Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

_Totentanz_

Sometimes referred to as Liszt’s “third piano concerto”, the inspiration for _Totentanz_ (Dance of Death) was a fourteenth century Italian fresco seen by Liszt during a trip to Pisa in 1838. Created by the Florentine artist Andrea Orcagna, the fresco is titled The Triumph of Death. In this ghoulish scene, the female figure of Death carries a scythe as she swoops toward her victims. Some souls are seen ascending to heaven, while others are being dragged down to hell. A pile of corpses and open graves with decomposed bodies add to the ghastly atmosphere.

Liszt did not begin work on _Totentanz_ (Dance of Death) until 1849, eleven years after he saw Orcagna’s painting, and ten years after he composed his two piano concertos. He revised _Totentanz_ in 1853 and 1859, and the premiere took place at The Hague in 1865. The pianist was Hans von Bülow, Liszt’s son-in-law, whom the piece is also dedicated to. Liszt uses the plainsong chant Dies irae (Day of wrath) as the theme in this composition, which is a set of variations. He had arranged Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique for solo piano several years before, which also incorporates the Dies irae melody; it is likely that Liszt was inspired by Berlioz to use this melody as well. As described by Oliver Hilmes in his biography of Liszt, “Death stalks the score in the form of strident trills and brutal chords. The percussive use of the piano, the bold harmonies and the work’s implacable momentum make the _Totentanz_ an extraordinarily modern piece, the piano writing confronting the soloist with uniquely challenging difficulties.” The composer Béla Bartók said of _Totentanz_, “. . .the work has such a phantasmagoric, dream-like quality that one feels one is in a world in which the strangest things could happen, and no juxtaposition is too bizarre.”

_Totentanz_ is Liszt’s final work for piano and orchestra. A few days after the premiere, he received tonsure, the first step toward joining a clerical order. Although he never completed the final steps of this process, he was known as Abbé Liszt for the remainder of his life.

—Laura Artesani
Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)
"Caro nome," from Rigoletto

Rigoletto’s Gilda is one of Verdi’s youngest heroines, and his most innocent. He wrote the part for a lighter, higher voice than many of his soprano roles. Gilda is a 16-year-old ingénue, who until the start of the opera has spent most of her life secluded in a convent. She knows hardly anything about the world or her family – not even her father’s real name. So when Gilda falls in love, she expresses her feelings not with the passion of Leonora from Il trovatore or Violetta from La traviata, but in a gentle, dreamy aria that Verdi instructed to be sung at a moderate pace and sotto voce (very quietly).

By the time Gilda sings her first and only aria we have already learnt a lot about her from her Act I duets with Rigoletto and the Duke of Mantua (disguised as ‘poor student’ Gualtier Maldé). We have witnessed her childlike excitement at Rigoletto’s arrival, her tender response to his grief at the memory of her mother, and her mixture of restlessness (she longs to go out into the city) and docility (when Rigoletto forbids it, she does not protest). We have realized her extreme innocence, almost naivety, in her dialogue with the conniving Giovanna, when she expresses her hope that the handsome stranger she’s seen at church is poor like her, as it will make their love more romantic. And we have seen her shyly mesmerized by the Duke’s eloquent declarations of love, to the point where her vocal line can only imitate his. Indeed, much of Gilda’s music in both Act I duets is imitative or acts as a descant to Rigoletto or the Duke’s vocal line.

‘Caro nome’ is Gilda’s first extended expression of independent emotions, and shows both her tenderness and her simplicity. The aria is preceded by a shimmering figuration described by Verdi scholar Julian Budden as an example of Verdi’s finest woodwind writing. Over it, Gilda slowly and rapturously pronounces the name of her lover, ‘Gualtier Maldé’. ‘Caro nome’ then opens with a gentle flute melody, as simple as a folk song. Gilda takes up the melody, echoed by a cicada-like buzzing on solo violin, as she meditates on the ‘beloved name’ that has taught her to love. The gentle pace, falling phrases and the stresses on words such as ‘desir’ (desire) and ‘sospir’ (sigh) suggest Gilda sighing with pleasure at her new emotions, while the solo violin conveys Gilda’s excitedly beating heart.

The aria develops in a way that is both novel and very simple. After bar 24 there is essentially no new musical material. Instead, the aria becomes a series of continuous variations on the opening melody, as though Gilda is weaving ever more elaborate romantic fantasies around the name of her lover. Nor is there any new text – instead, Gilda repeats her earlier words, in fragments. The increasingly elaborate melody and passages of ecstatic coloratura suggest her growing excitement at the discovery of love. Towards the end, the slowing pace and tender, expansive phrases show her delight – she doesn’t want to stop thinking about ‘Gualtier’. Throughout, the
orchestral textures remain delicate, reflecting Gilda’s gentleness. The aria culminates in a rapturous, wordless cadenza, and then blends seamlessly into the following scene, as Gilda continues to repeat rapturously the name of her lover as courtiers approach.

‘Caro nome’ is a breathtaking portrayal of young love in all its innocence and idealism. It marks the first step in Gilda’s transformation from ingénue to self-sacrificing heroine. The Gilda we encounter in Act II, with her long solo ‘Tutte le feste al tempio’, is a very different woman, both in terms of her emotions and her music. The fact that in ‘Caro nome’ we already know her love for the Duke is doomed makes its tenderness and sincerity all the more poignant.

—Kate Hopkins

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

Poème, op. 25

Few composers of the 19th century wrote music that was as sheerly voluptuous as Ernest Chausson’s, and few of his works are as effortlessly melodic and sensuous as the splendid Poème. Written immediately after 10 years of arduous labor on what he hoped would be his magnum opus—the opera Le Roi Arthus—Poème probably did seem effortless by comparison. Painterly Inspirations Languishing in Florence and its environs during the spring and early summer of 1896, Chausson felt inspiration afresh. “There are many things which I am tempted to write,” he wrote. “Pure music this time, which has been inspired in me by the landscapes or works of art here. I had such a low opinion of my musical talents that I was surprised when I saw what ideas certain paintings awaken in me. Some of them give me the entire outline of a symphonic piece.” It seems reasonable to assume that the Poème, composed during this spring, was one such piece.

Completed in June 1896, it was first performed by its dedicatee, the Belgian virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe, in Nancy on December 27; its success at a subsequent Parisian performance in April 1897 was an unexpected surprise to all involved. For years Chausson had struggled for recognition in Paris, where even in the 1890s his music was found to be too “experimental.” It was Chausson, whose earlier music had owed such enormous debt first to César Franck and then to Richard Wagner, who had advocated that French composers abandon the pervasive Wagnerism and create an individual Romanticism. With Poème he not only asserted an artistically independent style but also created a miniature jewel that combined poignant sentimentality with the declamatory lyricism that had always characterized French melody.

Chausson originally titled the piece Le Chant de l’amour triomphant (Song of Triumphant Love), suggesting an initial programmatic intent; one writer has pointed out that this is the title of a
short story by Ivan Turgenev, and as such, attempts have been made to point out parallels between story and music. But Chausson’s later suppression of the title in the printed score seems to make clear that his final intentions were to create a work free of extramusical associations.

Poème is a straightforward and plaintive dialogue between violin and orchestra, cast in a single continuous gesture. The soloist intones the deliciously bittersweet melody in the opening section; the orchestra, taking up the violinist’s urgency, builds toward a nervous animato passage, leading toward the climactic allegro and a return to the opening tempo (lento). A reflective reiteration of the opening theme concludes the work with a hint of nostalgia.

—Paul J. Horsley

吴祖强 Wu Zuqiang (b. 1927), 王燕樵 Wang Yanqiao (b. 1937), 刘德海 Liu Dehai (b. 1937)
草原小姐妹 Little Sisters of the Grassland

The concerto for pipa and orchestra, Little Sisters of the Grassland, was completed in March of 1973 and had its first performance in December of 1976. The title page of the score names three composers: Wu Tsu-chiang (Wu Zuqiang), Wang Yen-chiao (Wang Yen-qiao), and Liu Teh-hai (Liu Dehai); the latter is also twice identified as pipa soloist on the descriptive foreword page of the score.

The background information in this program note draws upon two main sources: William P. Malm's Music Cultures of the Pacific, the Near East, and Asia (Prentice-Hall), and material supplied by the National Committee on U.S. -China Relations.

With the ousting of Madame Chiang Ching (the widow and successor of the late Chairman Mao Tse-tung) and the so-called "Gang of Four," cultural activities in China have been undergoing what has been described as "a cautious artistic thaw," and music, literature, film, and theater largely suppressed during the ten years following the Cultural Revolution are making a careful comeback. Present cultural activity in Chinese society is viewed with respect to a guiding principle set out in 1956 by Chairman Mao — "Let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend"—but with limitations imposed a year later against the criticisms of communist rule which resulted from the 1956 relaxation. Thus, the place of both traditional and Western music in China must be understood within the context of political ideology, and all art is judged "by its ability to aid the revolution, support a strong, centralized Communist Party, and build a united communist country," again in accordance with principles laid down by Chairman Mao.
The Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 B.C.) considered music an essential part of the political order. Mao's political order was, of course, one of a very different kind: music in his world was recognized for its "emotive power in rousing revolutionary enthusiasm, [and this] has led to a strong emphasis on popular native tunes and rhythms 'well-known and beloved by the Chinese masses.' " This philosophical and behavioral orientation toward music throughout the history of China has resulted in a view of music as a functional art which may be used to establish a model of correct conduct. The portrayal of extra-musical attributes and emotional states of mind is at once evident in the fact that musical compositions throughout Chinese history are given descriptive titles, such as The Sacred War Symphony, The Yellow River Concerto, Raid on the White Tiger Regiment (opera), and The Red Detachment of Women (ballet). Telling, too, is the place of the composer in communist society: his task is to be functional rather than original, and the composition of a large-scale work is often assigned to a "composition committee" rather than to an individual. Western music came to be accepted by the Chinese elite along with other symbols of Western culture following the declaration of a republic in 1911, though there remained a clear distinction between Western classical music on the one hand and traditional Chinese classical music on the other. In fact, Chinese and Western musical styles are entirely distinct—an orchestra for traditional Chinese music will consist entirely of native instruments—though the synthesis of Western and traditional Chinese musical ideals has resulted in musical compositions which embody characteristics of both, and which include traditional Chinese instruments in musical scores which are essentially for Western classical orchestra. The pipa, a fretted, four-stringed lute, is a traditional Chinese instrument which may be listed along with such others as the titzu (bamboo flute), cheng (a relative of the zither), suona (Chinese horn), and erhu (double-stringed fiddle).

The term "pipa" was originally applied to any plucked-string instrument, and the present-day pipa has evolved from antecedents dating as far back as the third century B.C. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the pipa developed an extensive repertory and was particularly famous for its battle pieces, with its ability to suggest the clash of armor, arrows flying through the air, and the cries of wounded men in battle, and it was commonly found in the Chinese opera orchestra. Development of the instrument was held down during the feudal period, during which time the ruling class looked upon folk music with disfavor, but after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 the instrument evolved further. Music schools which gave instruction in traditional instruments offered courses in pipa music, traditional tunes were rearranged and modernized for new use, and the number of frets on the instrument, which by feudal times had grown from the original four to fourteen, now reached twenty-eight, allowing for the production of semitones and for transposition into twelve keys. In addition, the original silk strings were replaced with metal or nylon, allowing for increased volume and improved sound. With improvements to volume, pitch, and overall sound quality, traditional Chinese
instruments such as the pipa are now used not just for solo purposes, but also in modern Chinese opera and ballet scores and symphonic music.

The score of *Little Sisters of the Grassland* tells us that "this composition is based on a moving story of two children from Inner Mongolia, Lung Mei and Yu Jung, who are guarding the commune sheep in a blizzard. The story shows how the new generation of our great socialist motherland is brought up in the midst of the storms of nature and of class struggle, with fervent love for the collective and the Party, and closely following the leadership of Chairman Mao.

"The piece was composed in 1972. During the process of composition, one member of the Ministry of Culture, who was an intimate with the 'Gang of Four,' wanted to change the name of the piece and used this as a pretext for preventing its performance for two years."

The piece is in five connected movements. A brief Moderato with an initial string figure suggestive of Debussy and an opening statement for the soloist introduces the first movement proper, "Grazing on the grassland." This movement has two main musical ideas: a bouncy Allegretto tune which allows for much interplay between pipa player and orchestra, and a lyric Andante with prominent and expressive oboe and cello solos along the way. The second movement, "Furiously struggling in the blizzard," begins with suggestions of thunder in low strings and timpani, and the storm breaks out furiously in the Allegro and Presto sections which follow. The opening movement's Allegretto tune makes a reappearance, trying to hold its own against the elements, and the energy accumulated during the course of the movement is finally released into a virtuosic and evocative cadenza for the pipa soloist. Calming woodwinds announce the subsidence of the storm, but the struggle is not over, for our protagonists have no choice but to continue "pressing forward in the freezing night." The poignant Adagio which depicts this episode opens with solo pipa supported by muted strings and features a prominent solo for flute. An increase in orchestral activity leads to the fourth movement, "Remembering the parties concerned." The initial Andantino section offers a sweeping theme for full orchestra based on the first movement's opening tune, and the majestic Andante which follows recalls the earlier Andante of the first movement. The final Allegro, "Myriad red flowers blooming everywhere," harks back in mood and musical content to the opening Allegretto and ends with a jubilant Presto.

—Marc Mandel
Almost alone among the major Russian composers of his era—Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Glazunov, Prokofiev—Sergei Rachmaninoff didn’t write a single ballet. It’s not that he wasn’t interested. In a 1914 letter to conductor Alexander Ziloti, Rachmaninoff expressed his desire to “find a subject for a ballet,” although he admitted that he didn’t know any dancers, and that “for some reason I fear them!” In 1915 he began a collaboration with noted Moscow choreographer Kasyan Goleizovsky on a ballet to be called “The Scythians,” based on a poem by Konstantin Balmont. But Prokofiev beat him to the punch by completing his Scythian Suite the same year, and the project was abandoned. (Goleizovsky later claimed that Rachmaninoff incorporated some of the music he wrote for “The Scythians” into Symphonic Dances, but there is no hard evidence to support this claim.) In 1916, the brilliant stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold and the dancer Mikhail Mordkin approached Rachmaninoff with another ballet proposal, this one based on stories of Hans Christian Andersen, but that, too, never advanced beyond the planning stage. Highly self-critical and something of a loner, Rachmaninoff may have been temperamentally unsuited to deal with the messy collaborative conditions necessary for the creation of a new dance piece.

Even so, Rachmaninoff’s atmospheric and emotionally rich music has attracted numerous choreographers. His Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini was set to dance several times, during the composer’s lifetime by his friend Mikhail Fokine (as Paganini for Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes in London in 1939) and afterwards by Leonid Lavrovsky (for the Bolshoi in 1960). In the 1953 Hollywood feature The Story of Three Loves, directed by Vincente Minnelli and Gottfried Reinhardt, Moira Shearer (of Red Shoes fame) performs a ballet choreographed by Frederick Ashton to the Paganini Variations—and then drops dead. Other symphonic and piano works by Rachmaninoff have been staged by such choreographers as Walter Gore, Christian Holder, Ben Stevenson, Riccardo Duse, and Patrice Montagnon.

When he began composing what became his Symphonic Dances in 1940—while recovering at a luxurious Long Island waterfront estate from an exhausting season that had included forty-one concert appearances—Rachmaninoff had in mind another possible collaboration with Fokine, a follow-up to Paganini. Fokine even lived nearby. So inspired was Rachmaninoff that he managed to complete the piano score in a matter of weeks (working from nine in the morning to eleven at night, only stopping for one hour in the afternoon to rest). On August 21, he wrote to his friend Eugene Ormandy, conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, with whom he had developed a close partnership during his years living in America, that he had finished “a new symphonic piece, which I naturally want to give first to you and your orchestra.”

Rachmaninoff also played fragments for Fokine. The choreographer responded with a letter. “Before the hearing I was a little scared of the Russian element that you had mentioned, but yesterday I fell in love with it, and it seemed to me appropriate and beautiful.” Fokine admitted that he found the waltz rhythm of the second movement problematical, however: “The waltz rhythm seems to disturb you, to handicap you. . . The thought of dancing is a side issue. If the joy of creating dances to your music is again given me, I should not at all feel the need for this rhythmic support.”
But the collaboration Rachmaninoff so strongly desired with Fokine on Symphonic Dances never materialized, for reasons that remain unclear. Rachmaninoff’s very busy touring schedule, his declining health, and his move to Los Angeles made it difficult for the two men to focus on the project. Fokine’s death on August 22, 1942, brought an end to their friendship and the possibility of a ballet. When he was informed of Fokine’s passing, Rachmaninoff wrote, “What a great sorrow! Chaliapin, Stanislavsky, Fokine—this was an epoch in art. Now all are gone! And there’s no one to take their place. Only trained walruses are left, as Chaliapin used to say.” At the time, Rachmaninoff himself had less than a year to live.

Symphonic Dances was Rachmaninoff’s last major orchestral work, and one of only four (with Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, the Third Symphony, and the Fourth Piano Concerto) that he had composed since leaving Russia forever in 1917, at the age of forty-four. All four were given their premieres by the Philadelphia Orchestra. Despite Fokine’s claim that Symphonic Dances possessed a strong “Russian element,” in fact the work sounds more “American” than anything else Rachmaninoff composed. The music is optimistic in personality, indulging less in the sorrowful nostalgia heard so often in Rachmaninoff, with a strong rhythmic drive, energy, and a pungent harmonic language that at moments recalls Stravinsky or Prokofiev. The prominent use of the alto saxophone in the first movement’s glowing, lyrical second theme seems informed by jazz. Indeed, in a newspaper interview he remarked that he considered calling the piece just “Dances,” “but I was afraid people would think I had written dance music for jazz orchestras.” Significantly, Rachmaninoff (who tinkered endlessly with the scores of the Third Symphony and Fourth Piano Concerto) never revised Symphonic Dances, and considered it (according to his sister-in-law Sofia Satina) “his best composition.”

In form, Symphonic Dances suggests a symphony in three movements. The first (marked “Non allegro”) opens with a snap: a strong rhythmic pulse announced quietly first in the violins on insistently repeated eighth-notes on the note C, then taken up by the other strings and the timpani. Over this infectious toe-tapping foundation, the woodwinds sing a jaunty tune shaped in descending intervals of a fifth, followed by a highly punctuated series of chords that recall the shape of the tune of the Dies irae from the Requiem Mass, a motif Rachmaninoff had used in several major orchestral works, including the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. At rehearsal number 10, the mood changes (poco a poco rallentando), leading to the introduction of one of the composer’s most seductive melodies, given to the alto saxophone. (At the time, the saxophone was still a novelty in serious concert music, although it had been used by Bizet, Ravel, Glazunov, and recently by Prokofiev in Romeo and Juliet.) The lean combination of timbres here (the plush saxophone sound against sour accompaniment from oboes, clarinets, and English horn, with no strings) is stunning for Rachmaninoff, who tended in his preceding symphonic compositions to rely heavily (even too heavily) on the strings for emotional effect. After this haunting central episode the main themes return in a recapitulation section, with further references to the Dies irae motif, a unifying idea for the entire work.

The second movement—Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)—builds the strongest link to the world of dance, the well-worn form of the waltz. But this is a waltz notably lacking in confidence, stuttering as it begins in fragmentary rhythm, then switching between 6/8, 3/8, and 9/8 meter. Rachmaninoff adds the
marking “Tempo rubato” at several strategic points, so the waltz tempo ebbs and flows, leaving the listener slightly off-balance, expecting a certainty that never completely materializes. It is a masterful conceit, and one that recalls other modernist deconstructions of the waltz form, especially Ravel’s La Valse of 1920. Rachmaninoff’s obsession with the Dies irae motif dominates the final movement (Lento assai—Allegro vivace). Another pointed religious reference is made to the music Rachmaninoff himself wrote for the ninth section (“Blagosloven yesi gospodi”—“Blessed be the Lord”) of his All-Night Vigil, completed in 1915 during World War I. This theme comes from an ancient Orthodox liturgical chant and acts as an affirmative counterpoint to the pessimism of the message of the Dies irae. These two ideas intertwine in colorful and dramatic variations, by turns dark and triumphant, colored by the tolling of the tubular bells and contrasted with a serene middle section featuring a lamenting falling figure in the strings that seems to recall times gone by. The nostalgic mood is broken by brass fanfares that lead into the finale, where the Dies irae motif emerges triumphant. Just before the coda, where the chant tune reappears, Rachmaninoff wrote in the score the word “Alliluya,” followed by a citation of the alliluyas from the All-Night Vigil. In the Vigil, the alliluyas mark the end of the narration of Christ’s Resurrection. So at a time when the world was plunging into the terrible darkness of World War II, Rachmaninoff seems to be telling us that life will conquer death. At the end of the score, he wrote, “I thank Thee, Lord,” an expression of gratitude for a remarkable life of creativity.

—Harlow Robinson