

Program Notes

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943)

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

Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 is a masterpiece born from the ashes of creative despair. Following the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony, the young composer spiraled into a deep, paralyzing depression that silenced his pen for three years. It was only through daily hypnotherapy sessions with Dr. Nikolai Dahl—who continually repeated the phrase, "You will write your concerto... it will be of excellent quality"—that Rachmaninoff's creative block was finally shattered. Dedicated to Dr. Dahl, the resulting concerto premiered to rapturous applause, instantly securing Rachmaninoff's legacy.

The work opens famously with a series of solitary, tolling piano chords that swell in volume and tension, resembling the heavy bells of Russian Orthodox churches, before the orchestra unleashes the first movement's sweeping, tidal main theme. The second movement, *Adagio sostenuto*, shifts into a shimmering dreamscape of profound lyricism, featuring one of the most sublime melodies in the classical repertoire, passed gently between the piano, flute, and clarinet. Finally, the third movement bursts forth with rhythmic vitality and virtuosic fireworks. It navigates a struggle between turbulent energy and yearning romance before culminating in a triumphant, majestic coda that casts off the shadows of the composer's past. Today, the "Rach 2" stands as a towering pillar of the Romantic repertoire, beloved for its heart-on-sleeve emotionality, brilliant orchestration, and deeply moving narrative of personal resurrection.

Gustav Mahler (1860 – 1911)

Symphony No. 1 in D Major ("Titan") (1884 – 1888)

Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 is a startlingly bold and innovative orchestral debut. Deeply rooted in Mahler's own experiences of youth, unrequited love, and his profound, spiritual connection to the natural world, the work sets the stage for his entire compositional career. Mahler famously stated that a symphony "must be like the world. It must contain everything," and this expansive, all-encompassing philosophy is vividly realized right from his First.

The symphony awakens in a shimmering, ethereal mist. Mahler explicitly instructs the orchestra to play "like a sound of nature," with sustained string harmonics pierced by distant fanfares and the falling-fourth calls of a cuckoo. This atmospheric dawn gives way to a stomping, rustic *Ländler* in the second movement, serving as a joyous celebration of Austrian peasant dances. The mood drastically shifts in the third movement, a grotesque and ironic funeral march inspired by a famous woodcut of forest animals carrying a hunter to his grave. Here, Mahler brilliantly transmutes the cheerful children's tune "Frère Jacques" into a bleak, minor-key dirge introduced by a solo double bass, which is abruptly interrupted by the weeping, wailing sounds of a Bohemian street band. The finale shatters this eerie atmosphere with a terrifying cymbal crash, plunging the listener into a desperate struggle before ultimately fighting its way to a blazing, horn-led, and overwhelmingly victorious conclusion. It is a spectacular journey from the quiet dawn of nature to the ultimate triumph of the human spirit.

Jair Zacarias Bio

Jair Zacarias is a first-year Doctor of Musical Arts student at the University of Kansas School of Music under the guidance of Dr. Priscila Navarro. Born in Trujillo, Peru, Zacarias is the winner of several prestigious competitions, including the 2023 Stecher and Horowitz Piano Competition and the MTNA Young Artist Competition.

His artistic development has been furthered through masterclasses and collaborations with celebrated artists such as Yefim Bronfman, Jon Nakamatsu, Paul Schenly, Barry Douglas, and Jerome Lowenthal. Mr. Zacarias has appeared in festivals across the United States, Brazil, and Peru, including the Bowdoin International Music Festival and Pianofest in the Hamptons.

Recent accolades include being named the winner of the 2025 KU Concerto Competition and winner of the Sigma Alpha Iota Music Award. Mr. Zacarias has been featured on concert series in Florida, Maine, and Indiana, and his performances have been broadcast on WGCU-PBS and Kansas Public Radio. Additionally, he performed at an outreach recital at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Westport, Connecticut.

Mr. Zacarias holds a master's degree from Indiana University where he was mentored by the distinguished Emile Naoumoff, the last protégé of Nadia Boulanger, and completed his undergraduate studies at Florida Gulf Coast University under the tutelage of Dr. Michael Baron.