

Adolphus Hailstork (1941–) Fanfare on "Amazing Grace"

Composer Adolphus Hailstork often blends the music of his African-American heritage with that of the European tradition, which he learned from such esteemed mentors as the famous composition teacher Nadia Boulanger. Hailstork says about his compositional style: "I tried just about everything, musically speaking. There wasn't a single thing in 20th-century music that I didn't dabble in, from 12-tone to aleatoric to whatever. While I'm willing to embrace any technical thing that might help me achieve what I want, my true musical heart is based in song."

In this work, that song is the centuries-old hymn about redemption and mercy: *Amazing Grace*. Hailstork sets the hymn in the style of a Baroque chorale prelude, where phrases of the hymn gradually emerge from ornate counterpoint. This short piece is rife with brass fanfares that lend it a triumphant and dignified sound. Nearly halfway into the piece, the strings emerge from their supporting role with the first phrases of the well-known tune. The solemn Fanfare on "Amazing Grace" was recently used at an event befitting its stately sound: the President's Own United States Marine Band performed it at the Inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in January of 2021.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) Piano Concerto no.2 in C minor, op. 18

In 1897, the premiere of Sergei Rachmaninoff's first symphony was a failure. According to accounts of the concert, the musical disaster could be partly blamed on the conductor, who apparently mismanaged rehearsal time and showed up to the concert drunk. Rachmaninoff was panned in the musical press by the respected critic Cesar Cui, who suggested that if the composer had intended to depict the "seven plagues of Egypt" for a concert at a "conservatory in Hell," he would have "fulfilled his task brilliantly and delighted the inmates of Hell." Rachmaninoff was wounded by the reviews of his first substantial work. But even worse, he felt that the symphony "did not please me after its first rehearsal." Following this huge disappointment, Rachmaninoff was despondent: he became depressed, drank heavily, and was so self-critical that composition became impossible. Three years of writer's block ensued.

Finally, his concerned aunt, Varvara Satina, sought help for her gifted nephew from neurologist Nikolai Dahl. An amateur musician and art lover, Dahl spent hours in conversation with Rachmaninoff and used hypnotherapy to reignite his desire to compose. With Rachmaninoff in a hypnotic state, Dahl would repeat, "You will begin to write your concerto. You will work with great facility. The concerto will be excellent." Either through hypnotherapy or by offering a much needed sympathetic ear, Rachmaninoff's time with Dahl had its desired effect. He finished his second piano concerto in April of 1901, inscribing it with a dedication to Dahl.

The work has all the hallmarks of Rachmaninoff's Romantic style: beautiful and expressive melodies, rich orchestral colors, and a demanding part for the pianist. But what is most striking about this concerto is how often the pianist steps into the background, taking on the role of accompanist to let other instruments shine. It is this constant give and take—with Rachmaninoff choosing exactly the right orchestral color as each unforgettable theme unfolds—that gives this work such emotional power.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) Symphony no.5 in E minor, op. 64

Like Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky suffered frequent bouts of depression and self-doubt throughout his career. The months in 1888 when he composed his *Fifth Symphony* were bookended by such feelings. As he set out to compose the work, he wrote to his patron and to his brother that he worried that he was played out as a composer, that his imagination had dried up, that he had nothing left to express in his music. Yet when he finally escaped to his vacation home and set pen to paper, Tchaikovsky was able to complete the symphony in less than four months. Unfortunately, poor reviews of the premiere returned Tchaikovsky to his former gloomy state.

The Fifth Symphony is in cyclic form, meaning that its theme returns in more than one movement. Beethoven mastered this convention in works such as his fifth and ninth symphonies, causing many Romantic composers—including Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Brahms, and Liszt—to take up the challenge. Like Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, it has been speculated that the theme of Tchaikovsky's *Fifth* represents fate. This conclusion comes from a short musing in Tchaikovsky's notebook when he started sketching the symphony: "...a complete resignation before fate, which is the same as the inscrutable predestination of fate."

At the outset of the introduction to the first movement, the clarinets present the fate theme in a minor key, with somber orchestral accompaniment, suggesting something like a funeral march. The theme returns in the second movement when trumpets and timpani twice rudely interrupt otherwise warm, passionate music. When the low, ominous theme sounds at the end of the third movement in the clarinets and bassoons, it is in stark contrast to the stately waltz that had preceded it. In the fourth movement, the theme is finally in a major key, seemingly emerging out of darkness. It sounds triumphant, even soaring by the end of the piece.

One contemporary critic wrote that "if Beethoven's *Fifth* is Fate knocking at the door, Tchaikovsky's *Fifth* is Fate trying to get out." As Tchaikovsky mused in his notebook, he was resigned to fate and had accepted it. Perhaps it was this resignation that unlocked Tchaikovsky's imagination and set him free to compose. ♦♦