

# Seascapes

Saturday, August 8, 2009 • 8 p.m.

## Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

(born February 3, 1809; died November 4, 1847)

### Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage Overture (Op. 27, 1828/1834)

This year marks Felix Mendelssohn's 200th birthday, and in celebration, the Britt Orchestra will perform a number of his works, including this evening's opener.

This overture is based on two poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German author and poet who inspired numerous composers with his writing. In fact, Ludwig van Beethoven also composed a piece based on the same two poems as Mendelssohn's overture. The two poems are titled *Meeres Stille* (Calm Sea, or more accurately, Becalmed at Sea) and *Glueckliche Fahrt* (Prosperous Voyage). Here are the two poems in their entirety:

#### Meeres Stille

*Tiefe Stille herrscht im Wasser,  
ohne Regung ruht das Meer,  
und bekümmert sieht der Schiffer  
glatte Fläche ringsumher.  
Keine Luft von keiner Seite!  
Todesstille fürchterlich!  
In der ungeheuern Weite  
reget keine Welle sich.*

Deep stillness rules the water,  
the sea rests motionless,  
and the sailor looks anxiously  
at the smooth surface all around him.  
No wind from any direction!  
A terrible deathly stillness!  
In the entire vast expanse  
not a single wave rises.

#### Glueckliche Fahrt

*Die Nebel zerreißen,  
der Himmel ist helle,  
und Aeolus löset  
das ängstliche Band.  
Es säuseln die Winde,  
es rührt sich der Schiffer.  
Geschwinde! Geschwinde!  
Es teilt sich die Welle,  
es naht sich die Ferne.  
Schon seh' ich das Land!*

The mist is clearing,  
the sky grows bright,  
and Aeolus loosens  
the constraining bond.  
The winds are sighing,  
the sailor is roused.  
Quickly! Quickly!  
The waves divide,  
the distance draws near  
already I see land!

The contrast in mood of these two poems is depicted by two distinct sections. The first, a slow Adagio, shows the still waters of the ocean, an inauspicious sign for any sailor, portending a long journey ahead. The flute calls that end the first section can be thought of as the distant cry of a sea bird, or, perhaps it was meant as the first sign that the wind was picking back up, signaling the resumption of the voyage. Either way, this introductory section portrays the mood in Goethe's poem very expertly.

The second section, marked Molto Allegro vivace, depicts the clearing of the skies and the springing up of the breeze; one can hear the excitement the mariners might have felt at the continuation of their journey as we launch into very upbeat and animated music. This whole section seems to build to the exciting ending, which suggests the arrival in port, as the sailors celebrate the end of a prosperous voyage!

## Sergei Rachmaninoff

(born March 20, 1873; died March 28, 1943)

### Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor (Op. 40, 1926/1941)

- I. Allegro vivace
- II. Largo
- III. Allegro vivace

In many musical circles, the name Sergei Rachmaninoff has become synonymous with the piano, and understandably so. He was one of the finest pianists of his time, as well as an accomplished conductor and composer. As a composer, he represents the last of the great Russian late Romantics, and arguably the greatest among them. Many pianists have been scared off by his difficult writing, but his piano works never include virtuosity for virtuosity's sake. He sought to write music that explores the complete

expressive possibilities of his instrument; even his earliest works display his firm grasp of idiomatic piano writing and his gift for melody, the driving force behind most of his music.

By 1918, Rachmaninoff had left Russia for good, amidst the Soviet Revolution. He eventually settled in America (he died in Beverly Hills, California). At the end of 1925, he decided to limit his concertizing in America, and sold all his property. This gave Rachmaninoff nine months without any obligations, which meant plenty of time for composing. He turned immediately to writing a fourth piano concerto, one that he likely had been contemplating since 1914. He rented a flat in New York City, and worked on the new concerto. He didn't finish the concerto until 1926, while he was summering in Dresden. At this point, the piece was extremely long; Rachmaninoff commented to a friend that it would have to be "performed on successive nights, like the *Ring* (Wagner's epic opera cycle which lasts about 15 hours)." He made numerous cuts to his concerto before performing it on March 18, 1927 in Philadelphia, to a less than enthusiastic public. Before having the work published, he made more changes to the score, but it still did not impress audiences, so he withdrew it from his repertoire until he could examine what was wrong with it in more detail, something he didn't get around to until 1941. That fall, he played the piece again in Philadelphia, to a somewhat more enthusiastic audience. One reviewer commented that, "for all his 68 years, Rachmaninoff is still one of the most virile and brilliant young pianists before the public today."

With this piano concerto, we hear a mature and vital Rachmaninoff. The first movement shows off his talent for melodious writing, with two broad themes that suggest a bit of nostalgia. Midway through the piece, Rachmaninoff alludes to the *Dies Irae*, a Latin hymn that describes the Day of Judgment. He often quoted or alluded to this hymn in his compositions, implying a sort of obsession throughout his life.

In this work, we also hear his exposure to American jazz, particularly in the bluesy theme of the second movement. He greatly admired jazz pianists such as Art Tatum, and was in attendance at the premiere of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. This by no means implies that Rachmaninoff was an imitator. He simply absorbed what was around him and used it in his own compositions. Listen for the jazz influence in this movement and in the final one. Some of the jazz elements Rachmaninoff tried to incorporate were a bit awkward, which might in part explain the lukewarm reception the work received when it was premiered. Beyond the clear American influence, one can also hear quotations of his earlier piano concerti in this movement.

There is no pause between the second movement and the finale, which begins with rhythmic excitement and vitality. Rachmaninoff's use of rhythmic activity and orchestral color in this movement are not typical of his style, but still serve to enhance the energy of the piece. All the while, the composer's aptitude for melodious writing becomes very apparent. The soloist's part in this movement is truly stunning. Towards the end of the work, there are some truly Hollywood-worthy moments that bring the orchestra ever higher, until it all begins to fall away to make room for one last lengthy flourish by the piano. The orchestra then joins, and brings us to a climatic ending that will leave the audience breathless.

## Jean Sibelius

(born December 8, 1865; died September 20, 1957)

### **The Oceanides (Op. 76, 1913-1914)**

The orchestra now turns back to the sea, with Jean Sibelius's *The Oceanides*. Sibelius was a Finnish composer of primarily orchestral music. He wrote seven symphonies, one violin concerto, several sets of incidental music and many tone poems, including *The Oceanides*. Finland regards Sibelius as a national hero and its finest artist. Outside of Finland, his reputation has been mixed, but today he is generally regarded as one of the premier composers to come from the Nordic countries.

Sibelius often wrote tone poems based on the Kalevala, the Finnish folk epic; in the case of *The Oceanides*, he drew from Greek mythology for the subject of his music. The Oceanids were the nymphs of the ocean. There were thousands of these nymphs, who were all daughters of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys. Some of these nymphs figure prominently in Greek myths, but for the most part, they are considered lesser deities.

In the early 20th century, the music of Jean Sibelius was at the center of the ongoing modernist/anti-modernist debate. During this time, composers like Arnold Schoenberg were altering the course of music with new and different compositional techniques that were outside of the traditional major/minor system (a movement in music generally labeled as Expressionism). In early 1914, Sibelius took a month-long trip to Berlin to hear where music was going. He heard concerts with the music of Debussy, Mahler, Strauss and Schoenberg. Sibelius wrote of the new Expressionism that it was "a legitimate and valid way of looking at things... but it is certainly painful to listen to." In more traditional circles, Sibelius was seen as a needed break from the bizarre twists of Expressionism and modernism, which helped him on several occasions get commissions and concerts. In 1913, he was invited on a concert tour of the USA, and was commissioned to write a new work for the occasion. This work turned out to be *The Oceanides*, one of only two works he wrote specifically for a tour of America.

Toward the end of his life, Sibelius spoke of *The Oceanides* as one of his favorites of his own works. Although a specific program is not given, one can easily imagine nymphs dancing through the waters of the ocean, with its billowing waves and unpredictable weather. All the themes in this work are concise in nature, with brief touches of color from various members of the orchestra. Some analysts have used the term pointillist in describing the way in which Sibelius orchestrated this piece, and one can hear

clear influence from the Impressionist school of composers, like Debussy and Ravel. Some scholars think that *The Oceanides* was a response to Debussy's *La Mer*, which is also on the program tonight. Regardless, *The Oceanides* contains many original and beautiful moments, in a fashion only Sibelius could pull off.

## Claude Debussy

(born August 22, 1862; died March 25, 1918)

### La Mer (L 109, 1905)

- I. De l'aube à midi sur la mer (From dawn to midday on the sea) - Très lent
- II. Jeux de vagues (Play of the Waves) - Allegro
- III. Dialogue du vent et de la mer (Dialogue between wind and waves) - Animé et tumultueux

Claude Debussy was one of the most important figures in music during the late 19th and early 20th century. Described as an Impressionist (perhaps inaccurately, as will be discussed), he changed the way composers thought of orchestral color with music that appeals to the senses instead of the intellect. His most impressive works are his orchestral ones, like *Nocturnes* and *La Mer*, but he also wrote some chamber music, an opera, a great deal of piano music and numerous songs for voice and piano.

Impressionism was a movement in French art in which “the how dominates the what.” Details served second billing to overall effects, and often times, paintings only give a faint outline of what is actually being portrayed. Impressionism in music arose as a response to the excesses of the Romantic era. Romantic music is characterized by huge orchestras, long forms like the symphony, and the use of the major/minor tonal system (often stretched to its limits). Impressionist music, on the other hand, utilized shorter forms like the prelude and the nocturne, and exotic tonal schemes, such as the whole tone scale.

Debussy in particular eschewed the ideals of the Romantic era. However, early in his career, Debussy greatly admired Richard Wagner, the very epitome of Romantic ideals. At one point, Debussy won a bet that he could play the entire opera *Tristan & Isolde* from memory at the keyboard. The influence of Wagner began to haunt him later. When working on his own opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, he wrote to a friend he was having trouble avoiding “the ghost of old Klingsor, alias Richard Wagner, appearing at the turning of a bar.” He had set out to define his own style that was beyond Wagner, and appears to have succeeded.

*La Mer* is widely regarded as one of the greatest orchestral pieces of the 20th century. It received its premiere in 1905, but was not well received until its second performance in 1908. The piece is truly masterpiece, with its rich orchestration and exotic harmonies depicting the ocean better than any composer had before or has since. Debussy refers to the work as “three symphonic sketches” rather than calling it a symphony, which carries certain connotations with it. In a way, the work can be thought of as a symphony, as it consists of two powerful outer movements framing a light, scherzo-like section. It was clearly intentional on the part of Debussy to not call this work a symphony, so perhaps we shouldn't call it one either. Each of the three sections has a pictorial name that Debussy warned shouldn't be taken too literally. Fellow French composer Erik Satie joked that he liked the first movement (From dawn to midday on the sea) very much, “especially the part from 10:30 to a quarter to 11:00.”

The first movement contains a wonderful depiction of ocean waves in the cellos. Listen for how this theme ebbs and flows through the cello section. In fact, the entire movement seems to have an ebb and flow to it, perhaps to depict the movement of the tides from dawn until noon.

The second movement (Play of the waves) is much more playful in nature. There are many rapid themes throughout the orchestra. This movement swirls around and around until it finally dies away, leading to the opening of the final movement (Dialogue between wind and waves). In this movement, some of the melodies from the opening return and are further developed. Eventually, the entire orchestra is churning away towards a momentous conclusion. The result is one of the greatest orchestral pieces ever written, one with such power and force that it could only be a depiction of the ocean.

Program notes by Mark Knippel

