



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2021/2022 SEASON

Bahl & Time For Three

Friday, February 11, 2022 at 7:30 p.m. | Saturday, February 12, 2022 at 7:30 p.m. Holland
Performing Arts Center

Ankush Kumar Bahl, conductor

Time For Three: Nicolas Kendall, violin | Charles Yang, violin | Ranaan Meyer, double bass

SARAH KIRKLAND SNIDER

Something for the Dark

JENNIFER HIGDON

Concerto 4-3

I. The Shallows

II. Little River

III. Roaring Smokies

Time For Three, ensemble

RACHMANINOFF

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

I. Largo - Allegro moderato

II. Allegro molto

III. Adagio

IV. Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

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***Something for the Dark* (2016)**

Sarah Kirkland Snider

Born: Princeton, New Jersey, October 8, 1973

A native of Princeton, New Jersey, Sarah Kirkland Snider showed musical promise when she began piano lessons at age six, inspired by her parents' love of music as avid listeners rather than as musicians. After matriculating at Wesleyan University as an undergraduate, she continued studies at the Yale School of Music and in a subsequent fellowship at the Aspen Music Festival in 2006. Her music garnered interest and performances both in the United States and abroad. A number of grants and awards were bestowed by the National Endowment for the Arts, New Music USA, Opera America, and other music-oriented organizations.

In 2016, she composed *Something for the Dark* on a commission from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra after receiving the DSO's Elaine Lebenbom Memorial Award for Female Composers in 2014.

An imaginatively scored work, *Something for the Dark* alternates between opposing forces of hope versus despair. Loud, forceful episodes vie with quieter passages suggestive of inner strength and youthful idealism. An assertive presence of winds and brass initially seems to prevail, yet the softer "voices" mediate conflict and lead to resolution.

The composer has shared her thoughts on the work:

"Thinking about Detroit led me to think about resilience, and what it means to endure. After a brief hint of passing doubt, *Something for the Dark* opens with a bold, heroic statement of hope and fortitude in the horns and trombones. I think of this music as the optimism of a very young person. Initially, I envisioned this motif journeying through a bit of challenge and adversity to arrive at an even stronger, bolder version of itself: Growth! Triumph! A happy ending! But that wasn't what happened. Early into its search for glory, the motif finds itself humbled beyond recognition: a delicate, childlike tune in the flute, harp, and celeste arises in its stead. This new version of hope is then put through a series of challenges that roil and churn it like the sea tossing a small boat – testing it, weathering it, even taunting it with memories of its early hubristic naïveté. Eventually, the music finds its way to solid ground, and though its countenance has now darkened, its heroism a distant memory, there is serenity and some wisdom – and perhaps, even, the kind of hope that endures.

"The title of the piece comes from a poem by Philip Levine, the Detroit-born-and-raised former US poet laureate who was best known for his poems about Detroit's working class. The last two lines of his poem "For Fran" struck me as an apt motto for his many clear-eyed reflections on endurance. In preparing the flower beds for winter, Levine's wife becomes a symbol of the promise of renewal:

"She packs the flower beds with leaves/Rags, dampened papers, ties with twine/
The lemon tree, but winter carves/Its features on the uprooted stem...
I turn to her whose future bears/The promise of the appalling air/
My living wife, Frances Levine, Mother of Theodore, John and Mark/
Out of whatever we have been/We will make something for the dark." (Philip Levine)

Concerto 4-3

Jennifer Higdon

Born: Brooklyn, New York, December 31, 1962

Pulitzer Prize-winning Jennifer Higdon has continued to entice legions of fans for her accessible but finely crafted music. A conducting student of Atlanta Symphony music director Robert Spano, her popular Concerto for Orchestra—championed and recorded by her mentor—struck a resonant chord with many music lovers throughout the world of classical music. Like Rachmaninoff, her music continues to enthrall devotees in the face of snobbish negativity from critics who fault her and her Russian predecessor for being "overly" accessible. Still, she continues to compose in a neo-Romantic style that sounds resolutely modern yet comfortably tonal. She joins many composers of the past several decades who found new and relevant purpose in minor/major key harmony.

Studies in composition with Ned Rorem and the late George Crumb fostered her gift for incorporating beguiling romance of the former with the avant-garde proclivities of the latter. Rorem opined, “I don’t think of her as a former student but as a colleague. If I had to name 12 important American composers today, four of them would be women, and Jennifer Higdon is the best of them.”

The composer has described the work herein:

“Concerto 4-3 is a three-movement concerto, featuring two violins and a bass, which uses the language of Classical music with dashes of bluegrass technique. The work is divided into three movements, with the option to perform a cadenza between the first and second movements. The movement titles refer to rivers that run through the Smoky Mountains (where growing up, I heard quite a bit of bluegrass): ‘The Shallows,’ ‘Little River,’ and ‘Roaring Smokies.’ I wanted to reference the Smokies, because East Tennessee was the first place that I really experienced bluegrass (or as they call it there, Mountain Music.)

“The first movement, ‘The Shallows,’ incorporates unique extended techniques (a manner of playing beyond the normal way of playing these instruments) that mimic everything from squeaking mice to electric guitars. These sounds resemble parts of the mountain rivers that move in shallow areas, where small rocks and pebbles make for a rapid ride that moves a rafter quickly from one side of the river to the other.

“The second movement, ‘Little River,’ is slow-moving and lyrical, very much in hymn-like fashion. This movement reflects the beauty of Little River as it flows through Townsend and Walland, Tennessee. At times there is real serenity and a majestic look to the water, with no movement obvious on the pure, glassy surface.

“The third movement, ‘Roaring Smokies,’ is a rapid-fire virtuosic movement that shifts and moves very much like a raging river (those wild mountain waters that pour out of the mountains.) It is fun to swim in those old waters, but your attention must always be alert, as danger lurks... the water goes where it wants and will take you with it.

“While Concerto 4-3 is written in the Classical vein, there are certain bluegrass techniques incorporated into the fabric of the piece: emphasis on offbeats, open strings, and slides. But the language is definitely tonal, 21st century and American-sounding in style. This work was commissioned by The Philadelphia Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony and the Wheeling Symphony.”

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: Semyonovo, near Novgorod, Russia, April 1, 1873 | Died: Beverly Hills, California, March 28, 1943

Though Rachmaninoff lived well into the 20th century, the gifted pianist/conductor/composer carried forward the ripe Romanticism of Tchaikovsky. During the 1960s in particular, composers and critics tended to dismiss his music because of its direct appeal to a wide audience, but the passage of time has not diminished his popularity. Rachmaninoff had a great penchant for the big-hearted sweeping melodies that epitomize late Romanticism. His most popular orchestral works are the second and third piano concertos, Second Symphony, and the Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini.

He was born on a large estate near the ancient city of Novgorod, the son of an army officer and a wealthy heiress. His father gambled, drank to excess, and squandered his wife’s money, finally deserting his family when Sergei was nine years old. By all accounts the boy was a problem child, but clearly manifested extraordinary talent at the piano. At age nine he entered the College of Music in St. Petersburg. Because of his natural gift, he reputedly did not bother to study. To solve his discipline problem Rachmaninoff moved to Moscow to live with Nikolai Zvereff, a leading music teacher at the Moscow Conservatory. In 1892, Rachmaninoff graduated from the Conservatory with high honors.

He made his first visit to the United States in 1909 to rapturous acclaim. Henceforth, he visited America yearly. Rachmaninoff died on March 28, 1943, only a few weeks after becoming an American citizen, and five days before his seventieth birthday. In addition to his substantial gifts as a composer and pianist, he was also considered a first-rate conductor.

As in his life, a strain of melancholy pervades much of Rachmaninoff's music. Much has been made of his mental collapse following the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony, and his eventual "cure" through the intercession of a hypnotist, Dr. Dahl, whose successful treatment led immediately to the composer's wildly—to this day—popular Second Piano Concerto. Even with widespread public acclaim Rachmaninoff insisted that he never got over the pain of the Symphony's miserable reception. Adding to his woes were the immediate consequences of World War I and the Russian Revolution, which stripped his aristocratic family of its status and wealth. He never returned to Russia and remained consumed with homesickness to the end. The biographical facts of his life give ample reason for his melancholy, but he was probably bio-chemically predisposed to depression. The combination of "wiring" and traumatic events contributed to his chronic depression.

Because of its length—almost an hour—the Symphony underwent several abridgments, reducing its time span to roughly 35 minutes. Today, however, it is virtually always performed in its entirety, around an hour's length.

A unifying principle at work in the Symphony derives from using the primary themes and motifs throughout the composition. The initial motif presented by the low strings in the *Largo* introduction reappears often and plays a role in subsequent rhapsodic soaring melodies. Brooding, mysterious and dramatically intense, the music alternates between stormy conflict and serenity. An English horn solo initiates the *Allegro moderato* that comprises the remainder of the movement. A powerful eruption of emotional intensity infuses the development section, softened in the recap, which recalls the previous serene music.

A scherzo, *Allegro molto*, follows in the typically Russian tradition of often placing it second rather than third—as did the distinctly non-Russian Beethoven Ninth. One commentator described this movement as "vigorous to the point of abandon." A brass chorale at the movement's end surprises with a funereal reference, the Medieval *Dies irae* (symbol of Death and Punishment) inspired or cursed by the Black Death. The inescapable depression that haunted Rachmaninoff his entire life is found in many of his works, including even the Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini. Many other composers were drawn to this theme including, most tellingly, in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*.

The third movement *Adagio* is the emotional center of the piece, and incorporates two beautiful melodies, each presented in various forms and guises, sometimes intertwined. The first theme, played by ascending violins, appeared in 1976 in the pop song "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again" by Eric Carmen, which peaked at number 11 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in June 1976 and remained in the Top 40 for ten weeks. A solo clarinet introduces the second theme, *Espressivo e cantabile*. English horn and oboe solos softly appear mid-section. Shortly, the emotional climax of the Symphony all but erupts but soon fades into a decrescendo and ultimately into long silence. A horn leads to the first theme, ultimately linking it back to the opening movement.

The *Allegro vivace* follows the Russian symphonic tradition by summing up the themes heard in the previous movements (again as Beethoven did in the Ninth). Sweeping and grandiloquent, Rachmaninoff sets it in sonata form. Several ideas course through the movement, its opening triplet theme, the strutting march tune and the Romantic string melody of the third movement. It's a tremendous emotional conclusion to a monumental, rhapsodic masterwork.

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Time For Three

Defying convention and boundaries, Time For Three stands at the busy intersection of Americana, modern pop, and classical music. To experience Time For Three (TF3) live is to hear the various eras, styles, and traditions of Western music fold in on themselves and emerge anew. Bonded by an uncommon blend of their instruments fused together with their voices, Charles Yang (violin, vocals), Nicolas “Nick” Kendall (violin, vocals), and Ranaan Meyer (double bass, vocals), have found a unique voice of expression to share with the world.

Earning praise from NPR, NBC, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times* to name a few, the band has become renowned for their charismatic and energetic performances. Having graced the

stages of Carnegie Hall, The Kennedy Center, and The Royal Albert hall, their inimitable and mutable style fits equally well in an intimate club setting, like Joe’s Pub in New York, or Yoshi’s in San Francisco. In 2016, Time For Three was featured on the famed “Night of the Proms” tour, sharing the stage with such artists as Chaka Khan and Ronan Keating, playing arenas throughout several European countries. The trio has collaborated with artists as diverse as Ben Folds, Branford Marsalis, Joshua Bell, Aoife O’Donovan, Natasha Bedingfield, and Arlo Guthrie, and have premiered original works--written for the band--from composers Chris Brubeck and Pulitzer Prize-winners Jennifer Higdon and William Bolcom. An upcoming commission project includes a work by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Kevin Puts. They’ve appeared on ABC’s *Dancing With The Stars*, and won an Emmy for “Time For Three In Concert,” produced by PBS. Yet for all their accolades and diverse experiences, the irrepressible band constantly hungers for new ones. In 2020, the band partnered with cellist and composer Ben Sollee to put together the soundtrack to the new Focus Features’ film *Land*, starring and directed by Robin Wright. The film first premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 31, 2021.

With a collection of new songs, the band has teamed up with Grammy-winning songwriter Liz Rose and Grammy-winning producer Femke Weidema for new recordings released through Warner Music.



Jennifer Higdon, composer

Jennifer Higdon is one of America’s most acclaimed figures in contemporary classical music, receiving the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Music for her Violin Concerto, a 2010 Grammy for her Percussion Concerto, a 2018 Grammy for her Viola Concerto and, most recently, a 2020 Grammy for her Harp Concerto.

Higdon’s first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the International Opera Award for Best World Premiere and the opera recording was nominated for two Grammy awards. In 2018, Higdon received the prestigious Nemmers Prize from Northwestern University, which is awarded to contemporary classical composers of exceptional achievement who have significantly influenced the field of composition. Higdon enjoys several hundred performances a year of her works, and her works have been recorded on more than seventy CD’s.



Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

Currently in his first season as Music Director of the Omaha Symphony, Ankush Kumar Bahl has delivered resonant performances of masterworks, new and old, championing American composers and artists while pursuing innovative, community-based concert design. Bahl is recognized by orchestras and audiences alike for his impressive conducting technique, thoughtful interpretations, and engaging podium presence. In concert, he has left *The Washington Post* “wanting to hear more” and has been praised by *The New York Times* for his “clear authority and enthusiasm” and ability to “inspire.”

Highlights of previous and upcoming guest engagements include concerts with the New York Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México, Richmond Symphony, Virginia Symphony, Louisiana Philharmonic, and the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO, in Washington, D.C.). Summer festival appearances engagements include the Copenhagen Philharmonic at Tivoli, Sun Valley Summer Symphony, Wintergreen Summer Music

Festival, Chautauqua Institute, Wolf Trap with the NSO, and a debut at the Brevard Music Center in the summer of 2022. An experienced collaborator, Bahl has worked with many prominent soloists, among them Daniil Trifonov, Lang Lang, Sarah Chang, Lara St. John, Karen Gomyo, Aaron Diehl, Bhezod Abduraimov, Benjamin Grosvenor, Orion Weiss, Conrad Tao, Charlie Albright, Anthony McGill, Kelley O'Connor, Philadelphia Orchestra Concertmaster David Kim, and Vesko Eschkenazy, concertmaster of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Bahl is a proud recipient of four separate Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Awards between 2011 and 2016 and the 2009 Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Scholarship. A protégé of former New York Philharmonic Music Director Kurt Masur, he served as his assistant conductor at the Orchestre National de France, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. From 2011 to 2015, he was assistant conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra under Christoph Eschenbach, leading a variety of concerts over the course of 100 performances. Bahl has been fortunate to also count Maestros Jaap van Zweden, Zdenek Macal, David Zinman, and Gianandrea Noseda among his mentors.

American born and of Indian descent, Ankush Kumar Bahl is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area and received a double degree in music and rhetoric from the University of California at Berkeley. He was a conducting fellow at the Aspen Music Festival with David Zinman and completed his master's degree in orchestral conducting at the Manhattan School of Music with Zdenek Macal and George Manahan. In recent years, Bahl has been a frequent collaborator with jazz legend Wayne Shorter, conducting his quartet in concerts of his orchestral music at The Kennedy Center and Detroit Free Jazz Festival.