Testimony* was more forthcoming:

But I did depict Stalin in my next Symphony, the Tenth. I wrote it right after Stalin's death, and no one yet has guessed what the Symphony is about. It's about Stalin and the Stalin years. The second part, the scherzo, is about Stalin, roughly speaking. Of course, there are many other things in it, but that's the basis.

Assuming these words to be an accurate reflection of the composer's thoughts, the Symphony's program becomes intriguing, to say the least. In the Tenth Symphony, Shostakovich employs a device found in several of his works. It is a motif based on the notes D—E<sup>b</sup>—C—B, which in German musical notation is D—S—C—H, a monogram of the composer's name (**D. Schostakowitsch**). In the course of the Tenth Symphony, the "Shostakovich" motif confronts and defeats the "Stalin" music. Whether the Tenth Symphony in fact represents the triumph of Shostakovich over Stalin remains for the individual listener to decide. Without question, the work does represent the welcome resurrection of a brilliant symphonic composer and dramatist at the height of his powers.

### **Musical Analysis**

I. *Moderato*—The opening movement, by far the longest of the four, is constructed as a massive arch, based upon three themes, all of which are masterfully interwoven throughout. The first theme is immediately stated in ominous fashion by the lower strings. The solo clarinet introduces the more lyrical, but still quite melancholy, second theme. The music builds to a brief climax, with the strings offering hints of the undulating third and final theme. After a reprise of the second theme by the clarinet, the flute plays the final theme in complete form. The music builds inexorably to the lengthy central climax where the third theme, now played in militant fashion by the trumpets, is most prominent. The movement then begins its extended and steady decrescendo. An

affecting duet for piccolos, accompanied by the lower strings' repetition of the opening theme, concludes the opening movement.

II. *Allegro*—The strings play a forceful rhythm in 2/4 time, reminiscent of a Georgian dance known as the “Gopak.” Unlike most scherzos, which offer episodes of contrasting lyricism and repose, this brief *Allegro* assaults the listener with unremitting energy and power. The prominent use of brass and percussion lends a decidedly militaristic atmosphere to this “Stalin” movement, which rushes headlong to a violent conclusion.

III. *Allegretto*—As in the opening movement, the *Allegretto* features three principal motifs. The first is a rather puckish figure played in the opening measures by the violins. The piccolos, flutes and oboes present the first appearance of the “D—S—C—H” (Shostakovich) motif. The final motif, a solo horn call, serves to introduce the central *Largo* section. The *Allegretto* returns with the English horn intoning the opening motif. The “D—S—C—H” motif is now played with far greater force, at times conflicting with the oft-repeated horn call. The *Allegretto* concludes with faint echoes of the principal motifs.

IV. *Andante; Allegro*—The *Allegro* finale is preceded by an extended, atmospheric, slow introduction (*Andante*) that features several woodwind solos. Three staccato notes by the clarinet and a scurrying violin figure launch the *Allegro*, a whirlwind that has a decidedly celebratory air, particularly in contrast to the preceding movements. A stormy return of the “Stalin” music from the second movement is crushed by a full orchestral statement of the “D—S—C—H” figure. After a brief, lyrical interlude, the Symphony concludes with a reprise of the frenetic *Allegro* material, punctuated by triumphant statements of “D—S—C—H” in the brass and timpani.