Emigration, that topic that seems to be on every tongue these days, can have powerful effects even on people of the most exalted status, as the life and career of Sergei Rachmaninoff clearly demonstrate. At the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution, he was in his mid-forties and a world-renowned musician, celebrated as a pianist and conductor as well as the composer of such wildly popular works as the Second and Third Piano Concertos and the Second Symphony. Among the cataclysmic results of the Revolution was a “brain drain” in which many members of Russia’s upper classes, including many artists and intellectuals, fled the country. Like many others, Rachmaninoff would never return and lived the rest of his life with a deep nostalgia for his homeland and the glittering high culture in which he had played such an important part at the end of the Romanov era.

Like most other émigrés who had left their possessions behind, Rachmaninoff’s first concern was to make a living for himself and his family, which included two young daughters. It soon became clear that the best choice was to concentrate on a career as a touring concert pianist. After brief sojourns in Sweden and Denmark he settled in the United States, where, decades later he would eventually become a citizen. Over the next decade, after a period of intense practice and a considerable expansion of his repertoire, he would establish himself as one of the keyboard giants of the era. As successful as this part of his musical life was, however, it left little time for composition and his output declined dramatically for some years. He even went so far as to say that by leaving Russia, “I lost my desire to compose: losing my country, I lost myself also.”

By 1930, however, he experienced a change of heart. He purchased land in Switzerland near Lake Lucerne, where he built an estate designed in Russian style to remind him of the family estate which he had abandoned in Russia. Here at last he seems to have found the serenity necessary for creative work. This period has often been called the composer’s “Indian summer” period and produced several important works. Among them was the Third Symphony, Rachmaninoff’s final contribution to that genre, written in 1935 and 1936 and receiving its premier in 1936 with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of Leopold Stokowski, an orchestra with which the composer had a particularly close relationship.

Reception of the Third Symphony was somewhat disappointing to audiences and critics alike. By this time, the concept of musical modernity was well established, with composers such as Igor Stravinsky (“Mr. Modernsky” as he was sometimes called) and Arnold Schoenberg having brought a revolutionary new musical language into being. Many critics quite naturally expected that Rachmaninoff might himself have moved on from his old-fashioned late Romantic style, with its strong influence of composers such as Tchaikovsky. The fact that Rachmaninoff had no intention of pursuing innovation for its own sake caused important critics such as B.H. Haggin, writing in his familiar often testy style, to call the symphony “a chewing over again of something that never had any importance to start with.”

On the other hand, if the symphony was too old-fashioned for the critics, it fell between two stools by being not completely in the composer’s familiar old lushly melodic style either, leaving audiences puzzled. Rachmaninoff had developed in some ways, and although his style could never be called “modernist”, it had come to be more concentrated and more intellectualized with somewhat more daring harmonies and a willingness to experiment with orchestration. Despite the disappointment of the initial
reception however, Rachmaninoff continued to believe in the work, and although it has not enjoyed the popularity of the Second Symphony, it is an impressive achievement that has held its place in the repertoire.

On today’s program we hear only the first movement of this large work. The opening few bars, played in slow tempo, present a solemn simple motif with something of the character of a Russian chant. This passage serves both as introduction as well as a so-called motto, a theme which recurs throughout the entire work as a unifying element. Particularly striking is the unusual orchestration of the passage, for two stopped horns, clarinet, and solo cello.

After that brief introduction we are suddenly launched into the main fast portion of the movement, which presents us with a long-lined, flowing first theme, containing at least something of a nod to modernist techniques by its frequent changes of meter. This is followed by a lush second theme much closer to Rachmaninoff’s familiar, older style. A bassoon duet begins the development section in a passage which, as many commentators have pointed out, is reminiscent of Wagner, a composer that Rachmaninoff knew well. A reappearance of the motto brings the development to a close and then follows the expected recapitulation with some unexpected changes of harmony and orchestration. The motto returns one last time to bring the movement to a soft, solemn close.

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Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, opus 43
By Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 -1943)

In 1805, the twenty-two year old Nicolò Paganini was a member of the second violin section of the orchestra at the court of the small Italian state of Lucca, which, incidentally, was ruled by the Princess Elisa Baciocchi, the twenty-eight year old sister of a certain Napoleon Bonaparte. When he was not performing in Her Highness’s orchestra, the young violinist found spare time to work on a set of violin studies, which although completed that same year, would have to wait until 1820 to be published. As any violinist will testify, these Twenty-Four Caprices for Solo Violin, which were unprecedented in their imaginative use of a wide variety of violin techniques as well as in their fiendish difficulty, still strike terror into the hearts of performers today, and still stand as one of the great litmus tests of violinistic virtuosity. Paganini himself, of course, went on to become the prototype of the dazzling soloist as heroic figure, establishing new standards of virtuosity that inspired many imitators, including such performers as Franz Liszt on the piano.

The best known of the Caprices is Number 24, a set of variations on a striking theme characterized by a rather jerky, leaping rhythm. Melodies are often built from chords and this theme is based on the so-called circle-of-fifths progression which, as any freshman music theory student knows, is one of the oldest and most satisfying of chord progressions. So rich are the implications of this theme that it has been borrowed by many composers including the likes of Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms.

In the 1930’s, as described above, Sergei Rachmaninoff’s creative juices had begun to flow once again. In the summer of 1934, working at his estate in Switzerland, he set himself the task of borrowing Paganini’s famous tune for a work for piano and orchestra which he would play himself. Although he would call it a Rhapsody, it was actually a set of variations on the melody. Work on the piece proceeded quickly and the premiere took place in November of 1934 in Baltimore with the composer as soloist playing with the Philadelphia Orchestra, his “favorite orchestra”, under the direction
of Leopold Stokowski. The performance was a great success and the Rhapsody would become the most popular of the works from this so-called “Indian summer” period, showing no decline in his powers of inspiration and vying with some of the composer’s hugely popular works such as the Second and Third Piano Concertos, which had been written decades earlier. Furthermore, pundits and connoisseurs tended toward the opinion that the mature composer had actually improved in his technical mastery while losing none of the freshness of his invention.

The Rhapsody consists of twenty-four variations that systematically explore the potential of the theme, while giving the pianist ample opportunity for virtuoso display. Somewhat unusual is the very opening, which begins with a short introduction followed by the first variation, and only then the complete theme. As many commentators have pointed out, this unusual procedure of stating a kind of skeletal variation before the actual theme is a technique that Beethoven used in the finale of that highly revolutionary symphony, the Eroica.

Also worth noting is the use of the famous Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) theme from the medieval Requiem Mass, that wonderfully gloomy melody which had long been quoted by numerous composers as a symbol of the macabre. Rachmaninoff was famously a melancholy sort and seemed to take delight in slipping it into many of his works as a kind of trademark. Here it appears first in Variation 7 and then continues to haunt several other variations with its ghostly presence.

Finally, no discussion of the Rhapsody would be complete without mentioning the famous melody of Variation 18, which, like several other of Rachmaninoff’s best tunes, has found its way into Hollywood movies. Although based on the seemingly artificial technique of turning Paganini’s theme upside down, this melody is as passionately expressive as anything the composer ever wrote, and, once again, connects him to the great tradition of romantic Russian melodic writing. Rachmaninoff, who had a very acute sense of box office and knew very well what effect such a gorgeous melody would produce, supposedly said with a wink:” This one is for my agent.”

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Totentanz (Dance of Death) S.126
Paraphrase on the Dies Irae

By Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

Walter Pater, that exquisitely refined aesthete and critic, once defined romanticism in simple terms: “It is the addition of strangeness that constitutes the romantic character in art.” Precise dating of the beginning of the Romantic Movement with its quest for the exotic, the irrational, and the terrible, has become something of a sport for cultural historians. In his discussion of the subject, the English art historian Sir Kenneth Clark has suggested that the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 might serve as well as any other starting point. The earthquake and resulting tsunami are believed to have killed perhaps as many as 50,000 people and thoroughly shook the popular belief of the Age of Reason in an orderly and rational universe. Voltaire’s Candide appeared soon after the quake, using it as an argument against the view that we live in “the best of all possible worlds”. Also appearing soon after the quake was the philosophical treatise Inquiry into the Origins of the Sublime by the philosopher/statesman Edmund Burke. This influential work, which Sir Kenneth calls “original, intelligent, and extremely boring”, propounds the doctrine that pain, danger, and “whatever is in any sort terrible, is a source of the sublime.”

Creative artists took the new aesthetic to heart soon enough, producing such supposedly sublimely terrible works as Sir Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, commonly considered the first Gothic
novel, and Mary Shelly’s novel *Frankenstein*. The ghoulish short stories of Poe followed, and it need hardly be said that this tradition of horror and the macabre has become a staple of our popular culture.

Those looking for musical counterparts to the Gothic novel, with its pseudo-medieval trappings and macabre goings-on could hardly do better than Franz Liszt’s *Totentanz* (Dance of Death). Liszt was fascinated by death and wrote a number of works with macabre allusions, including *Funérailles*, *La Lugubre Gondola*, and *Pensée des morts*. There has been some debate as to the precise inspiration for *Totentanz*, some suggesting that it was the fourteenth century fresco *The Triumph of Death* in the Campo Santo in Pisa, which Liszt saw on a trip to Italy in 1838. A competing theory is that the primary inspiration was the series of well-known woodcuts entitled Der *Todtentanz* by Hans Holbein.

Whatever his extra-musical inspiration might have been, the logical choice for Liszt’s musical material was the *Dies Irae* melody already alluded to above. Attributed to the thirteenth century Franciscan monk Thomas of Celano, this somber tune suited perfectly the blood-chilling words of the medieval poem whose title translates as “Day of Wrath” and which became part of the Requiem Mass. It would seem that this description of the horrors of Judgment Day was incorporated into the Mass not for the benefit of the deceased, whose dossiers were presumably closed, but for the living, in an attempt to terrify them into rectitude. (Incidentally, the Second Vatican Council of the 1960’s removed the *Dies Irae* from the Mass, on the grounds that it embodied the negative spirituality of the medieval period and that a more hopeful view of death was more in keeping with the Christian faith.) In any case, the melody had the smell of sulphur about it and has proved to be irresistible to a long list of composers. As already mentioned, Sergei Rachmaninoff, he of the famous long face and dour personality who had his own obsession with death, used the *Dies Irae* as a sort of calling card, working it into a number of his works.

As a close friend and great admirer of Berlioz, Liszt was no doubt influenced by the daringly modern use of the melody in the final movement of the *Symphonie fantastique*. Liszt heard the premiere of the work in 1830 and eventually made his own piano arrangement of the entire symphony. He apparently formed the conception of the *Totentanz* as early as 1838 or 1839 but didn’t finish it until 1849. Two revisions were made, one in 1853 and the other in 1859. The work was performed publicly in 1865 at The Hague by the distinguished pianist Hans von Bülow, to whom it was dedicated.

Liszt’s treatment of the theme is in the form of a set of variations which begin with a piano cadenza immediately after the opening bloodcurdling statement of the theme in the low winds and strings. Although sometimes melodramatic almost to the point of campiness (parts of it could be used in a grade “B” horror film), the *Totentanz* is wonderfully vivid and contains some daringly imaginative writing for piano. No less a musical personage than Bela Bartok, that apostle of high modernism, was attracted to this work and performed it many times during his career as a concert pianist. Some commentators have, incidentally, commented on the similarity between the highly percussive use of piano in the introduction of the *Totentanz* and that of the beginning of Bartok’s *Sonata for two Pianos* and Percussion.

The variations include such sophisticated techniques as canon (variation IV), and fugue (variation V). An interesting anomaly is the introduction of an entirely new theme midway through the work which is similar to, and derived from, the *Dies Irae* theme, and which then generates its own new set of variations. Bartok’s interpretation of this new theme was that it “was intended to relieve the overwhelming austerity and darkness with a ray of hope.” In any case, the *Dies Irae* ultimately returns and brings the work to a dramatic conclusion.

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The achievements of Franz Liszt as the greatest pianist of his time and the founder of modern piano playing (not to mention his exploits as one of the leading sex symbols of the nineteenth century) have, from time to time, tended to obscure his work as a composer. Or, as Camille Saint-Saëns once put it, “the world persisted to the end in calling him the greatest pianist in order to avoid the trouble of considering his claim as one of the most remarkable composers.”

Among Liszt’s accomplishments as composer was the establishment of a new orchestral genre that he called the symphonic poem. This new type of composition was a one-movement work that tried to continue the old tradition of symphonic logic and development while allowing greater freedom for the composer to create literary or pictorial images outside the music itself. Liszt himself produced thirteen such works, and more than any other composer helped to establish the symphonic poem as one of the most important genres of late romantic orchestral writing.

By far the best known of Liszt’s symphonic poems and one of his most popular works is Les Préludes. Although the premiere took place in 1854 in Weimar under the direction of the composer, the work had its origins in the previous decade. In 1844 and 1845 Liszt had written a choral work entitled The Four Elements (The Earth, The Winds, The Oceans, The Stars), set to text by the French poet Joseph Autran. Several years later Liszt set out to write an orchestral introduction to the work that would incorporate material from the four movements. The work went through various revisions and at a certain point, Liszt had a change of heart, deciding that the work of another poet better expressed the music. That writer was Alphonse Lamartine, a well known French philosophical poet and statesman of the period whose poem, Les Préludes, became the basis for Liszt’s new work. As it happens, the connection to Lamartine is so vague that, as one distinguished program annotator put it, “we may safely forget the poem.” What is of greater relevance is the preface printed in the score written in purple prose apparently by Liszt’s mistress, the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, which reveals the meaning of the score. “What is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by death?”. After that portentous question we are told in a rather vague way that the music will deal with four aspects of life: love, destiny, pastoral escape, and war.

The primary musical device used to convey these ideas was another of Liszt’s innovations, the technique known as “thematic transformation.” Although there are earlier examples of this kind of variation technique, no previous composer had used it as extensively or systematically as Liszt. (One probable predecessor was Schubert’s Wanderer Fantasy for piano, which used a similar technique and from which Liszt learned a great deal as he made his own arrangement of the work for piano and orchestra.)

The work begins with a musical description of the Question, as the principal theme is heard quietly in the strings at the very beginning, but then expanded into a majestic, rather martial sounding theme heard in the trombones and lower strings. This theme then recurs throughout a number of episodes, ingeniously transformed each time to assume a different character. The first such episode is a sentimental love theme stated by horns and violas, leading to a second episode representing a storm scene. Then follows an interlude of “pastoral calm” ushered in by a brief horn solo that is then imitated by the woodwinds, and then an episode in which the love theme is transformed into a march. Finally, the majestic Question episode returns one last time.

Program music, i.e., music that refers to images or events outside the music itself, became an important part of the romantic aesthetic. Liszt was a pioneer in this type of music and in Les Préludes he
demonstrates how his new found technique can create a logical musical structure marked by both unity and variety, while allowing the imagination full rein to paint pictures and dramatize events.

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