

Life Forces

by René Spencer Saller

According to Valentin Silvestrov, "the most important lesson of the avant-garde was: to be free of all preconceived ideas, particularly those of the avant-garde." The Ukrainian polymath embraced—and embodies—this creative paradox. A prolific composer of symphonic, chamber, vocal, and sacred music, Silvestrov occupies a genre niche all his own. It's somewhere between the holy minimalism of Arvo Pärt and the luscious maximalism of Johannes Brahms. (I'll also recommend it to any Björk and Matmos fans out there.) Melodically speaking, Silvestrov's 2001 composition for string orchestra, *Hymne—2001*, doesn't shy away from the sensuous and pretty. Its strangeness either resides outside the harmonic realm or is so deeply immersed inside it that simple binaries such as "strange" and "familiar" or "modern" and "ancient" dissolve into irrelevance.

Sergey Rachmaninoff completed his Piano Concerto No. 3 in his native Russia and premiered it in New York, to kick off a concert tour of the United States. Deprived of a piano during the long voyage by ship, the 36-year-old virtuoso practiced on a special wooden keyboard, his long fingers dancing in a silent blur. At home or at sea, it hardly mattered. "My music is the product of my temperament, and so it is Russian music," he declared.

You'd never guess that *Concerto for Orchestra*, which ranks among Béla Bartók's most popular and accessible works, was the product of a depressed, impoverished, terminally ill man. But working on the commission gave the Hungarian expat a much-needed boost, and his concerto traced a similar *per aspera ad astra* trajectory. He explained his intentions in his own program notes: "The general mood of the work represents, apart from the jesting second movement, a gradual transition from the sternness of the first moment and the lugubrious death-song of the third to the life-assertion of the last one." His theme isn't about mere survival; it's about the will to live.

Born of Silence

"What I deal with might be termed poetry in music," writes Valentin Silvestrov. The composer's surname sounds almost suspiciously poetic,

like a melding of "silence" and "silver" dreamed up by some Nabokov-mad publicist. Composed in the spring of 2001, *Hymne—2001* reveals the ways in which silence is part of Silvestrov's strategy, the white space surrounding the stanzas. "Music should be born of silence," he wrote. "That's the most important thing: the dimension of silence."

Silvestrov, who turns 80 later this year, is one of the most compelling poets of post-post-everything contemporary music. Born in Kiev, in Ukraine, he started out as a self-taught eccentric, and then took evening classes in music while studying to become a civil engineer. Although he spent six years studying composition and counterpoint at the Kiev Conservatory, he honed his chops in the insurgent Kiev avant-garde scene. Unfortunately, like so many of his weirdo-intellectual compatriots, he soon ran afoul of the Soviet culture-cops. Although he won prestigious prizes in 1967 and 1970, his music was seldom performed in the U.S.S.R., and he wasn't permitted to attend the premieres of his works in the United States and Europe. But as his international fame increased (and the stringent dictates of Socialist Realism relaxed), Silvestrov enjoyed a much higher public profile and was even allowed to accept guest-lecturer gigs abroad.

Silvestrov describes *Hymn 2001* (which also exists in a solo-piano arrangement) as follows:

This work is a noble song of praise with a fanned-out texture on a tonal and harmonic basis. My hymn is enveloped in silence although it appears like a customary string setting on the outside. The paradox of [John] Cage's ('4:33') is also present in latent form, but this is the "silence of new music." All melodic content from my other compositions can also be found here. A rest does not only constitute a lack of sound, but is also a state of retardation and paralysis or a suspension of time. In early music, there was an occasional need for silence, but here it is a fundamental feature.

A Piano-Sung Melody

Sergey Rachmaninoff began his Third Piano Concerto in the summer of 1909, at his family's country estate, Ivanovka. He finished it that September, shortly before embarking for the United States. "It is borrowed neither from folk song forms nor from church services," he later explained. "It simply 'wrote itself.' If I had any plan in composing

this theme, I was thinking only of sound. I wanted to 'sing' the melody on the piano, as a singer would sing it—and to find a suitable orchestral accompaniment, or rather one that would not muffle this singing."

After arriving in New York, Rachmaninoff—one of the most astounding virtuosos of his age or any other—performed it twice, first with Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony, and again, six weeks later, with Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic. Rachmaninoff approved of Mahler's rigorous practice-until-perfect approach. "According to Mahler," Rachmaninoff wrote, "every detail of the score was important—an attitude which is unfortunately rare amongst conductors." Despite several successful performances, Rachmaninoff hated his American sojourn. "Everyone is nice and kind to me, but I am horribly bored by the whole thing," he confessed in a letter to his cousin. "I feel that my character has been quite ruined here." Declining a job offer from the Boston Symphony, the homesick composer returned to Russia.

After the 1917 Revolution stripped Rachmaninoff of his cherished ancestral estate, he emigrated to horribly boring, character-ruining America after all. He settled first in New York and eventually migrated to the West Coast. He died in Beverly Hills in 1943, just a few weeks after attaining U.S. citizenship and just days before his 70th birthday.

The Rockin' Rach 3

The Third Piano Concerto was not an immediate hit. Long and relentlessly contrapuntal, the "Rach 3" requires a rare combination of athleticism and delicacy, of precision and passion. In three fast-slow-fast movements, the D-minor concerto begins urgently, with a melancholy Russian tune. After some pianistic pyrotechnics, a gentler interlude ensues. The Adagio sets the stage with grave winds and brass before the piano tumbles in with an ardent new subject. Pockets of transparent bliss are ruptured by fierce block chords. The feverish, shape-shifting finale builds to a breathless coda: a magnificent chromatic racket.

Despite its many technical challenges, Rachmaninoff preferred his Third Concerto over his Second, which he described, somewhat enigmatically, as "uncomfortable to play." Most pianists find the Third more difficult, although neither is what you'd call a cinch. Vladimir Horowitz, one of its

earliest champions, called it “elephantine.” Josef Hofmann, the pianist to whom Rachmaninoff dedicated the concerto, never publicly performed it; explaining only that it “wasn't for” him. In 1940 Rachmaninoff recorded the work, after making four substantial cuts so that it would work within the 78-rpm format. These days the “Rach 3” is usually performed at its original length and feels surprisingly lean for such a massive showpiece.

Hungary Heart

In 1940, after the death of his mother, Bartók fled Nazi-occupied Hungary for the United States, where he spent the last five years of his life. Although he settled in New York, with his much-younger wife, he never truly left his native country behind. His musical language was steeped in the folk idioms of the Eastern European countryside. For years he and Zoltán Kodály had logged countless hours as musical documentarians, using Western notation and early portable recording phonographs to capture Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian folk melodies from indigenous singers. Those years of immersive field work meant that Bartók carried his homeland with him, no matter where he happened to be living.

When Boston Symphony Orchestra music director Serge Koussevitzky commissioned the concerto, Bartók was perilously poor, depressed, and racked with high fevers caused by undiagnosed leukemia. He weighed only 87 pounds. Aware of Bartók's grim circumstances and his stoic refusal of charity, Koussevitzky offered him a \$1000 advance to compose a new orchestral work in memory of Koussevitzky's late wife. Although the Russian-born entrepreneur really wanted to cover Bartók's medical expenses and probably never expected him to fulfill the assignment, Bartók was buoyed by the prospect. He set out for a sanatorium at Lake Saranac in upstate New York, where he finished the *Concerto for Orchestra* in less than eight weeks. He orchestrated it the following winter, while recuperating in North Carolina.

Concertante Contrasts

In his own program notes, Bartók wrote, “The title of this symphony-like orchestral work is explained by its tendency to treat the single orchestral instruments in a *concertante* or soloistic manner. The ‘virtuoso’ treatment appears, for instance, in the fugato sections of the

development of the first movement (brass instruments), or in the *perpetuum mobile*-like passage of the principal theme in the last movement (strings), and especially in the second movement, in which pairs of instruments consecutively appear with brilliant passages."

Cast in five movements, the concerto boasts brisk contrasts and weird symmetries. It's a storehouse of stylistic touchstones: Bach fugues, peasant folk songs, angular tonal experiments, birdsong, night music. There's even a jab at Dmitry Shostakovich's recent "Leningrad" Symphony, which Bartók despised as a celebration of state violence.

The first movement, *Introduzione*, starts slowly and mysteriously, then develops into a swifter fugato section. *Presentando le coppie*, or "Presentation of the Couples," contains five sections in which instrumental pairs (bassoons, oboes, clarinets, flutes, and muted trumpets) are separated by specific intervals (minor sixths, minor thirds, minor sevenths, fifths, and major seconds, respectively). *Elegia*, the central Andante, is a poignant nocturne based on three themes derived from the first movement. The fourth movement, *Intermezzo interrotto* ("interrupted intermezzo"), pits Eastern European folk tunes against a parodic quotation from Shostakovich (itself a quotation from Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, which Bartók probably didn't realize at the time). The propulsive fifth movement brings it all back home with more fugal splendor and folky exuberance.

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