
Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony

January 12 & 13, 2024 • Schuster Center

ARTISTS

Kensho Watanabe, guest conductor
Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra

PROGRAM

Richard Wagner

Act I Prelude from *Lohengrin*

Claude Debussy

Ibéria

1. Par les rues et les chemins
(In the Streets and Byways)
2. Les parfums de la nuit
(The Fragrances of the Night)
3. Le matin d'un jour de fête
(The Morning of a Festival Day)

- INTERMISSION -

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

1. Largo—Allegro moderato
2. Allegro molto
3. Adagio
4. Allegro vivace

Kensho Watanabe is the Benjamin & Marian Schuster Endowed Young Classical Artist.
The Masterworks Series is sponsored by Dr. Ingrid Brown and Dr. Troy Tyner.

Microphones on stage are for recording purposes only.

About the Artist



Kensho Watanabe Guest conductor

Critically acclaimed for “a combination of authority,

charisma, and technical aplomb rarely found in a young conductor,” (*Seen and Heard International*) Kensho Watanabe is quickly establishing himself internationally as an artist known for his collaborative leadership and intelligently crafted performances. Following successful debut performances at the Metropolitan Opera last season with Kevin Puts’ *The Hours* and Terrence Blanchard’s *Champion*, Watanabe returns to the Met this season to conduct the full revival run of *The Hours*.

Equally at home in both symphonic and operatic repertoire, Watanabe opened his 2023–24 season by making his Detroit Opera debut with Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*. In addition to his work at the Metropolitan Opera, Watanabe has led numerous operas, including performances of *La bohème* at Spoleto Festival USA in 2022. He has also previously worked with the Curtis

Opera Theatre, the Castleton Festival, and Opéra de Montréal.

Recent highlights include debuts with the London Philharmonic and Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestras, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Turku Philharmonic, and his Polish debut with Filharmonia Szczecin. Watanabe has also collaborated with the Houston Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Brussels Philharmonic, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the Seiji Ozawa Matsumoto Festival, and Orchestre Métropolitain in Montreal.

Based in Paris, Watanabe was the inaugural conducting fellow of the Curtis Institute of Music from 2013 to 2015, studying with his longtime mentor Yannick Nézet-Séguin. An accomplished violinist, Watanabe received his Master of Music degree from the Yale School of Music and served as a substitute violinist in The Philadelphia Orchestra from 2012 to 2016. He is also a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied with distinguished conducting pedagogue Otto-Werner Mueller. Additionally, he holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Yale, where he studied molecular, cellular, and developmental biology.

Program Notes

Act I Prelude from *Lohengrin*

Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

Lohengrin was Wagner’s sixth opera, premiered in 1850, and it brought him widespread recognition as the new genius in German opera. The story is based on the German Arthurian legend of Lohengrin, the son of Parsifal, both guardians of the Holy Grail—the chalice into which Christ’s blood is said to have spilled. Wagner’s *Lohengrin* is set in 10th Century German Brabant

COMPOSED

1847–1848

PREMIERE

August 28, 1850;
Weimar, Germany

(Antwerp), where the royal succession is endangered because the heir, Gottfried, has disappeared and his sister Elsa is accused of murdering him. Lohengrin arrives to help Elsa and her missing brother. As Lohengrin sets all to right, he falls in love with Elsa.

Act I of the opera introduces Lohengrin, settles Elsa's innocence, and ends with Lohengrin proposing to her.

The Prelude (Overture) to Act I is one of Wagner's most sparkling, and soft-spoken, masterpieces. It's built solely on the musical theme for the Holy Grail—a lavish melody that depicts this holy relic as it descends to earth in the hands of angels. This theme will eventually weave through the entire three-act opera like a recurring motive.

The Prelude's opening moments are all golden light as the violins and woodwinds build luminous chords. Then the Holy Grail theme is played at a whisper in the upper violins—a dignified and drifting melody. Most exceptional about this theme, though, is how Wagner presents it: he divides the first and second violins into many different parts, creating the kind of brilliant light that diffracts through clusters of diamonds. We will bask in this light throughout the Prelude as the theme intensifies incrementally with volume and additional instruments. This build-up reaches its spine-tingling climax at around six-and-a-half minutes into the work—a moment of sheer majesty and radiance. The Prelude then subsides back to the hushed aura of its opening moments, becoming, finally, a tender chord in the upper violins.

Ibéria

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Just on the heels of his symphonic suite, *La Mer*, Debussy began a new three-movement orchestral work entitled *Images for Orchestra* in 1905. The central movement, *Ibéria*, celebrates the essence of Spain, and as the suite's most popular movement, it is often performed alone. Debussy composed his impressionistic Iberian homage with little direct experience of Spain, but by instead relying on books and the musical expertise of his Spanish musician friends. And indeed, *Ibéria* evokes a dreamy world drenched in Spanish scents and flavors, infused with the essence of Spanish folk tunes, Moorish-influenced melodies, and Spanish dance rhythms.

Ibéria itself is also cast in three movements. The first movement opens with a loud stomp from the full orchestra, followed by lustily dancing winds and castanets in rapid triplet patterns, flamenco-style. Within a few bars, two clarinets play the major theme of the movement, light-hearted and energetic. Musical vignettes appear and vanish, like the fleet fanfare and march at about three minutes into the movement. And throughout, Debussy creates a kaleidoscope of timbre and energy through ever-changing colors and rhythms. The movement winds down, becoming lazy and sleepy, with the percussion having the last, quiet words.

A brief pause, and then the second movement emerges, directed to be played “slow and dreamy.” Oboes and flutes waft beneath high-pitched notes held in the strings. The harp and celeste add luminous glints of color, and then a solo oboe

LAST DPO PERFORMANCE

January 2010

APPROXIMATE DURATION

8 minutes

COMPOSED

1905–1912

PREMIERE

February 20, 1910;
Paris, France

LAST DPO PERFORMANCE

March 2017

APPROXIMATE DURATION

20 minutes

begins to sing, like a quietly-hummed lullaby, at about two minutes. Melodies, some folk-sounding, another recalling the clarinet theme from the first movement, rustle amidst nighttime sounds, like the beautifully eerie glissandos in the upper violins, until faint church bells begin to wake up the world. Without pause, the third movement begins as a dance with driving rhythms in the lower strings. Soon, the violins and violas are directed to strum their instruments like guitars. About a minute later, a lone street fiddler wanders into the merry-making. As themes from the previous movements reappear, these happy minglings of musical jubilation conclude with a quick and glorious explosion of energy.

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

In 1906, amidst a busy schedule of teaching, concertizing, and conducting, Sergei Rachmaninoff and his family spent the summer in quiet Dresden, Germany, where he took the opportunity to compose his Symphony No. 2. It was an ambitious work, considering his Symphony No. 1 (1897) had met with a dismal premiere. But when his Second premiered in 1908, it instantly became his most popular symphony, and one of the great masterpieces of his career.

The Second Symphony opens with a remarkable introduction: the basses begin in the low registers, playing only seven notes. This bass line is the musical motive that nearly every other theme in the Symphony will be based upon—and though that motto is often cleverly disguised, the effect of its near constant presence makes for a magical cohesion throughout the entire work. The first great example of this motto transformation occurs as the movement speeds up into *Allegro moderato* (moderately fast). The first full theme we hear in this new tempo is that original motto, now played in the violins, slightly varied, and sped up. It works its magic—transporting us into an epic musical adventure. Rachmaninoff will bring us through lots of music in this first movement, from pathos-laden moments to flashes of breathtaking grandiloquence and hushed tenderness. As the final bars come to their dramatic close, we're left with the feeling of having come a long way in this epic.

The second movement is a rollicking scherzo, jumping from the start like a racehorse. The horns soon play a majestic, swashbuckling melody, but with a twist: it's derived from the *Dies irae*, an ancient plainchant that describes the Day of Judgement.

The third movement is a quintessential “Rachmaninoff Adagio,” a gentle, lyrical, and wandering rhapsody. Its main theme showcases Rachmaninoff's mastery for making simple melodies sound so vast and rich.

The final movement opens boisterously; the music bursts with color and electricity, and the orchestration is thick with instruments and sound. As the movement progresses, the Symphony begins to clamor increasingly with activity. Just as everything begins to reach an almost hyper excitement, the *Dies irae* theme from the second movement makes a majestic return as a brass chorale, lifting everything into the Symphony's hair-raising final bars.

COMPOSED

1906–1908

PREMIERE

January 26, 1908;
St. Petersburg, Russia

LAST DPO PERFORMANCE

March 2013

APPROXIMATE DURATION

60 minutes