

# *Ensemble for the Romantic Century*

presents

## ***The Heart is Not Made of Stone***

Saturday, 12 May 2012, 8:00 PM; pre-concert lecture at 7:00 PM  
Leonard Nimoy Thalia at Peter Norton Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway at 95th St.

Written by *Eve Wolf*

Directed by *Donald T. Sanders*

Production and Costume Design by *Vanessa James*

Lighting Design by *Beverly Emmons*

*Julian Sachs*, Company Stage Manager

*Caity Quinn*, Production Manager

*Natalie Wagner*, Assistant Stage Manager

*Emily Rosenberg*, Assistant Designer

*Sueann Leung*, Assistant Designer

*Tomas Kelemen*, Assistant Designer

*Ariel Bock* as Anna Akhmatova

*Carlos Dengler* as Isaiah Berlin

*Kire Tosevski* as Lev Gumilyov

*Michael Lewis* as Ivan

*Robert Ian Mackenzie* as Boris

*Kate Konigisor* as Lady Berlin

*Emmet Smith* as Isaiah Berlin's stepson

*Tanya Bannister*, piano

*Yura Lee*, violin

*Lionel Cottet*, cello

**Eve Wolf** and **Max Barros**, Artistic Directors

**James Melo**, Musicologist

**Donald T. Sanders**, Director of Theatrical Production

## Special thanks to

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CUNY Graduate Center.

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*Romeo and Juliet*

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Cover design by *James Melo*

## PROGRAM

### Act I 1945 Leningrad

- DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH *Jazz Suite no. 2*—"Waltz II" (sound recording)
- DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH Cello Sonata no. 2 in D major, op. 40  
- Moderato con moto
- SERGE RACHMANINOFF Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42
- SERGEY PROKOFIEV *Romeo and Juliet*, op. 64  
- "Balcony Scene" (trans. for violin and piano by Matthias Fletzberger)

### INTERMISSION

### Act II 1956 Leningrad

- SERGEY PROKOFIEV *Romeo and Juliet*, op. 64  
- "Montagues and Capulets/Dance of the Knights"  
(sound recording)
- SERGE RACHMANINOFF Prelude in G-sharp minor, op. 32, no. 12
- DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH Piano Trio no. 2 in E minor, op. 67  
- Andante  
- Allegro con brio  
- Largo  
- Allegretto

### Epilogue 1965 Oxford, England

- SERGEY PROKOFIEV *Romeo and Juliet*, op. 64  
- "Death of Juliet" (trans. for violin and piano by Eve Wolf /Vadim Borisovsky)

## PROGRAM NOTES

*I'm not of those who left their country  
For wolves to tear it limb from limb.  
Their flattery does not touch me.  
I will not give my songs to them.*

(Anna Akhmatova, from *Anno domini*, 1922)

Few events in modern history had the scope and impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917, which put an end to centuries of czarist rule in Russia and created a society in which almost all the former values—political, cultural, religious, economic, and artistic—were effectively demolished in a wholesale agenda of social change. There is no need to rehearse the details of this momentous historical event, the consequences of which are all too familiar. The figure of Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) is inseparable from the implementation of the conditions that we associate with the Soviet state, particularly the reign of terror, persecution, mass murder, and artistic and intellectual surveillance that he visited upon his countrymen. The program presented tonight focuses on the lives of artists who were forced to work under the shadow of Stalin's regime and those who had no alternative but to leave their country forever, particularly on the plight of Anna Akhmatova and her relationship with the philosopher and critic Isaiah Berlin, who left Russia a few years after the outbreak of the Revolution.

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As the Soviet Union began to take shape in the wake of the 1917 Revolution, which caused many intellectuals and artists to leave their native Russia, the poet **Anna Akhmatova** (1889-1966) decided to stay in Russia. Like many of her colleagues, she was tempted to leave the country, but she also nurtured a sense of responsibility that she articulated in a poem ominously titled "When in Suicidal Anguish" (1918). The following lines, which seem to summarize the very essence of the poem, were not published in Russia until the 1990s:

*A voice came to me. It called out comfortingly.  
It said, "Come here,  
Leave your deaf and sinful land,  
Leave Russia forever,  
I will wash the black shame from your heart.  
[...] Calmly and indifferently,  
I covered my ears with my hands,  
So that my sorrowing spirit  
Would not be stained by those shameful words.*

Akhmatova would pay a very high price for her decision. By choosing to stay and bear witness to the evolving horror of Leninist and Stalinist Russia, she opened herself to surveillance, censorship, and the banishment of her works. At the time of the Revolution, she was already a

beloved poet of all the Russians, and her prominence made her a particularly valuable target of the Stalinist regime. As the persecution of artists increased during Stalin's reign of terror, Akhmatova was effectively destroyed as an artist, in the sense that she could not give free rein to her imagination nor have her works sanctioned (and therefore published) by the regime. When her poetry was deemed "politically irrelevant" by Stalin's bureaucracy and censors, her every move began to be watched for the slightest sign of rebellion, criticism, or antagonism toward the political status quo. Critics have noted the influence of *art nouveau* in Akhmatova's early poetry, manifested in its mood of languorous refinement, as well as in the refined and subtle imagery that betrayed an aesthetic akin to the *art-for-art's sake* movement. This fact alone would render her poetry "unusable" by the regime, since it did not embrace any populist or propagandist ideals, focusing instead on the inner life of the subject. Akhmatova's meeting with the English critic and philosopher **Isaiah Berlin** (1909-1997), who paid her a visit in St. Petersburg, marked an important moment in her life. It is clear that Berlin had no idea of the scope of the consequences that this visit would bring upon Akhmatova. In the course of their brief meetings on November 1945 and January 1946, during which they talked about several subjects and discussed their literary and artistic interests, Berlin and Akhmatova fell in love. However, under the circumstances, nothing could possibly have developed between them, unless Akhmatova decided (and had the means) to leave the country. But she decided to stay. The mere fact that Berlin was seen as a foreigner was enough to throw suspicion on Akhmatova. The persecution and surveillance of every aspect of her life increased, and she found herself increasingly unable to lead a fulfilling artistic life and, later, a personal life as well. With time, she and her fellow artists, writers, poets, and friends, engaged in a kind of passive resistance that relied on the underground transmission of poems, either through clandestine publications or by the sheer power of memory: poems would be written, read together by some trusted friends, memorized for further transmission, and the paper was instantly burned. In addition to the iron grip on her life as an artist, Akhmatova also suffered directly from the regime through the execution of her first husband and the imprisonment of her son from that marriage, a tragedy that affected her profoundly. At the height of Stalin's reign of terror, Akhmatova's life was precarious by any measure, and at more than one point she was literally in danger of losing her life. She found herself having to cave in and bow to the Stalinist bureaucracy on some occasions (even writing poems in praise of the regime) in an attempt to free her son from prison, only to be accused by him, later on, of being a negligent and selfish mother who thought only of her own work and never did enough to secure his freedom. Eventually, with the death of Stalin in 1953 and the gradual softening of the most stringent policies of the regime, she was allowed to leave Russia to receive an honorary degree from Oxford, and it was during this trip abroad that she once again saw Isaiah Berlin, now a married man with a secure position in the academic circles of London. It was a rather ironic denouement for a love affair that could not have bloomed where it first sprang to life, and could not bloom now either, even though the external and political environment was more conducive to it. The new circumstances of Berlin's life, however, precluded any such developments. In spite of all that she had to endure, Anna Akhmatova retained a sense of artistic and personal integrity that made her one of the most important voices in the resistance against Stalin. She is now revered as an icon of Russia culture and universally acknowledged as one of the most important poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her popularity cuts across all cultural and linguistic barriers, attesting to the timeless nature of her poetry and the depth of her insights into the human condition.

Like Akhmatova, the composer **Dmitry Shostakovich** (1906-1975) had to find ways to deal with the irrational demands and capricious persecution of Stalin's regime. Contrary to her, however, Shostakovich achieved a degree of public prominence that was quite unusual for an artist working in such a repressive environment. Shostakovich played his cards very well, being constantly on the alert for the fine line dividing the private from the public, and mindful of what he could say in the press as opposed to what he could voice to friends and intimates. In time, he came to be seen as a mouthpiece for Stalin's regime (he even delivered some speeches in

praise of the political climate in Russia during a Peace Conference in New York in 1949) even though he agonized in private about many of the things he felt he was forced to do. During the heyday of the regime, Shostakovich had to publish articles and make public speeches under varying degrees of duress and pressure from Stalin's bureaucracy, and as a consequence we cannot arrive at any impartial judgment about his pronouncements, since we cannot always separate what may have been genuine from what was motivated by sheer survival strategies. In the last three decades, following the publication of Solomon Volkov's *Testimony* (1979), which purports to be the memoirs of Shostakovich as transmitted orally to Volkov himself and other witnesses, the composer's position in relation to Stalin has been intermittently re-evaluated. There may be no end to the controversy about how guilty or innocent Shostakovich was in bowing to Stalin's demands, partly because the information that we have (and are likely to have in the future) is inevitably tainted by the perpetual cloud of secrecy under which everyone lived at that time. Shostakovich's career developed as if the composer were constantly walking on a tight rope. He had to be especially mindful of charges of "formalism", the Stalin bureaucracy's umbrella term used to denigrate any music that was perceived to be inadequate, subversive, or irrelevant to the regime. The term carried a highly negative connotation that pointed at once to an artist's undue preoccupation with matters of individual and aesthetic expression, and charges of being open to degenerate influences from the West. The moment a composer's work was attacked for being "formalist", serious consequences could ensue if the composer did not take measures to mend his ways. Failure to comply with the regime's expectations was tantamount to open defiance, and Shostakovich learned very soon the limitations under which he had to work.

Shostakovich's music displays an uncanny mixture of melancholy, pathos, bleakness, and unexpected turns of humor verging on hilarity and, very often, sheer black humor. Many anecdotes are told of his fondness for extreme sensations and experiences, such as standing up in the car of a rollercoaster at the height of the ride, or calmly reading a newspaper as his riding companion was in the throes of terror during the rollercoaster's spin. Throughout his oeuvre, one can detect moments of pure abandon, juxtaposed with others in which hopelessness reigns supreme. These qualities are in sharp display in the *Piano Trio no. 2, op. 67*, a work that is pervaded by gloom and despair. Nevertheless, in quintessentially Shostakovich style, the prevailing somberness alternates with satirical outbursts, anger, and simple folk elements. Completed in 1944, at the height of World War II, the work is a sustained lamentation for both Shostakovich's recently deceased friend, the musicologist Ivan Sollertinsky, and for the victims of the Holocaust. It is also the first work by Shostakovich to incorporate rhythmic and melodic elements from Jewish traditional music, in a direct reference to the victims of Nazi persecution. The first movement is highly structured around canonical treatments of the main themes, unfolding through a series of thematic transformations and metamorphoses that is indebted to well-established compositional procedures. The "Scherzo" that follows is infused by a bitter sense of humor, cast in the fast and dizzying swirl of a waltz. The character of lament is most prominent in the third movement, "Largo", which is technically an elaborate passacaglia in which the ostinato bass is repeated no less than six times. The chorale texture of the movement, coupled with the constant canonical interchanges between the violin and the cello, give this movement a stately and majestic character redolent of tradition, orthodoxy, and majesty. In the last movement, the use of the Dorian mode with an augmented fourth, together with the iambic rhythm (short-long/unaccented-accented) generate a kind of *danse macabre* full of verve and humor, which in turn contrasts with a stern and almost solemn march. The movement ends with a recall of the chorale from the "Largo", which closes the work in a note of sadness but also of resignation, since this time the chorale returns in the more comforting key of E major, rather than the somber key of E minor.

Each of the other two works by Shostakovich in the program exemplifies a more joyful, even jocular side of his personality. The *Waltz II* from the *Suite for Variety Orchestra*, written sometime after 1956, has been previously thought to be part of the *Jazz Suite no. 2* from 1938. That work, which was originally in three movements, was lost during World War II. The *Waltz* is a marvelous rendition of a world in which the good life unfolds almost unchallenged, but in which there is nevertheless a slight hint of decadence. This charming and seductive waltz would be very difficult to pass muster during the height of Stalinist terror and censorship, and the fact that it was composed after 1956 might reflect a sense of liberation from the old regime. The *Waltz* was made famous as the soundtrack of the opening scene in Stanley Kubrick's film *Eyes Wide Shut*. The movement from the *Cello Sonata op. 40*, a *moto perpetuo* characterized by great rhythmic vitality, makes abundant use of ostinato patterns. There are many unexpected harmonic turns and incursions into distant keys, betraying a certain youthful enthusiasm on the part of the composer. After all, the *Cello Sonata* dates from 1934, a few years before Shostakovich suffered the first fall from grace in the eyes of the Soviet bureaucracy through their stern and very public disapproval of the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*.

**Serge Rachmaninoff** (1873-1943) was born into an aristocratic family of partly Tatar descent, some of whose members had been in the service of the tsars since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He grew up in a musical household (both his mother and father were amateur pianists) and it was in the nurturing and secure domestic environment that he received his first piano lessons. He soon demonstrated a phenomenal talent for the piano and for composition, and after preliminary studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory he moved to Moscow at age 14 to enroll at the Moscow Imperial Conservatory, where he eventually met Tchaikovsky.

Throughout his youth, Rachmaninoff grew accustomed to a way of life that was redolent of the Russian aristocracy, embedded in tradition and orthodoxy, and marked by an unwavering faith on the power and integrity of the Tsar. This enclosed world, with its ordered existence and renewed promises of stability, came to an end with the Revolution of 1917. Rachmaninoff suffered terribly with the Revolution, which effectively destroyed his way of life, his cultural and social affiliations, and his very conception of what his native Russia had been. On 22 December 1917 he left with his wife and their two daughters to Helsinki, carrying only a few sketches and scores of his compositions. After a difficult year touring and giving concerts in Scandinavia, he received lucrative offers from the United States, all of which he declined, but he eventually decided that the U.S. was the right place for him. In November 1918 he left Oslo for New York, and as soon as he arrived in the U.S. he embarked on a steady campaign to secure his position with concert managers and agents. From 1918 to 1943, he made a living as a concert pianist in the U.S. and in Europe, a circumstance that greatly diminished his output as a composer, aggravated by an almost debilitating homesickness. Contrary to Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff never returned to Russia. He could never forget his native country and spent his years in exile mourning the fate of Russia and the loss of his former way of life. In his home in the U.S. he tried to recreate his former life, entertaining Russian guests, hiring Russian servants, and observing Russian traditions. However, he never managed to shake off the gnawing sense of loss for what had happened to Russia, and this sentiment was greatly responsible for his taciturn behavior and melancholy demeanor, as well as some of the most poignant characteristics of his music. He became a brooding and taciturn Russian exile, who wandered the world as a piano virtuoso and pined for his native land like a lost soul. He died in Beverly Hills, in his adoptive country, famous and admired the world over.

Rachmaninoff was the last representative of Russian late Romanticism. Although much of his creative life unfolded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, his aesthetic roots were firmly planted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, nurtured by the influences of Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and other Russian composers who provided a bridge between Western traditions and the specific nature of the Russian character. A phenomenal pianist, Rachmaninoff commanded attention by his figure and

demeanor. His somber expression caused Stravinsky to dub him “a six-foot scowl,” and he was known for his regimented discipline, strict punctuality, and intolerance for the trivial incidents of daily life. Such minutely regulated life stands in sharp contrast to the intensely emotional quality of his music.

The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42*, was the only solo piano work that he composed after he left his native Russia, and was also his last original work for piano solo. Completed in 1931, the piece is contemporaneous with one of the most vocal and public denunciations of the Stalin regime by Rachmaninoff, who referred to its leaders as “Communist grave-diggers”. As a result, Stalin immediately banned Rachmaninoff’s music. Three years later, however, no doubt because of the growing success of the composer and the popularity of his music in the West, Stalin reversed the ban. As a result, the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* was not only performed in Russia but also well received there. The style and musical language of this superb set of variations depart from Rachmaninoff’s most Romantic vein. The music breathes a certain emotional detachment, a cold and icy beauty that is informed by a degree of intellectualism wholly absent from almost all other works by Rachmaninoff. According to the composer himself, the *Variations* should be heard as a tripartite structure similar to a three-movement sonata: Allegro and Scherzo (variations 1-13), Adagio (variations 14-15), and Finale (variations 16-20 and coda). Part of the reason for the more detached nature of this work, which in no way detracts from its exquisite beauty, was the choice of theme itself, an old Spanish melody known as “La folia” and which Corelli used as a basis for variations in the last work of his violin sonatas op. 5, published in 1700 (hence the attribution of the theme to him). The pristine elegance of the theme led Rachmaninoff to cast his variations in a similarly elegant, controlled, and highly structured manner. The melodic structure of the theme, covering a small range and unfolding mostly by stepwise motion, has many similarities to the diction of traditional Russian chants, a fact that was undoubtedly of great appeal to Rachmaninoff. He also took advantage of the tonal ambivalence between the major and minor modes that pervades the theme, in order to create a shifting harmonic language that punctuates a great variety of moods. The midpoint of the variations, right after variation 13, includes an intermezzo colored by Spanish inflections and sporting faux-Baroque ornamentations, a whimsy gesture of homage to the theme’s origin.

The range of Rachmaninoff’s pianistic idiom is in full display in the two sets of *Preludes*, opp. 23 and 32, which were completed in 1903 and 1910, respectively. Rachmaninoff’s *Preludes* cover all the available major and minor keys. It is clear that he had in mind the models established by Bach and Chopin, both of whom wrote preludes that span the entire gamut of the tonal system. But it is also clear that Rachmaninoff did not conceive of the *Preludes* as unified sets, but rather as distinct entities that collectively created a kaleidoscope of techniques and colors. For one thing, he never performed any of the two collections complete in public, preferring instead to include a few of the *Preludes* in various combinations with other works. The *Prelude in G# minor, op. 32, no. 12* has a poignant melody in the left hand, which is offset by the sparkling sonorities of the right hand. A more dramatic central section seems to fuse the two textures, bathed in a harmonic palette of great richness, before the return of the opening section.

Contrary to Shostakovich (who remained in Russia) and Rachmaninoff (who left never to return), **Sergey Prokofiev** (1891-1953) spent part of his creative life in the West, but returned to Russia in 1936 driven by financial difficulties, and remained there until his death. This situation afforded him a unique perspective into the Stalinist regime. He returned to Russia when Stalin’s reign of terror was beginning to unfold in all its might. Like Shostakovich, Prokofiev found ways to reconcile his private and public personas, finely calibrating what he could discuss in public and what he could say among friends. In his music, he would sometimes pay tribute to Stalin while at the same time burying veiled criticisms of the regime and other subliminal allusions. The ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, one of his most beloved compositions, was written mostly during the summer of 1935, shortly before he returned to Russia. Prokofiev extracted three suites from

the ballet, two of which were presented in Moscow and in Leningrad immediately upon his return. The subject of the ballet, the bitter rivalry between two families and the tragic consequences of their ongoing feud, could be seen as a covert criticism of the repressive Russian regime, but Prokofiev obviously had no such intention while composing the work. More important is the realization that these long-lasting rivalries can ruin the lives of innocent people caught up in the cycle of violence. In this regard, the excerpts selected for tonight's program are particularly relevant. The representation of established power, the love interlude of the protagonists, and the tragic denouement represent an all too familiar pattern. After all, the struggle between the individual and an established power is one of the most pervasive dramas of human existence, and in Stalinist Russia this drama unfolded with tremendous consequences. One might speculate about what the bureaucrats could have been thinking while they listened to this work and absorbed the plight of the two young lovers, forced into a mutual death by an inflexible social system. The drama that unfolds in *Romeo and Juliet*, in spite of the specificity of time and space, is ultimately timeless, and Prokofiev's music makes this abundantly clear. The score is one of his most intensely expressive works, and he was clearly aware of its significance. He declared that he had "taken special pains to achieve a simplicity which will, I hope, reach the hearts of all listeners. If people find no melody and no emotion in this work, I shall be very sorry—but I feel sure that sooner or later they will". He was absolutely right.

Prokofiev died on the very same day (5 March 1953) in which Stalin's death was officially announced. For three days, his body remained in the apartment where he lived, near Red Square, because the throngs of people who came to pay homage to Stalin prevented any funeral services to be carried out for Prokofiev. In the general adulation devoted to Stalin, in spite of his horrendous crimes, Prokofiev's death passed almost unnoticed.

Taken together, the lives of the artists represented in tonight's program offer ample evidence of the old dictum according to which "absolute power corrupts absolutely". However, no matter how effective a police state may be, no one can fully lay siege to the imagination.

James Melo  
Musicologist