

# program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

## **Bright Blue Music (1985)**

MICHAEL TORKE ■ BORN IN 1961

Michael Torke (TOR-kee) was born in Milwaukee on September 22, 1961. His parents enjoyed music, but they were not trained in the field, so they entrusted Michael to a local piano teacher when he early showed musical talent. He soon started making up his own pieces, and by age nine he was taking formal composition lessons. His skills as a pianist and composer blossomed while he was in high school, and he took his professional training at the Eastman School in Rochester, where he studied with Joseph Schwantner and Christopher Rouse. Though he had surprisingly little familiarity with popular idioms before entering Eastman in 1980, Torke absorbed all manners of music from the students and faculty at the school, coming to realize that he could make pop, rock and jazz coexist with the “classical” idioms in his music. After graduating from Eastman in 1984, he spent a year at the Yale School of Music as a student of Jacob Druckman before moving to New York City, where his practice of submitting scores to every available competition had already made his name known to a number of contemporary music buffs. (He has won the American Prix de Rome and grants and prizes from the Koussevitzky Foundation, ASCAP, BMI and the American Academy & Institute of Arts and Letters.) In 1985, his music was taken on by the prestigious publishing firm of Boosey & Hawkes. In 1990, he received a first-refusal contract for all

of his compositions from Decca/London Records, the first such agreement that company had offered since its association with Benjamin Britten; in 2003, he launched his own label, Ecstatic Records. In 1997, he was appointed the first Associate Composer of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. Torke’s recent projects include the opera *Pop-pea*, a rock version of Monteverdi’s *The Coronation of Poppea*, premiered at the Châtelet Theater in Paris in May 2012.

There is youthful excitement and joy in *Bright Blue Music*, commissioned by the New York Youth Symphony. The piece is firmly rooted throughout in the key of D, which Torke claims to have associated with the color blue since he was five years old, and achieves a spaciousness and extroversion that may evoke for some vast expanses of cloudless sky.

## **blue cathedral (1999)**

JENNIFER HIGDON ■ BORN IN 1962

Jennifer Higdon, born in Brooklyn, New York on New Year’s Eve 1962 and raised in Atlanta and Tennessee, is one of America’s foremost composers. She took her undergraduate training in flute performance at Bowling Green State University, and received her master’s and doctoral degrees in composition from the University of Pennsylvania; she also holds an Artist Diploma from the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Higdon joined the composition faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia in 1994, where she now holds the Milton L. Rock Chair

in Composition Studies. Her distinctions include three Grammy Awards and a Pulitzer Prize. Among Higdon's recent projects is the opera *Cold Mountain*, based on Charles Frazier's best-selling novel, which premiered at Santa Fe Opera in 2015.

Of *blue cathedral*, composed in 1999 in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Curtis Institute of Music, Higdon wrote, "Blue — like the sky. Where all possibilities soar. Cathedrals — a place of thought, growth and spiritual expression, serving as a symbolic doorway into and out of this world. Blue represents all potential and the progression of journeys. Cathedrals represent a place of beginnings, endings, solitude, fellowship, contemplation, knowledge and growth.

"As I was writing this piece, I found myself imagining a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky. Because the walls would be transparent, I saw the image of clouds and blueness permeating this church. In my mind's eye, the listener would enter from the back of the sanctuary, floating along the corridor amongst giant crystal pillars, moving in a contemplative stance. The stained glass windows' figures would start moving with song, singing a heavenly music. The listener would float down the aisle, slowly moving upward at first and then progressing at a quicker pace, rising towards an immense ceiling which would open to the sky. As this journey progressed, the speed of the traveler would increase, rushing forward and upward. I wanted to create the sensation of contemplation and quiet peace at the beginning, moving towards the feeling of celebration and ecstatic expansion of the soul, all the while singing along with that heavenly music.

"This is a musical story that commemorates living and passing through places of knowledge and of sharing and of that song called life."

### ***On the Beautiful Blue Danube, Waltzes, Op. 314 (1867)***

JOHANN STRAUSS, JR. ■ 1825-1899

*On the Beautiful Blue Danube* almost sank beneath the waves at its launching. Johann Herbeck, director of the Vienna Men's Chorus, asked Strauss if he could provide a new piece for his ensemble, and Strauss responded with a melody inspired by a line from a poem of Karl Isidor Beck: "On the Danube, on the beautiful, blue Danube." Herbeck assigned Josef Weyl, a police clerk who sang in the chorus and a poet-*manqué*, to concoct some verses to fit Strauss' exquisite melody. "Vienna, be gay! And what for, pray? The light of the arc! Here it's still dark!" was the best that Weyl could do. (Hans Fantel suggested that this doggerel may have been prompted by the carbon-electrode lights just beginning to sprout on Vienna's street corners.) The press notices of this new number's premiere on February 15, 1867 were not unkind, but Strauss judged the whole thing a marginal fiasco, and tucked *The Blue Danube* into his desk.

Later that year, he was invited to take part in the International Exhibition in Paris that Napoleon III was staging in honor of himself. His music proved so successful in the French capital that he dusted off *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* and displayed it to the delirious Parisians. Within weeks, demand for the work spread across the western world, and *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* has since come to be regarded as the quintessential expression of the Viennese waltz.

## Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18 (1900-1901)

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF ■ 1873-1943

The greatest disappointment of Rachmaninoff's career was the failure of his Symphony No. 1 at its premiere in 1897, a traumatic event that thrust him into a nervous collapse. His aunt, Varvara Satina, had recently been successfully treated for an emotional disturbance by a certain Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a Moscow physician who was familiar with the latest psychiatric discoveries in France and Vienna, and it was arranged that Rachmaninoff should visit him. He began his daily sessions in January 1900. "Dahl had inquired what kind of composition was desired of me, and he was informed 'a concerto for piano.' In consequence, I heard repeated, day after day, the same hypnotic formula: 'You will start to compose a concerto — You will work with the greatest of ease — The composition will be of excellent quality.' Although it may seem impossible to believe, this treatment really helped me. I started to compose again at the beginning of the summer." In gratitude, he dedicated the new Concerto to Dr. Dahl.

The Concerto begins with bell-tone piano chords heralding the main theme, announced by the strings; the arching second theme is initiated by the soloist. The development is propelled by a martial rhythm that continues with undiminished energy into the recapitulation. The *Adagio* is a long-limbed nocturne. The finale resumes the marching motion of the first movement with its introduction and main theme. In relief to this vigorous music is the lyrical second theme. These two themes, the martial and the romantic, alternate for the rest of the movement.

# ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

SEPTEMBER 20-21, 2019  
8:00 P.M., SYMPHONY HALL

P R O G R A M

**DIANE M. WITTRY** MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

*Bright Blue Music* MICHAEL TORKE

*blue cathedral* JENNIFER HIGDON

*On the Beautiful Blue Danube, Waltzes, Op. 314* JOHANN STRAUSS, JR.

## I N T E R M I S S I O N

Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Op. 18 SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Moderato

Adagio sostenuto

Allegro scherzando

Piano Soloist: Olga Kern