### Minnesota Orchestra

**Juanjo Mena, conductor**  
**Kirill Gerstein, piano**

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<td>Orchestra Hall</td>
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*We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of [Allen and Kathy Lenzmeier](#) in the presentation of these concerts.*

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#### Sergei Rachmaninoff

**Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18**  
*Moderato  
Adagio sostenuto  
Allegro scherzando*  
*Kirill Gerstein, piano*

*ca. 36’*

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#### Dmitri Shostakovich

**Symphony No. 7 in C major, Opus 60, Leningrad**  
*Allegretto  
Moderato – Poco allegretto  
Adagio  
Allegro non troppo*  
*[There is no pause before the final movement.]*

*ca. 70’*

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**Concert Preview**  
Friday, March 13, 7:15 pm, Target Atrium  
Saturday, March 14, 7:15 pm, N. Bud Grossman Mezzanine  
Sunday, March 15, 1:15 pm, N. Bud Grossman Mezzanine

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of [Classical Minnesota Public Radio](#), including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 2
The solo piano is heard almost continuously in this very challenging concerto. Deep chords in a haunting opening theme give way to a meditative second movement (flute, clarinet and strings carry the theme in turn), followed by a vigorous, aggressive march.

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 7, Leningrad
In June 1941 Hitler’s troops invaded the Soviet Union; this vast symphony is Shostakovich’s response. The composer dedicated the work to “our coming victory over the enemy” and to his besieged native city, Leningrad. Recurring throughout the symphony is a heroic theme introduced early in the massive first movement, before a jaunty marching tune signals the approach of an invading force and the destruction to follow. Nostalgic central movements depict a way of life now lost forever, and despite the tension in the finale, the heroic theme returns, heralding victory.
Sergei Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto may be one of the world's best-loved piano concertos, but it almost didn't get written, and the tale of its creation is one of the most remarkable in all of music. Rachmaninoff graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892 with its highest award, the gold medal, and quickly embarked on a career as a touring pianist. But he wanted to compose. He had written a piano concerto while still a conservatory student, and early in 1895 the 21-year-old composer took on the most challenging of orchestral compositions, a symphony. Its premiere, on March 27, 1897, was a catastrophe. Conductor Alexander Glazunov was unprepared, the orchestra played badly, and audience and critics alike hated the music, César Cui describing it as a “program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt...[music that would give] acute delight to the inhabitants of Hell.” What should have been a moment of triumph for the young composer instead brought humiliation.

Rachmaninoff may have been a powerful performer, but he was a vulnerable personality, and the disaster of the premiere plunged him into a deep depression. His first act was to destroy the score to the symphony. It was never performed again during his lifetime, but after his death it was reassembled from the orchestral parts, and the painful irony is that this work is now admired as one of the finest works of his youth. However, in the aftermath of the fiasco of its premiere, Rachmaninoff lost confidence in himself and wrote no music at all for the next three years.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

**Born:** April 1, 1873, Semyonovo, district of Starorussky, Russia  
**Died:** March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California

**Concerto No. 2 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 18**  
**Premiered:** November 9, 1901

With the dam broken, new music rushed out of the rejuvenated composer. Across the summer and fall of 1900, Rachmaninoff composed what would become the second and third movements of his Second Piano Concerto. These were performed successfully that December, and Rachmaninoff composed the opening movement the following spring. The first performance of the complete concerto, in Moscow on November 9, 1901, was a triumph. Not surprisingly, Rachmaninoff dedicated the concerto to Dr. Dahl.

**the music: virtuosic and rich with melodies**

**moderato.** The very beginning of the concerto seems so “right” that it is hard to believe that this movement was written last. Throughout his life Rachmaninoff loved the sound of Russian church bells. The concerto begins with the sound of those bells, as the solo piano alone echoes their tolling. Into that swirling sound, the orchestra stamps out the impassioned main theme, one of those powerful Slavic melodies that instantly haunt the mind; the solo piano has the yearning second subject. Rachmaninoff writes with imagination throughout this movement: the orchestra reprises the main theme beneath the soloist's dancing chordal accompaniment, while the solo horn recalls the second subject in a haunting passage marked *dolce.* The music demands a pianist of extraordinary ability.

**adagio sostenuto.** A soft chorale for muted strings introduces the second movement, but in a wonderful touch the solo flute sings the main theme as the pianist accompanies. The theme is repeated, first by the clarinet and then the strings, growing more elaborate as it proceeds, and only then is the piano allowed to take the lead. A brief but spectacular cadenza leads to a recall of the tolling bells from the very beginning and a quiet close.

**allegro scherzando.** The final movement begins quietly as well, but in a march-like manner full of suppressed rhythmic energy. Rachmaninoff makes effective contrast between the orchestra's opening—powerful but controlled with an almost military precision—and the piano's entrance, which explodes with an extraordinary wildness. The second theme, broadly sung by the violas, has become one of those Big Tunes for which Rachmaninoff was famous. This wonderful melody would become an inspiration for countless Hollywood composers and, many years later, would be used to set the words “Full moon and empty arms.” If one can escape such associations and listen with fresh ears, this lovely
music is an excellent reminder of Rachmaninoff’s considerable melodic gift. The concerto rushes to its conclusion on a no-holds-barred coda (another Rachmaninoff specialty) that resounds in every measure with the young composer’s recently restored health.

**Program Notes**

**Dmitri Shostakovich**

*Born:* September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia  
* Died: * August 9, 1975, Moscow, Russia

**Symphony No. 7 in C major, Opus 60, Leningrad**

*Premiered:* March 5, 1942

On June 21, 1941, Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia, and specified to his generals that it would “have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful and unrelenting harshness.” He kept his word: over the next four years 20 million Russians would be killed.

Dmitri Shostakovich was on his way to a soccer double-header when he heard the news that would transform his life and that of his nation. When his attempt to enlist in the army was rejected, he contributed to the war effort by writing patriotic songs and marches and joined the fire-fighting brigade at the Leningrad Conservatory. They did not have long to wait. The Germans began shelling Leningrad on September 1, beginning one of the most horrifying sieges in history, lasting almost three years and killing 20 million Russians.

commemorating Leningrad and its struggle

That July, even before Nazi shells fell on Leningrad, Shostakovich had set out on a vast musical project in response to the invasion—a work that would become the longest, most famous and most notorious of his 15 symphonies. He completed the huge first movement on August 29 as the German army approached and had the second done on September 17. By September 29, when he completed the third, Leningrad had been completely cut off. He and his family were flown over enemy lines to Moscow and then, along with many other Soviet artists, evacuated to Kyubishev, 600 miles east of Moscow. He completed the Seventh Symphony there on December 27, and the premiere followed on March 5, 1942, also in Kyubishev. He dedicated the Seventh Symphony “to our struggle with fascism, to our coming victory over the enemy, and to my native city, Leningrad.”

allegretto. The *Leningrad* Symphony, as the Seventh inevitably became known, spans some 70 minutes. The massive first movement, which gives the symphony its distinctive character, is a drama that seems to be a complete emotional journey in itself. Its powerful opening, in C major, establishes a heroic character; Shostakovich described it as “the happy, peaceful life of people sure of themselves and their future.” The violins’ lyric second subject and the exposition’s closing theme, imaginatively assigned to a solitary piccolo, offer fleeting glimpses of a peaceful life.

When war suddenly intrudes into this almost pastoral world, the invaders arrive not as cataclysmic horror, but as a faint presence on the most distant horizon. Over a faint snare drum tattoo, strings pluck out a jaunty little tune, almost banal in its simplicity. The sting comes in the closing phrase, taken from “Da geh’ ich zu Maxim’s”—an aria from Franz Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*, which ironically was among Hitler’s favorites. Over the incessant snare drum, this little tune repeats 12 times, growing louder and beginning to swagger as the enemy approaches. Then the tune, having reached steamroller proportions, is assaulted by a mighty “Russian”-sounding theme, and a noisy musical battle erupts. After Shostakovich reintroduces his heroic opening theme, we hear what might be described as a battered recapitulation, and solo bassoon sings a long threnody on the violins’ second subject. What earlier sounded so peaceful is now spare and grim. The movement concludes in near silence, as fragments of the invader theme lie shattered in the ditch.

moderato – poco allegretto. The composer referred to the second movement, a scherzo, as “a lyrical respite,” recalling “pleasant events and past joys,” after the violence of the first. Second violins announce a tart little dance, full of ironic turns, and the strident central episode, which moves in 3/8 and C-sharp minor, rides along the piercing sound of solo woodwinds. The opening dance returns, accompanied by wonderful sounds, pulsing quietly, from two flutes and alto flute.

adagio. The spare wind chorale that opens the *Adagio* alternates with a cadenza-like recitative for violins, and this in turn is followed by a lyric idea for flute. This, some of the most appealing music in the symphony, is rudely shoulderied aside as the music accelerates into a raucous, troubled central section. Shostakovich recalls his opening material briefly before proceeding directly into the finale.

allegro non troppo. “Victory” was the composer’s original name for the last movement, which he described more fully as “the victory
of light over darkness, wisdom over frenzy, lofty humanism over monstrous tyranny.” The music begins in harmonic uncertainty and takes a firm direction only when the strings stride out purposefully with the movement’s main theme. This is a long, tense movement, with ten extra brass players; and despite a quiet central episode, the music often feels more tortured than triumphant. Even the last-minute return of the heroic opening theme does not dispel this tension, and Shostakovich wrenches the music into unequivocal C major only for the final chord. Written from the depths of war, this is a finale that celebrates the expectation of victory rather than its finality.

**an unprecedented impact**

No other symphony in history has had such an immediate impact as the *Leningrad Symphony*. Its premiere was broadcast throughout Russia, and the Leningrad premiere—on August 9, 1942, in the midst of the siege—was so important to the beleaguered city that its only surviving orchestra, a radio orchestra of barely 50 players, was augmented by musicians pulled from military units, even including some who were called back from the front to participate.

The score was microfilmed, driven to Tehran, then flown to Cairo and on to the West. Sir Henry Wood led the British premiere on June 29, and Arturo Toscanini led the NBC Symphony in the American premiere on July 19, which was broadcast nationally. That same week, Shostakovich appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, improbably wearing the hat of the Leningrad Conservatory’s fire brigade. The symphony was performed more than 60 times in its first season, unheard of for any symphony, before or since. This music had become the cultural symbol of the struggle against Hitler and the Nazis.

Inevitably, a reaction set in. English critic Ernest Newman contributed a memorable barb, saying that if one “wished to locate this symphony on the musical map, he should look along the 70th degree of longitude and the last degree of platitude,” and Bartók—perhaps unwisely—sneered at the invader theme in his Concerto for Orchestra. After its excessive popularity, the *Leningrad Symphony* virtually dropped out of sight in the years following the war.

What sense are we to make of the Shostakovich Seventh Symphony, close to seven decades after its premiere? The conditions that gave rise to its creation have long since faded into history, and this work might have been expected to vanish along with them. Yet it has reestablished itself to some degree in recent years, and it continues to engage audiences.

Perhaps, like a faded snapshot or a uniform found in a closet, it draws on simple nostalgia to evoke another era. But the music’s passion and heroism are powerful as well. American writer and poet Carl Sandburg said that this symphony was “written in the heart’s blood,” and while its rawness and immediacy may be the source of some of its problems, they are also the source of its strength. Sentiments that sound tinny and jingoistic during moments of ease can take on renewed meaning during times of national emergency, as the events of September 2001 reminded us. In its stark power, broad strokes and unconflicted emotions, Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony speaks of a less complicated time, and it truly is music written “in the heart’s blood.”

**Instrumentation:** 3 flutes (1 each doubling alto flute and piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (1 doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 6 trumpets, 6 trombones, tuba, bass drum, cymbal, field drum, tam-tam, tambourine, triangle, xylophone, timpani, 2 harps, piano and strings

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Program notes by Eric Bromberger.