



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2021/2022 SEASON

Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*

Friday, March 11, 2022 - 7:30 PM | Saturday, March 12, 2022 - 7:30 PM

Holland Performing Arts Center

Ankush Kumar Bahl, conductor

Gabriela Martinez, piano

MICHAEL DAUGHERTY

Red Cape Tango from Metropolis Symphony

RACHMANINOFF

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43

Gabriela Martinez, piano

INTERMISSION

BERLIOZ

Symphonie Fantastique, Op. 14

- I. Rêveries, Passions (Dreams and Passions)
- II. Un bal (A Ball)
- III. Scène aux champs (Scene in the Country)
- IV. Marche au supplice (March to the Scaffold)
- V. Songe d'une nuit du sabbat (Dream of a Witches' Sabbath)

SPONSORED BY:



Red Cape Tango from Metropolis Symphony

Michael Daugherty

Born: Cedar Rapids, Iowa, April 28, 1954

Born into a richly talented family of musicians, Michael Daugherty has occupied a space in the pantheon of frequently performed American composers. Born in the heartland of the Midwest to a dance-band drummer, he and his four brothers followed his father's lead in becoming professional musicians. The composer's range of music-related endeavors include teaching and performing as a pianist in addition to his critically acclaimed compositions. His studies include composition at the University of North Texas, the Manhattan School of Music and computer music at Pierre Boulez' famed and at times controversial IRCAM in Paris. In common with many American composers he has absorbed influences from popular culture, freshly renewed Romanticism, contemporary "classical" and current Post-Modernism. His teachers were among the leading lights of contemporary music, including Jacob Druckman, Earle Brown, Bernard Rands and Roger Reynolds at Yale, and György Ligeti in Hamburg. Reflecting the origins of his musical interests, he also served as an assistant of jazz great Gil Evans.

Paying homage to the comic book universe, Daugherty composed his *Metropolis Symphony*, inspired by the "Man of Steel"—Superman—in 1993 from which the fifth movement has become a popular standalone work - the *Red Cape Tango*. Listeners may hear a familiar refrain, the Medieval chant, *Dies irae*—"Day of Wrath"—used by composers old and new, including both Berlioz in *Symphonie Fantastique* and Rachmaninoff in his Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, heard directly after this piece.

The setting of *Red Cape Tango* limns a musical portrait of Superman's fight to the death with Doomsday, alternating between potent dark elements and sardonic comic asides. Herein, the threat of Doomsday appears as an irresistible siren who lures Superman through the magnetic power of a fateful tango.

A slow and languorous evocation of the *Dies irae* motif in the brass is soon joined by bells and eerie groans from the orchestra. The Medieval theme morphs into a tango-based variant. Rapidly rising strings and injections of strife add to the sense of a major battle. Timpani and other percussion heighten the sense of conflict. Strings and the armament of struck instruments bring strong coloration in keeping with the "warfare," while a steady background of tango rhythm endures. A loud thwack ends the battle.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: Starorussky, Uyezd, April 1, 1873 | Died: Beverly Hills, California, March 28, 1943

With his tall, gaunt, dark demeanor, Rachmaninoff's appearance fit that of the prototypical, mystery-shrouded, 19th-century Romantic artist. Esteemed as a piano virtuoso and a gifted composer in tune with the public, he left an enduring legacy of works for piano and orchestra that continue to move the multitudes despite decades of disparagement from critics. His big, warm-hearted tunes, often emerging unannounced at the most opportune moments, sweep away all concerns about formal weakness. As a performer, his awareness of how to "wow" his audiences filled his concert works with unmistakable showmanship wedded to romantic ardor.

The composer was still smarting over the less-than-cordial welcome received by his fourth piano concerto, especially galling after the adulation accorded to numbers two and three, and he had composed almost nothing for five years. Inspiration seemed to gain a foothold, however, with the completion of his final work for solo piano, the Variations on a Theme of Corelli, in 1934. In short order he began work on a new piece for piano and orchestra, also in variation form, a scheme that proved more cordial to his compositional style than sonata-allegro had ever been. The result was the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (1934), an immediate and enduring success for both musical novices and sophisticated listeners. Famed maestro Leopold Stokowski led the premiere in Baltimore with the composer at the keyboard.

The Rhapsody is a set of 24 variations based on the last of two dozen Caprices for solo violin by Niccolò Paganini, that archetypal Romantic virtuoso of the early 19th century. Paganini's dark, gaunt visage and stunning virtuosity – not dissimilar to Rachmaninoff himself! – captivated virtually everybody who heard him, which included as disparate a group of composers as Schumann, Chopin and Liszt. His name also became synonymous with the concept of selling one's soul for talent, which may have encouraged Rachmaninoff to appropriate the formidable, Medieval *Dies irae* and insert the theme into variations 7, 10, and 24.

After an eight-bar introduction, the orchestra and piano begin their ongoing dialogue in earnest, each variation exploring different facets of color, mood and pacing. Two-thirds through the piece, having demonstrated that his powers of composition had in no way diminished despite half a decade of near silence, Rachmaninoff conjures up the justly famous, achingly gorgeous 18th variation, whose lovely theme has entranced listeners for more than six decades. Marked *Andante cantabile*, this irresistible, heartfelt tune is an inversion of Paganini's Caprice, slowed down and refashioned into a melancholic theme that epitomizes a key facet of the Romantic spirit. Having conjured that memorable tune, the cagy composer returns to the world of pianistic virtuosity, investing the remaining variations with increasing brilliance. The final pages of the score interweave Paganini's tune with the *Dies irae* motif, back for one last devilish romp before concluding with a delightful twist.

Symphonie Fantastique

Hector Berlioz

Born: La Côte-Saint-André, France, December 11, 1803 | Died: Rue de Calais, Paris, France, March 8, 1869

No composer was more infused with the spirit of early and extravagant romanticism than Hector Berlioz. A pioneering master of orchestral sonority, he wrote for instruments in a manner that challenged standard usage, often asking musicians to play outside of the "normal" range. He strove to thereby enrich the orchestral palette and to create intentionally strange sounds to evoke shadowy areas of human emotion. No wonder that Mahler, writing more than half a century later, was so strongly taken with Berlioz's "imaginative scoring." The nightmarish sonorities of Mahler's eerie scherzos derive from the phantasmagoric world of the *Symphonie Fantastique*.

In 1830, Berlioz became quite a name in Paris, though one would be hard-pressed to choose which adjective would best describe him: "famous" or "notorious." His hallucinatory *Symphonie Fantastique* put him on the musical map, but his obsessive courtship (today it would be called "stalking") of English actress Harriet Smithson only added to the conception that he had perhaps had one puff too many of the opium ingested by the hero of his quasi-autobiographical symphony.

Cast in five movements, the *Symphonie Fantastique* celebrated the wedding of an explicit storyline with symphonic form. Berlioz, a fine writer about music—readers are encouraged to savor the delights of the composer's book *Evenings with the Orchestra*—provided a listener's guide to each movement. Of the opening movement, "Dreams and Passions," he notes: "The author imagines that a young vibrant musician, afflicted by the sickness of spirit which a famous writer has called the wave of passion, sees for the first time a woman who unites all the charms of the ideal person his imagination was dreaming of, and falls desperately in love with her." A distinctive theme known as an *idée fixe* (essentially an obsessive idea) represents the Smithson-based muse; as befits its descriptor the tune recurs obsessively in various guises throughout the symphony. The wildness and range of the protagonist's mental and emotional states are strongly limned through kaleidoscopic changes in texture, color and rhythmic dislocations, all in all a prescient anticipation of the music of the 20th-century.

A distinct change of mood characterizes the following movement, "A Ball." Here Berlioz places his alter-ego at a festive party that begins with a brief mysterious introduction to the main theme, an energetic and somewhat manic Waltz, twice interrupted by the *idée fixe* to remind us that the hero's obsession cannot be stilled.

The extended third movement, "Scene in the Country," finds the would-be suitor enjoying the calm beauty of the countryside, only to be distracted by internal musings about his lover's faithfulness. The music captures his unsettling mixture of hope and fear, of happiness traduced by dark premonitions.

The fourth movement, "March to the Scaffold," is remarkably modern in the eerie timbres that suggest the nightmarish quality of the "storyline." The hero dreams that he has killed his beloved and is condemned to death and led to his execution.

The inspired weirdness of the "March to the Scaffold" is chillingly exceeded in the concluding "Dream of a Witches' Sabbath." The *idée fixe* theme is maniacally altered in a dizzying version by a wailing clarinet. Later the Medieval *Dies irae* theme appears in profane mockery of the Catholic Church. The devolution from dance to total chaos is both overwhelming and extraordinarily ebullient; Berlioz's world – and alter-ego – truly goes to hell in a handbasket.

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Gabriela Martinez, piano

Versatile, daring and insightful, Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Martinez is establishing a reputation on both the national and international stage for the lyricism of her playing, her compelling interpretations, and her elegant stage presence.

Delos recently released Ms. Martinez's debut solo album, *Amplified Soul*, which features a wide-ranging program including works by Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, and Szymanowski. She also pays homage to acclaimed composers Mason Bates and Dan Visconti, whose title selection, *Amplified Soul* (world premiere recording), was written for her. Ms. Martinez collaborated with Grammy Award-winning producer David Frost on the recording. A music video of *Amplified Soul* can be found on Ms. Martinez's YouTube Channel.

Since making her orchestral debut at age 7, Ms. Martinez has played with such distinguished orchestras as the San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, New Jersey, Tucson, West Michigan, Pacific and Fort Worth symphonies; Germany's Stuttgarter Philharmoniker, MDR Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra,

Nurnberger Philharmoniker; Canada's Victoria Symphony Orchestra; the Costa Rica National Symphony and the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra in Venezuela. Recent season highlights include debut appearances with the Buffalo, Boulder, Dayton and National philharmonic orchestras and the Jacksonville, Delaware, Akron, La Crosse, Modesto, Rogue Valley, Springfield (MO), Topeka, and Wichita symphony orchestras.

She has performed with Gustavo Dudamel, James Gaffigan, James Conlon, Marcelo Lehninger and Guillermo Figueroa, among many others, and has performed at such esteemed venues as Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, Merkin Hall and Alice Tully Hall in New York City; the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, El Paso Pro Musica Series, the Kansas City Harriman-Jewell Series; Canada's Glenn Gould Studio; Salzburg's Grosses Festspielhaus; Dresden's Semperoper; Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens; and Paris's Palace of Versailles. Her festival credits include the Mostly Mozart, Ravinia, and Rockport festivals in the United States; Italy's Festival dei Due Mondi (Spoleto); Switzerland's Verbier Festival; the Festival de Radio France et Montpellier; and Japan's Tokyo International Music Festival.

Her wide-ranging career includes world premieres of new music, live performance broadcasts, and interviews on TV and radio. Her performances have been featured on National Public Radio, CNN, PBS, *60 Minutes*, ABC, *From the Top*, Radio France, WQXR and WNYC (New York), MDR Kultur and Deutsche Welle (Germany), NHK (Japan), RAI (Italy), and on numerous television and radio stations in Venezuela.

Ms. Martinez was the First Prize winner of the Anton G. Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Dresden, and a semifinalist at the 12th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, where she also received the Jury Discretionary Award. She began her piano studies in Caracas with her mother, Alicia Gaggioni, and attended The Juilliard School, where she earned her Bachelor and Master of Music degrees as a full scholarship student of Yoheved Kaplinsky. Ms. Martinez was a fellow of Carnegie Hall's The Academy, and a member of Ensemble Connect (formerly known as Ensemble ACJW), while concurrently working on her doctoral studies with Marco Antonio de Almeida in Halle, Germany.



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.