Fire and Fantasy
Friday, July 24 at 7:00 PM

Program Notes

Variations on *"America"* (1892)

Charles Ives (1874-1954) (arr. W. Schuman)

Born in 1874, Charles Ives was taught music by his father, a bandleader with a love for experimentation. Although Ives worked professionally in the insurance business, music remained his creative outlet. Never dependent on composing for income, Ives was free to write as boldly as he wanted, often breaking the musical rules of his time. His unconventional style was not appreciated until later in life, when his health declined. Ives received well-deserved recognition in 1947 when he won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Third Symphony.*

Variations on "America" was written when Ives was only seventeen years old. Originally composed for organ while he worked as a church organist, the piece already shows his sense of humor, creativity, and love of musical surprises.

Built on the familiar tune of *God Save the King* (a/k/a *My Country 'Tis of Thee),* the piece takes the melody through a series of unrestrained transformations through different moods and styles-before flying into a ragtime-inspired finale packed with syncopation and musical jokes.

William Schuman created the orchestral version in 1962, later followed by a band arrangement by William Rhoads. Today, the piece remains a beloved staple of American concert music, showing both Ives' genius and his wonderfully mischievous sense of fun.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23 (1875)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Born in Russia in 1840, Tchaikovsky was a deeply sensitive and emotionally complex composer whose music resonated with the general public. Widely regarded as one of the first Russian composers to achieve international acclaim in Western Europe, he transformed personal passion and inner turmoil into sweeping, unforgettable works. His lush melodies, orchestration, and

dramatic intensity helped shape the Romantic era and continue to move audiences.

Tchaikovsky wrote his First Piano Concerto in 1874. The concerto was first rejected by Tchaikovsky's friend Nikolai Rubinstein, who called it impossible to play and poorly written. Tchaikovsky refused to revise it, famously declaring, "I will not change a single note." Thankfully, he stood his ground. Tchaikovsky instead dedicated it to pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, who premiered the work in Boston in 1875. The concerto would go on to become one of the most famous and popular works ever written for piano and orchestra.

The first movement bursts forth with one of the most recognizable themes in all of classical music. Opening brass fanfares and sweeping piano chords create an unforgettable entrance before the music dives into lively folk-inspired melodies full of excitement and momentum.

The second movement offers a gentler contrast with a graceful melody first introduced by solo flute and pizzicato strings. Its calm atmosphere is briefly interrupted by a playful middle section, inspired by a popular French tune of the time, before returning to the warm and lyrical first theme.

The final movement charges ahead with fiery energy and dance rhythms inspired by Ukrainian folk music. The piano and orchestra race together toward a thrilling and triumphant ending that leaves no doubt why this concerto has remained a favorite for generations.

— Intermission —

Scheherazade, Op. 35 (1888)

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Born in 1844, Rimsky-Korsakov was a leading member of "The Five," a group of Russian composers dedicated to creating a distinctly national musical style. Though he lacked formal training, his talent quickly earned recognition, eventually leading to a teaching position at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He became famous for his brilliant orchestration and vibrant use of folklore and exotic musical ideas.

Scheherazade draws its inspiration from *One Thousand and One Nights*. The music centers around two main characters. The Sultan Shahriar is represented by a bold and commanding brass theme, while Scheherazade

herself appears through the solo violin: graceful, mysterious, and captivating. To save her life, Scheherazade tells the Sultan enchanting stories night after night, each one more imaginative than the last.

The suite progresses in four movements, each painting a vivid musical scene. *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship* rises and falls like ocean waves as the orchestra carries us across the sea. *The Story of the Kalendar Prince* introduces a wandering prince through colorful, quirky bassoon melodies.

The third movement, *The Young Prince and the Young Princess*, is the most lyrical of the suite, filled with warm conversations between the strings and woodwinds. The final movement, *Festival at Baghdad*, erupts with excitement and energy as earlier themes return and collide in a peak musical celebration. The music races toward a dramatic shipwreck before Scheherazade's violin gently returns one final time, bringing the story to a peaceful close.