



Mission Chamber Orchestra of San José

26th Season

Inspirations from Nature & Travel

Saturday, Feb. 25, 2023

7:30 PM

Hammer Theatre Center

San Jose, California

Program

“Wind River” (I Am)

Joseph Curiale

***Sunrise* world premiere**

Adrienne Albert

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, op. 43* **Sergei Rachmaninoff*

Sandra Wright Shen, pianist

- Intermission -

Symphony No. 9 *“From the New World”*, op. 95 **Antonin Dvorak**

No still or video photography is permitted during the performance.

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Mission Chamber Orchestra of San José

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About the Artist



Sandra Wright Shen

Steinway Artist Sandra Wright Shen has been described as a classical "pianist of the first order". With her passion, musicality, and inspiration, she aims to move hearts through music. Sandra has performed as a soloist and chamber musician in 14 countries and throughout the US, at prestigious venues such as the Kennedy Music Center in DC, the Chicago Cultural Center, Monte Carlo Opera House, Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona, Frankfurt Cultural Center in Germany, the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, Taiwan National Concert Hall, Korea Seoul Arts Center, Hong

Kong City Hall, Granada Intl. Music Festival, Recontres Musicale de Chaon in France, Brevard Music Festival and Masterworks Music Festival. As a guest artist, she has appeared with Charleston Symphony, Hilton Head Symphony, Redlands Symphony, Brevard Festival Sinfonia, New Millennium Orchestra, Greater San Diego Chamber Orchestra, Formosa Philharmonic Orchestra, Taiwan National Symphony, Taipei Symphony and others. Shen was the Artist-In-Residence of the Charleston Symphony for the 2017-18 season. She played chamber concerts with Vesselin Parashkevov, former concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and also performed on tour in Asia with cellist Nina Kotova.

Shen has received several first prizes in several major piano competitions, including the 2012 France International Piano Competition, 1997 Hilton Head International Piano Competition, the 1996 Mieczyslaw Munz Piano Competition, and the 1990 Taiwan National Piano Competition. Shen's recordings include her debut CD featuring Rachmaninoff's Third

Piano Concerto and the Saint-Saëns “Carnival of the Animals”, both released on the Taiwan Rolling Stone Music label.

As an educator, Shen serves on the piano faculty of San Francisco Conservatory Pre-College and Masterworks Music Festival, and served on the piano faculty at the Brevard Music Festival, Steinway Society Summer Music camp and American Fine Arts Festival in Europe. She also served as piano faculty at Southern Illinois University. She was twice invited to be Distinguished Visiting Professor at Furman University. Sandra performed live for WCQS radio station in Asheville, filmed a 4-part series titled "The Movements of the Master Pianists" for Hong Kong TV, and "Inspiration From Above" for US Creation TV. She also hosted a classical music program on Taiwan IC broadcast radio station. Mixing music and philanthropy, Sandra has played benefit concerts for disaster victims, foster children, and music education for underprivileged children. She is Honorary Advisor for Young Music Foundation and board member for Inspiring Foundation of Arts and Culture in Taiwan. Sandra was born in Taiwan and received her Bachelor and Master of Music in piano performance, and organ minor, from the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore Maryland, where she studied with legendary pianist, Ann Schein and organist Donald Sutherland. She lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

www.missionchamber.org

Program Notes

Wind River

Joseph Curiale (b. 1955)



Joseph Curiale was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He received a bachelor of Science in Music Education degree from the University of Bridgeport, a Master's Degree in Composition from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and a Doctorate in Music Composition from the University of Minnesota. He has held numerous teaching positions at the college level, spent almost 30 years writing, arranging and producing music for television (10 years for The Tonight Show, Johnny Carson) and

films (once nominated for an Emmy Award), has written two books and has one more in the works. He has also been nominated three times for the CNN Hero Award for his philanthropic activities. His foundation has helped widows and orphans of the mass of farmer suicides in India and has helped build homes for the needy and fund college fees for people in The Philippines.

"Wind River" (I Am) was commissioned by the University of Wyoming in celebration of the new millennium. Wind River is the name of a mountain range, part of the Rocky Mountains, in western Wyoming and contains the highest peak in Wyoming. Its beauty is protected by three federal wilderness areas and two national forests. One can feel the majesty of the mountains, hear the sounds of birds and running streams, and experience the exuberant feeling of being there in Curiale's music.

Sunrise

Adrienne Albert (b. 1941)



Award-winning composer Adrienne Albert (ASCAP) has had her chamber, choral, vocal, orchestral and wind band works performed throughout the United States and across the globe. Before beginning composing her own music in the 1990s, Albert enjoyed a long career as a singer working with composers including Igor Stravinsky, Leonard Bernstein, Philip Glass, Gunther Schuller among others,. Adrienne's own music has been supported by noteworthy arts organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, American Composers Forum, Meet The Composer/Rockefeller Foundation, Subito Awards, Mu Phi

Epsilon Fraternity, MPE Foundation, ACME, and ASCAP. Recent commissions include works for The Cornell University Chorus, Harvard-Westlake School, Holyoke Civic Symphony, Mu Phi Epsilon Foundation, Palisades Virtuosi, Zinkali Trio, Pennsylvania Academy of Music, Chamber Music Palisades, Pacific Serenades as well as private individuals. A graduate of UCLA, Albert studied composition privately with Stephen Mosko, and orchestration with Albert Harris. Her music has been recorded on MSR, Naxos, Navona, Centaur, Little Piper, Albany, and ABC Records and is published by Kenter Canyon Music (ASCAP). Her music can also be found through Falls House Press, FluteWorld, Theodore Front Musical Literature, and Trevco-Varner Music.

A few years ago when Emily Ray was serving as Music Director of the Community Women's Orchestra of Oakland, she asked Adrienne about works that might be suited to the group. One of the pieces Ms. Albert sent Ms. Ray was called *Sunrise*, recorded by a studio recording orchestra in the 1990's but never performed live. A different work was chosen to be performed by the women's orchestra, but when programming for the 2022-23 MCOSJ season, Ms. Ray told Ms. Albert she would like to program *Sunrise*. Unfortunately, Ms. Albert could not find her files containing the work, so she had to re-compose it. The version being premiered this evening is slightly different from the original.

A rising motive (representing the sun rising) played by solo flute at the beginning of *Sunrise* serves as the basis for the work. Upon the third statement of this motive, the melody descends back to the original note, then falls even farther to produce a winding, flowing tune. This morphs into a joyful melody with a jaunty accompaniment and an undulating figure suggesting the waving grasses of the open prairies. As the music gets quieter, a switch to a minor key ushers in a mood change and a beautiful oboe solo outlining a descending arpeggio, just the opposite of the rising opening melody. This theme is developed in this middle section, which reaches a climax before we hear a solo flute (bird calls, of course.) Next, the original melody returns, but this time brightened by introduction of the orchestral bells (glockenspiel.) This melody is also developed (the clouds are, perhaps, changing colors?) and after the "flowing tune" of the first section returns, the music gradually increases in volume again: the teeming life on earth awakens. A brilliant chord at the end proclaims the sun has risen!

Notes by Emily Ray

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini
Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 - 1943)



Sergei Rachmaninoff was born at his family's estate in Semyonovo, Russia in 1873. Displaying talent at an early age, he began piano lessons when he was four. He later attended the Moscow Conservatory. Throughout his young life,

he struggled financially and often taught piano to support himself and his family, though he preferred composing. Performance opportunities helped with the income flow, but he suffered from depression for three years, during which time he stopped composing. An offer to conduct opera improved his circumstances, but it wasn't until early 1900 that he received therapy for his depression, after which time he began composing again. Performance tours across Russia, England, in Paris, Dresden, and the United States (1909-1910) helped spread his fame, and it was an invitation to perform in Scandinavia that helped him and his family escape Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. He first settled in Denmark in 1918, but with the financial help of friends and offers of employment in the U.S., he and his family sailed from Oslo, Norway, to the United States later that year.

After fleeing Russia in 1917, Rachmaninoff composed only 6 works. The great virtuoso pianist had to take on a busy schedule of concert tours to sustain his family in the U.S. Eventually, he was financially well-off and bought a vacation house in Lucerne, Switzerland where he would spend summers with family. In the summer of 1934, he began working on the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and inspiration struck - it only took him 7 weeks to complete this work. It is a theme and variations for piano and orchestra, with 24 variations, based on a theme from Niccolò Paganini's Caprice No. 24 in A minor for solo violin. The premiere was in Baltimore under the direction of Leopold Stokowski, and it was an immediate success, and remains so to this day.

In its 24 variations, each variation builds on the previous one, exploring different moods and textures. The theme itself is a simple melody that is presented in the opening bars of the work. However, Rachmaninoff transforms this simple melody into a complex and intricate composition that is full of dramatic contrasts and emotional intensity. Throughout the piece, Rachmaninoff demonstrates his ability to create lush harmonies and intricate textures that highlight the virtuosity of the soloist.

Although we do not know exactly what Rachmaninoff was thinking when he composed the piece, we have a clue from a ballet production that was based on this piece. Choreographer Michel Fokine approached Rachmaninoff to do a ballet production together. Rachmaninoff was delighted and proposed an outline based on Paganini's life: the legend of Paganini exchanging his soul for supernatural violin technique (Var. 7-9), his romances with women (Var. 10-18), and his downfall (Var. 19-end).

The piece opens with a fragment of the theme in the orchestra with a dramatic response from the piano. This Introduction reminds us of Beethoven's Eroica variations which also begin with simple tonic and dominant (first and fifth notes of a scale.) The theme is first introduced by the orchestra in Variation 1, then piano in variation 2, and from there on the momentum progresses. The theme is then developed through a series of variations that range from playful and lighthearted to dark and brooding. Variation 6 sounds like the devil's persuasive offer where the piano ends the phrase higher and higher with an alluring question that grows stronger. In addition to Paganini's theme, Rachmaninoff introduced the Medieval chant "Dies Irae" (Latin for Day of Wrath) theme in variation 7, symbolizing the evil spirit. The two themes (Paganini theme played by the bassoon and Dies Irae theme by the piano) are juxtaposed. From there on, the demonic spirit increases with confrontation and rhythmic tension between the piano and the orchestra. Variation 11 is almost like music of transfiguration with the piano and harp arpeggiation and wistful violin tremolos which introduces the elegant dance in variation 12 where Rachmaninoff indicated this is the first appearance of the woman. The dance turns into a determined pursuit in variations 13 and 14. Then comes the homage to the great jazz pianist Art

Tatum in variation 15: fast finger passages present the theme inverted, which prepares the listener for the famous “love theme” in variation 18 where the theme is not only turned upside down, but transposed into a major key, as well. Rachmaninoff carefully planned the tonality of the piece to channel this special moment in Db major from the keys of A minor, D minor, F major, and dark Bb minor. This thoughtful tonal plan breathes in a deep yearning and a significant satisfaction when we arrive at variation 18 – a true stroke of genius! Variation 19 is a piano version of the showcase of Paganini’s brilliant pizzicato technique. It then reaches the grand finale with more virtuosity with octaves and chords and increasing chromaticism all the way to the end. The “Dies Irae” theme returns again at the end, almost like the devil gets the final word, “Haha! I got you!”

The *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is a showcase for the soloist, and often considered as the “5th concerto” by Rachmaninoff. The piece is a phenomenal work for piano and orchestra, tightly weaving together, and more than just a display of technical virtuosity. It is also a deeply emotional work that is full of passion, beauty, and drama.

Perhaps Rachmaninoff, a touring virtuoso of the order of Paganini, had been reflecting on his life at 61 years old, asking “was it really worth it?” As he was sitting in his chair in Lucerne, Switzerland, I believe Rachmaninoff was cautioning all of us, in his beautiful way, to “Make wise choices. Don’t get fooled by what you are chasing after.”

Notes by Sandra Shen

Symphony No. 9 “From the New World”

Antonin Dvorak (1841 - 1904)



Antonín Dvořák was born in Nelahoševce, in the current day Czech Republic. Showing an early talent for music, he played the violin, viola, piano, and organ. In his teens he started composing music, but did not become well known as a composer until his 30’s. A stint as a violist in an orchestra conducted by the Bohemian composer Bedrich Smetana marked a turning point for him, as Smetana encouraged him to write music that would reflect the culture of the Czech people.

After winning the Austrian Prize three times and with the recommendation by Johannes Brahms to his publisher, Dvořák started gaining recognition as a composer. Trips to foreign cities where his music was performed (London, Vienna, Moscow, and St. Petersburg) were highly successful.

In 1892 Dvořák came to the United States to become the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. One of his students was the African American Henry Burleigh, who introduced Negro spirituals to him. Dvořák felt these could form the basis for an American musical voice: “These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States. These beautiful and

varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them.” Indeed, his Symphony no. 9 and American Quartet contain themes inspired by the spirituals. While in the U.S., Dvořák spent time in Spillville, Iowa, where there was a Czech speaking community, and he researched Indigenous American music.

After spending three years in the U.S., Dvořák returned to his beloved homeland. He became director of the Prague Conservatory in 1901 after being named to the Austrian House of Lords. He remained director until his death in May of 1904.

The Symphony no. 9 in E minor, “*From the New World*” has been popular since its first performance at Carnegie Hall in 1893. While the melody in the opening introduction could easily pass as a Negro spiritual, a first-movement theme sounds very similar to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and the opening theme of the dancelike 3rd movement is said to be inspired by a dance of the Pa-Puk-Keewis, the symphony is multinational. One hears the “sweet-sour” melodic changes of Czech folk music, and Czech dance rhythms. The influence of Beethoven is also heard in the startling use of timpani in the symphony’s introduction and the reintroduction of early movement themes in later movements. Dvořák is also said to have written the beautiful second movement melody for clarinet, but changed it to English horn to better imitate the voice of Henry Burleigh. William Arms Fisher, a student of Dvořák, wrote lyrics to the melody in 1922, and it became the popular song, *Goin’ Home*, that was played on the radio frequently after the death of President Franklin Roosevelt. Astronaut Neil Armstrong carried a tape recording of the Symphony no. 9 to the moon with him on Apollo 11 in 1969.

Notes by Emily Ray

Acknowledgements

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