

The Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra
William Schrickel, Music Director

Sunday, October 13, 2019—4:00 PM
Roseville Lutheran Church, Roseville, Minnesota

William Schrickel, conductor
Kevin Kling, narrator
Sarah Wright, violin

Program

Victor Zupanc/ Kevin Kling

The Twelve Dancing Princesses
(World Premiere of MSO commission)

Kevin Kling, narrator

Intermission

Dmitri Shostakovich

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A Minor, op. 77

I. Nocturne: Moderato

II. Scherzo: Allegro

III. Passacaglia: Andante—Cadenza

IV. Burlesque: Allegro con brio

(The last two movements are played without a pause.)

Sarah Wright, violin

Program Notes

Victor Zupanc's music for *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* was written on a commission from the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra and the St. Olaf Orchestra. This afternoon's performance, featuring writer Kevin Kling as narrator, is the world premiere. The composer wrote the following note about the work:

"The Twelve Dancing Princesses was commissioned following the successful performances of a previous collaboration between Victor Zupanc and Kevin Kling, for orchestra and narrator, titled *The Burning Wisdom of Finn McCool*, which was adapted from a very old folk tale from Ireland and featured new music with a Celtic twist. For this new commission, Kevin and Victor decided to use a lesser known fairy tale written by the Brothers Grimm, who also gave us *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Hansel and Gretel*.

The choice of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* seemed perfect because at its core, this story is about dancing. It's also about kings and princesses and a kingdom far away and a witch, Dame Death, and her evil spells and, of course, the poor and not so bright peasant who becomes the hero. The story presented a bevy of rich opportunities for music. I chose to go to Eastern Europe for music influences, but also decided that no style or genre was out of bounds, so I also went jazz and rock and tango and polka and cowboy music because there are, after all, *twelve* princesses.

A huge factor in my composing was the brilliant storytelling by Kevin Kling who is a master of putting his own personal twist on any tale he relates. This adaptation is of the Old World, but it is firmly rooted in the present day with language to which one can easily relate. Humor is often present, but always accompanied by a rich palette of emotions. I have striven to achieve the same with the music and to create a cohesive experience that marries music and words as one. Always present in my music is the element of surprise—I never want my listener to doze off. I feel that the music in this piece is chock full of unexpected twists. At the very least, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* should provide an entertaining and thought-provoking afternoon of music and storytelling."

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was in the middle of composing his first violin concerto in February of 1948 when, along with Prokofieff and a number of other Soviet composers, writers, and scholars, he was denounced by a Communist Party Resolution for creating music that displayed "formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies alien to the Soviet people." The St. Petersburg-born composer continued writing the concerto, but when he finished, he quietly locked it away in a desk drawer.

Shostakovich spent the next few years writing "safe" music—patriotic choral works and film scores in the popular style. Joseph Stalin, the despot who twelve years earlier

had seen to it that Shostakovich was denounced and humiliated in a 1936 editorial in *Pravda* after Shostakovich's opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, offended his musical sensibilities, died in 1953. Following his death, Soviet political and artistic repression slowly receded. Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1 in A Minor, which was dedicated to the great Ukrainian-born violinist, David Oistrakh, received its first performance in Leningrad (the former St. Petersburg) on October 29, 1955, with Oistrakh as soloist with the Leningrad Philharmonic under the baton of Yevgeny Mravinsky. The premiere was a huge success, with both composer and soloist receiving repeated and prolonged ovations.

The concerto, in four movements rather than the more traditional three, is written for an orchestra that dispenses with trumpets and trombones, and the work's gravitas is extended by its quasi-symphonic construction and its nearly 40-minute length, including an extended cadenza at the end of the third movement that links directly to the finale. The first movement *Nocturne*, restrained and darkly rhapsodic, is an aching sad monologue for the violin with a spare, somber accompaniment that emphasizes the low registers of the orchestral instruments.

Though titled *Scherzo*, the second movement displays virtually none of the musical attributes typically associated with the "traditional" *scherzo* (an Italian term for a musical joke): lightness, charm, and humor. This music is savage, mocking, and ironic; Oistrakh himself described it as "evil, demonic and prickly." The movement opens with a sarcastically devilish dance in 3/8 time that leads into a rougher 2/4 section that suggests a Jewish folk dance. The opening material returns, more rhythmically complicated and with increased demands on the soloist's virtuoso technique. The klezmer-inspired material makes one more brief appearance before the final coda; then the 3/8 dance dangerously spins ever more wildly, bringing the movement to its breathless conclusion.

The *Scherzo* is also notable for containing Shostakovich's 4-note musical "signature"; he took the German transliteration of his name (Dmitri SCHostakovich) and applied the German musical pitch names to the four initials in capital letters (D—E-flat—C—B-natural) and created a motif identifying himself in no uncertain terms. This "autograph" first appears (transposed) in the woodwinds about 80 seconds into the movement, and it reappears in the solo violin at the terrifying climax of the coda.

Shostakovich liked to use Baroque musical forms in his major works, and for the third movement of the concerto, he turned to the *passacaglia*, a theme-and-variations technique in which a bass line is stated at the outset, then repeated with varying harmonies and additional counter-melodies embellishing each restatement.

Theme—Lower strings intone the heavy 17-bar theme, with timpani and horns providing an important counterpoint—a broad fanfare idea in triplets that will be taken over by the solo violin later in the movement.

Variation 1—The first variation introduces woodwind harmonies and the theme is moved to the tuba and 3rd bassoon.

Variation 2—The solo violin enters, playing a simple and expressive melody.

Variation 3—The English horn and bassoons pick up the solo violin's previous melody while the violin sings a mournful song that rises and falls with exquisite lyrical beauty.

Variation 4—Cellos and basses take over the soloist's melody while the solo horn plays the original bass line and the solo violin soars high above the orchestra.

Variation 5—The soloist plays a slow, intense triplet figure related to the fanfare played by the horns at the beginning of the movement: cellos and basses pluck the theme.

Variation 6—The solo violin plays the passacaglia theme fortissimo in octaves, providing an exquisite contrast to the expressive melodic playing in the low strings.

Variation 7—Bassoon and tuba quietly take over the theme while 3 clarinets provide new harmonies and the solo violin returns to the same lyrical music it sang in its initial entrance in the third variation.

Variation 8—Pizzicato strings and timpani quietly accompany the soloist, with cellos and basses playing the theme while the solo violin meditates on the horn triplet motif from the initial statement of the theme.

What starts off sounding like it will be a ninth variation is in fact a 12-bar passage leading into the soloist's cadenza, a 5-minute bravura rumination on the music that has come before and a prequel to the finale to which it is directly linked.

The fourth movement *Burlesque* inhabits the musical territory of the folk dance. Oistrakh, in an article defending the concerto shortly after its premiere when, despite its triumphant audience reception, the piece was being ignored by the Soviet critical establishment, characterized the finale's mood as one of "merriment" and said it evoked a "joyful folk holiday." It seems likely that this simplistic (and inaccurate) description was written to try to convince the Composer's Union that the concerto was truly reflective of the politically acceptable "Soviet personality." The unsettling movement, while boiling over with nervous dance energy, is a violinistic tour de force with an underlying mood of sarcasm, irony, satire, and anger. Shostakovich brings back the passacaglia theme from the third movement with a nose-thumbing sense of (self-)mockery, using the brittle tones of the xylophone and high horn (playing in canon, separated by a single bar) to invoke a derisive spirit. A concluding Presto, rather than being triumphant, again pokes fun at the passacaglia theme; the solo violin and the orchestra take turns musically taunting one another as the music hurtles toward its frenetic, final cadence.