KU Symphony Orchestra
Program Notes
Wednesday, November 11, 2026

Kevin Day (b. 1996)
Lightspeed: Fanfare for Orchestra (2019)

In 2019, at just 23 years old, American composer Kevin Day wrote Lightspeed: Fanfare for Orchestra, a vibrant concert opener that captures many of the qualities that have come to define his rapidly growing career. Day's music draws freely from an eclectic range of influences, including jazz, minimalism, Latin music, R&B, fusion, hip-hop, and contemporary classical music. His catalog now encompasses works for orchestra, wind ensemble, chamber ensembles, solo instruments, voice, electronics, jazz ensemble, and the stage.

Born in Charleston, West Virginia, and raised in Arlington, Texas, Day grew up surrounded by music. His father worked as a hip-hop producer, while his mother was a gospel singer and church music director. Day began composing while still in high school and later studied tuba and euphonium performance at Texas Christian University, where he also received his first formal training in composition. He subsequently earned a master's degree in composition from the University of Georgia and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Miami.

Day has emerged as one of the most prominent composers of his generation, with music performed throughout the United States and internationally. His works have been presented by leading professional orchestras, military ensembles, universities, and educational ensembles, and his career has included performances, residencies, commissions, conducting appearances, and recognition as both a composer and performer. His honors include a MacDowell Fellowship, a BMI Composer Award, and First Prize in the Atlanta Philharmonic Orchestra Composition Contest. His growing body of work also extends to opera, including Lalovavi, an Afrofuturist opera commissioned by Cincinnati Opera as part of its Black Opera Project.

Commissioned in 2019 by the Washington and Lee University Orchestra, Lightspeed reflects Day's lifelong fascination with science fiction, particularly Star Trek and Doctor Who. The title evokes the exhilarating moment when a spacecraft accelerates beyond ordinary limits and launches into the unknown.

That sense of propulsion is immediately apparent in the music. Brilliant orchestral colors, driving rhythms, and bold brass and percussion writing propel the work forward with tremendous energy. Yet Day balances these explosive gestures with contrasting lyrical writing, particularly in the strings, allowing moments of warmth and expansiveness to emerge from the rhythmic intensity.

The result is a compact musical journey that seems constantly in motion. Lightspeed combines the excitement of a traditional orchestral fanfare with the rhythmic vitality and stylistic openness characteristic of Day's music. Optimistic, cinematic, and unapologetically energetic, the work provides exactly what its title promises: a thrilling launch at full speed.

Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)
Tzigane, *Rhapsodie de concert,* M. 76 (1924)

Few works announce themselves quite like Maurice Ravel's Tzigane. For several minutes, the violinist stands virtually alone, spinning out an increasingly elaborate monologue filled with double stops, harmonics, rapid passagework, and sweeping gestures. It sounds spontaneous and even dangerous, as though the music is being invented on the spot. Of course, almost nothing in Ravel's music was left to chance.

The inspiration for Tzigane came from Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arányi, a great-niece of the legendary violinist Joseph Joachim. Ravel heard d'Arányi perform in London in 1922 and, after the concert, reportedly asked her to play Hungarian melodies for him. She continued late into the night, and Ravel was fascinated. Two years later, he presented her with one of the most demanding works in the violin repertoire.

Ravel titled the piece Tzigane, using a French term historically associated with the Romani people. Rather than attempting to reproduce authentic Romani folk music, however, Ravel created his own highly stylized vision of the virtuosic Hungarian-Gypsy tradition that had fascinated European composers for generations. The influence of Franz Liszt is never far away, and neither is the spirit of the nineteenth-century violin virtuoso.

The work begins with an extraordinary extended cadenza for the solo violin. Starting on the instrument's lowest string, the violin gradually explores an enormous range of colors and techniques. Ravel seems determined to test nearly everything the instrument can do: rapid scales, trills, multiple stops, harmonics, left-hand pizzicato, and passages that race across all four strings. Yet beneath the technical fireworks is something darker and more improvisatory. The opening feels less like a conventional concerto entrance than a storyteller gradually drawing an audience into another world.

When the orchestra finally enters, it does not simply accompany the soloist. Ravel surrounds the violin with constantly changing colors, allowing fragments of melody and rhythm to pass between soloist and ensemble. The music alternates between seductive lyricism and increasingly wild bursts of virtuosity, with the violin almost continually at the center of the action.

That is part of what makes Tzigane so unusual within Ravel's music. He is often associated with refinement, precision, and exquisite control of orchestral color. All of those qualities are present here, but they are placed in the service of something far more unruly. The music accelerates, interrupts itself, changes direction, and repeatedly seems ready to fly apart before Ravel pulls everything back under control.

By the final pages, restraint has essentially disappeared. Soloist and orchestra race toward the conclusion in a display of escalating speed and brilliance, and the violin is pushed to its technical limits.

Ravel once described Tzigane as "a virtuoso piece in the style of a Hungarian Rhapsody." The description is accurate, but perhaps too modest. Tzigane is also Ravel having a little fun with the mythology of the virtuoso violinist: one player, one instrument, and the exhilarating impression that at any moment either might catch fire.

Eduardo Nogueroles (b. 1972)
Spanish Concerto for Tuba and Orchestra (2025)

World premiere of the orchestral version of the "Spanish Concerto" for tuba and orchestra, inspired by the color and richness of traditional spanish dances, performed by David Earll alongside the University of Kansas Symphony Orchestra. The work, structured in three contrasting movements, explores the timbral, technical, and expressive possibilities of the solo instrument in constant dialogue with the orchestra.

A modal introduction of Andalusian inspiration sets the stage for the first movement, written in the style of a Farruca, a flamenco dance in binary meter, characterized by its intense and incisive rhythm, assertive nature, and strong personality. At the end of the movement, a brief cadenza connects organically with the second movement.

The second movement is based on a reinterpretation of the traditional song La Tarara, a simple melody that evokes memories from the composer's childhood, infusing the music with a nostalgic and poetic atmosphere. Here, the tuba takes on an expressive and lyrical role, culminating in an extended and virtuosic cadenza that showcases the full technical potential of the instrument and serves as a bridge to the final movement.

The third movement is a Jota, a dance in ternary rhythm, lighthearted and joyful in character, that transports us to the festive spirit of Spanish folklore. In its central section, known as the copla, the tuba once again adopts a lyrical voice, contrasting with the energy of the dance and highlighting the instrument's melodic capacity and noble timbre. The concerto concludes with a progressive accelerando, in which a virtuosic and almost frenzied passage leads to a vibrant finale.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 – 1943)
Symphonic Dances, Op. 45 (1940)

By the time Sergei Rachmaninoff began writing the Symphonic Dances in the summer of 1940, he had spent more than two decades away from Russia. The Revolution of 1917 had forced him to leave his homeland, eventually settling in the United States and building an extraordinary second career as one of the world's most celebrated pianists. Composition, however, became increasingly rare. Symphonic Dances would be his final major work, and in many ways it sounds like a composer looking backward while still refusing to stand still.

Rachmaninoff originally gave the three movements the titles “Noon,” “Twilight,” and “Midnight,” suggesting a progression from daylight into darkness, although he removed those titles before publication. What remained was a work filled with memories, quotations, and musical ghosts from throughout his life.

The first movement begins almost cautiously before a short rhythmic figure launches the orchestra forward. The music can be muscular and even aggressive, but at its center comes one of the work’s most unexpected sounds: an alto saxophone. Rachmaninoff gives the instrument a long, haunting melody surrounded by delicate orchestral colors. Near the movement’s conclusion, another memory quietly appears. Rachmaninoff quotes his own First Symphony, a work whose disastrous 1897 premiere had devastated the young composer. More than forty years later, he resurrects its theme, transforming what had once represented one of his greatest disappointments into something warm and triumphant.

The second movement is a waltz, although hardly one intended for an elegant ballroom. Muted brass introduce a strange, uneasy atmosphere before the strings begin a swirling dance. The music continually shifts between grace and instability, as though the ballroom itself were slowly tilting beneath the dancers. Moments of elegance appear and disappear, creating a waltz that can feel beautiful, mysterious, and slightly sinister all at once.

The final movement brings Rachmaninoff face to face with a musical idea that had followed him throughout his career: the medieval Dies irae, or “Day of Wrath,” chant traditionally associated with death and judgment. Rachmaninoff quoted the melody repeatedly in his music, including The Isle of the Dead, the Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and several of his symphonies and piano works.

But in Symphonic Dances, death does not receive the final word.

Against the Dies irae, Rachmaninoff introduces another melody, the Russian Orthodox chant “Blessed be the Lord,” which he had previously used in his All-Night Vigil. The two ideas struggle for dominance until the chant ultimately prevails. At this moment in his manuscript, Rachmaninoff wrote a single word across the score: “Alliluya.”

The significance is difficult to miss. In his final orchestral work, an aging composer living thousands of miles from the country he still considered home revisited the music of his youth, his failures, his faith, and even his lifelong fascination with death. Yet Symphonic Dances does not end in resignation. It ends defiantly, with enormous orchestral force and one final victorious gesture.

Rachmaninoff completed the score in October 1940 and dedicated it to Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, who gave the premiere on January 3, 1941. He would compose no other major work before his death two years later.