

**EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
**APRIL 25 & 26, 2025**  
**PROGRAM NOTES**

**Antonin Dvořák**

Born September 8, 1841 – Nelahozeve, Czechia

Died May 1, 1904 – Prague, Czechia

***Carnival Overture***

Though he died 90 years ago, Antonin Dvořák is one of today's most popular and listened-to composers of classical music. The exact reasons why are always in debate, but a general consensus revolves around the composer's extreme listenability. Modern, casual listeners easily can be dissuaded by works that rely on brilliant harmonic explorations and clever orchestrations if a clear and catchy melody is not the dominant message. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of flux, with some music going in a radical direction no one had seen coming. However, there were composers who still believed in an age-old practice: The power of a great "tune."

Perhaps no one was better at writing unforgettable melodies than Dvořák. His most famous work is derived from his three-year tenure in the United States as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. It was during this time he composed his "American" works, which are the dominant pieces in his catalog today. However, the "American" opuses number only a few out of the composer's more than 200 contributions.

*Carnival, Op. 92* comes from a set of three concert overtures written consecutively right before Dvořák and his family set off for America. The three overtures (*Carnival, In Nature's Realm, and Othello*) premiered in April 1892 with Dvořák as conductor. He began his trip the next day, leaving the final manuscript proof edits to his friend and colleague Johannes Brahms.

**Sergei Rachmaninoff**

Born April 1, 1873 – Staraya Russa, Russia

Died March 28, 1943 – Beverly Hills, CA

***Concerto for Piano, No. 3, op. 30 D minor***

Sometimes a classic and popular work can achieve fame on two fronts, not just for beauty, but for technical demands as well. The pinnacle of this idea lies with one of the most feared pieces of piano music — Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 3*.

For reasons you might not expect, Rachmaninoff is a polarizing figure. A romanticist without a doubt, he was not one to shock audiences with modernist tones. In fact, Rachmaninoff was among the last of the old guard protecting the ways of the Beethoven school.

A pianist from the age of 4, Rachmaninoff found his own way to deliver a shock to the senses. His piano works present a unique conundrum — being one of the finest instrumentalists of his generation, his piano music takes after his own talents and abilities leading to works that few could play at the time. Today the level of instrumental performance excellence is higher than ever, but Rachmaninoff's piano music still remains a hard-to-reach goal for any pianist. Additionally, the composer's enormous

stature (6 1/2 feet tall) shows itself in the scores — Rachmaninoff's keyboard reach was legendary, leading some pianists to bypass performing his music altogether.

*Piano Concerto No. 3* was premiered in New York City in 1909. Both the premiere and the second performance (the latter conducted by Gustav Mahler) featured Rachmaninoff as soloist, and the work's public reception going forward was bizarre. At first, opinions were mediocre, with specific statements hinting at the possibility of the public growing tired of the ever-virtuosic Rachmaninoff writing musical firework shows.

By the 1920s, with Rachmaninoff approaching his 50s, the perception of the hefty piece changed. The composer's style was mellowing, allowing for fresh perspectives of his entire catalog. Today, the piece is an undoubted masterpiece, proof that the last Russian romanticist is cherished on all fronts.

### **Igor Stravinsky**

Born June 17, 1882 – Lomonosov, St. Petersburg, Russia

Died April 6, 1971 – New York, New York

### ***Petrushka***

The three most crucial works by Igor Stravinsky all came in quick succession. They are the composer's first three ballets: *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. Apart from being the works that molded the foundation of the beloved composer's career, they are also some of the first pieces that accurately represent the modernist era's characteristics still to come.

We are lucky that these early Stravinsky works number three instead of two. One of them seemed to appear outside of Stravinsky's plans and via spontaneous inspiration.

Stravinsky's first ballet, *The Firebird*, premiered in Paris in 1910 and was a smash hit. However, before the first note of *The Firebird* was even played, Stravinsky was already planning his next project, one of disturbing imagery of sacrifice and ritual. This, of course, was *The Rite of Spring*, the 1913 premiere of which remains the most famous scandal in music history. However, before that work began Stravinsky seemed to strike inspirational gold — yet another ballet idea. This one he started immediately. It was called *Petrushka*.

*Petrushka* was written quickly and premiered in the summer of 1911. It tells the story of a jealous puppet (*Petrushka*) who is killed by a companion over a love feud. The ballet ends with the ghost of *Petrushka* cursing his creator.

**Nathan Black** is the general manager of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP's *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast*, and as of 2022 is the resident lecturer of EPSO's "Opening Notes" series.