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The Romantic Sonata Rachmaninoff & Grieg
Alexander Braginsky, piano & Tanya Remenikova, cello

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Program Notes

by James Hepokoski

The two cello sonatas presented here inhabit the sumptuous worlds of late Romanticism and early modernism. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, composers were seeking to construct personalized musical languages, to create melodies, harmonies, and textures stamped as their own. At times, as with Grieg, the personalized language was offered as the representative voice of a nation (here, Norway). In other cases, such as that of the early Rachmaninoff, the musical language was recognizably regional (here, Russian) but strove within that larger tradition to forge an idiosyncratic, unique voice. In addition to their differences in nationality and temperament, the two composers belonged to different compositional generations. Born in 1843, Grieg was determined to keep his "Romantic-Nationalist" style clean and uncomplicated. On the other hand, Rachmaninoff, born in 1873, came to maturity in a rapidly changing world, and his music is shot through with the advanced technique, high-pressure emotion, and bitter-sweet irony characteristic of several of the "early modernists."

Composed in 1901, Rachmaninoff's sonata is the third member of a triptych of works that announced his return to compositional activity after a five-year collapse of confidence in his own powers following the disastrous reception of his *First Symphony* in 1897. A product of the Moscow Conservatory, Rachmaninoff had published nothing since 1896, and it was only after being treated by Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a specialist in hypnosis, that he was able to compose again. Within a short period of time he produced three closely related works from 1901: the *Suite No. 2 for Two Pianos*, the *Piano Concerto No. 2*, and the *Sonata in G minor for Piano and Cello*, which were published as Opp. 17, 18, and 19. With these works, Rachmaninoff declared that he was a musician to be reckoned with: he now presented himself as a technically brilliant "early-modernist" composer, a master of opulent and richly varied piano writing, and a figure of enormous expressive depth.

Rachmaninoff's title for his sonata is unusual. According to the manuscript, this is a sonata for "piano and cello," not the reverse—and indeed, the piano leads and dominates much of the

action (that is, Rachmaninoff himself, "the pianist"). The cello part often serves as a searching, second voice for the pianist—although, to be sure, it is sometimes released into a darkly rich, ecstatic lyricism on its own. Rachmaninoff wrote the piece for himself and his friend Anatoly Brandukov, to whom the work was dedicated. Together, they gave the work its first performance in Moscow on 2 December 1901. (Rachmaninoff added the *vivace* ending to the finale only after this premiere.)

The first movement opens with a slow introduction, *Lento*—a passage of almost immobile preparation, in which the cello and piano brood over some of the motivic materials for the sonata-to-come, particularly the interval of the rising half-step. Suddenly, decisive action snaps the stasis into motion (*Allegro moderato*): the piano twice asserts the fundamental rhythmic motive of the piece (short-short-long/short-short-long—a "call to order"), and the cello sounds the broad, G minor first theme, *espressivo e tranquillo*. From time to time, the piano spurs the motion onward with its motivic call to order.

As is typical of sonatas of this period,

the second theme is conceived both as a marked contrast to the first and as a "healing space" within the minor-mode movement as a whole. Here the tempo slows to *Moderato*, the mode changes to major (D major), and the piano introduces a nostalgic, square-cut tune moving largely in steady quarter notes. The second theme's major mode is in part undercut by chromatic slippages and borrowings from the minor (including the "pathetic" upbeat that begins the theme), as if one were trying to recapture a simpler, lost past, now dissolving away and increasingly unavailable in the "new" century. The theme is restated by the cello, whereupon the exposition opens to a breathtaking pianistic lyricism in the familiar Rachmaninoff manner. Following a repetition of the exposition, the development is permeated with the "call-to-order" motive and the brooding, ascending half-steps of the introduction. A brilliant piano cadenza (on the call-to-order motive) initiates a passage that merges almost imperceptibly into the recapitulation. The second theme then furnishes the desired major-mode resolution, but the victory is short-lived: the *coda* restores the negative G minor, and the movement closes with a brusque "short-short-long" from the

piano.

The second movement, *Allegro scherzando* (12/8, C minor), is laid out in easily distinguished sections, which might be described as: ABA/C/ABA. This rondo-like structure is probably better understood as a scherzo with trio (in which C is the trio). With its piano-figure repeatedly plunging downward in the bass, the principal theme, A, conjures up a grim, spectral image enveloping the whole (a deathly night ride, perhaps, in the manner of Schubert's "Erlkönig"). The B and C passages provide momentary, rhapsodic escapes: B (*Un poco meno mosso*) calls forth some delicious major-mode pleading from the piano; C, also in the major mode, unfurls a broad, lyrical melody for the cello with rich piano arpeggios underneath.

The most important task of the *Andante* (*E flat major*), the emotional heart of the sonata, is to secure a stabilized major mode, one that will govern the more positive last half of the work, just as the stern minor mode had prevailed in the first two movements. This *Andante* is a grand, lyrical nocturne, a wondrous opening into the major, enriched with voluptuous *fin-de-siècle* harmonies and expanded to fill

the entire movement. Its luxuriously floated opening theme, spanning the open fifth, has been more subtly prepared than the listener might at first recognize. While it by no means quotes material from earlier movements, it has been expressively foreshadowed by them. With its emphasis on the "hovering" fifth scale-step, for example, it bears a family resemblance to the second theme of the first movement and the B theme of the second—as if it were only now bringing those ideas to full flower, and ultimately, to a climactic, sweeping reprise near the end of the movement.

Once the major-mode has been opened in the *Andante*, the finale, *Allegro mosso*, can stride forth with self-assurance, its G major balancing and resolving the G minor of the opening movement. The themes of this sonata-form movement exude confidence from the outset: the opening cello theme rushes onward in exuberant triplets; the second theme, also led by the cello (and slowing to *Moderato*), is broad, noble, and hymnic and rises to a climactic restatement in the piano. A suitably strenuous development and regular recapitulation follow. The *Coda* subdivides into two sections: a *dolce, meno mosso* fade-out (essentially the piece's

original conclusion at its premiere); and an added *Vivace* to end the work on a note of exhilaration—and to end it with a variant of the decisive "Rachmaninoff" signature rhythm at the end.

Throughout his career Grieg strove to capture a "Norwegian sound." Informed by folk music, this sound was to be heard as healthy, sincere, and pure; it was to be experienced as fresh air in an otherwise congested European musical climate. As Grieg's nationalist colleague, Rikard Nordraak, wrote to him in 1865, "We Norwegians—we who have felt the fresh, unpolluted mountain air—can discern more clearly than most the miserable, dishonest products of the spirit in the music of our time." As for Grieg, he would reflect in 1900 that "the realm of harmony has always been my dream world, and the relation between my sense of harmony and Norwegian folk music has always been a mystery for me."

Grieg sketched the initial ideas for the Cello Sonata in A Minor in summer 1882 in Lofthus, in the Hardanger region of Norway, notable both for its folk traditions and its spectacular fiords. He finished the work in Bergen the following spring, and the first per-

formances took place in Dresden and Leipzig in October 1883. (To situate the Cello Sonata within his larger career, this is fifteen years after the Piano Concerto, ten years after the *Peer Gynt* music, five years after the String Quartet, and one year before the *Holberg Suite*.) Originally planned for his brother, John, the work survived an initially cool European critical reception and gradually entered the standard sonata repertory for cellists.

The first movement unfolds in a clear sonata form displaying several typical features of the composer. The exposition, for instance, juxtaposes two blocks of nationally characteristic material, the thematically uniform blocks are separated by little or no transition, and they are set as expressive opposites, contrasting maximally with each other. The movement opens directly with the first block, an A minor *Allegro agitato* beginning in an ominous *pianissimo*, then building in anxious waves to a desperate peak—only to subside, *morendo*, at its end. The negative situation suggested by the music of the first block leads immediately to a hopeful, second-block positive response: the prior minor mode relaxes into major (C major), the tempo notches downward to a calmer *molto*

più tranquillo, the piano sounds a single phrase of preparation (it is the previously "desperate" first theme reaching out, now in major, toward the healing-space to come), and the second theme proper, *dolce*, emerges in the cello. Here we encounter a sentimental "song of the heart," saturated with Norwegian color and melodic contours (notice the melodic drop, 8-7-5, or doti-sol)—the expression of national feeling to serve as a redemptive space within the sonata. The remainder of the movement dramatizes the struggle between the major and minor mode blocks. Ultimately, the minor mode emerges as victorious, and the last bars of the recapitulation and the *Coda* end with a reaffirmation of the chilly winter light of A minor.

The slow movement, *Andante molto tranquillo* (F major), is ushered in with heartfelt, national lyricism. Proceeding in calm, measured steps—yet colored with chromatic harmonies underneath—its main theme paraphrases the well-known "Homage March" from Grieg's *Incidental Music to Sigurd Jorsalfar* (1872). A second lyrical theme, gliding forward in smooth triplets, leads to an agitated center section that stages an impressive set of anguished, sequential climaxes—and

ultimately a triple *fortissimo* crisis—before subsiding into a reflective reprise.

The finale begins with a brooding A-minor preparatory phrase from the solo cello, then plunges into the body of the movement proper, *Allegro molto e marcato*, a sonata structure parallel to that of the first movement. Here, however, Grieg transforms the content of the minor mode first block into something less ominous—a lively folk-dance in the vigorous, 2/4 halling style. The calmer second block, first sounded in C major (*tranquillo*), idealizes the folk-motivic material of the first—turning it into an emotional "song of the heart"—while simultaneously alluding back to the "hopeful" second theme of the first movement (notice especially the shared 8-7-5 "Norwegian" element in the two melodies). As the finale proceeds, we discover that the negative resolution of the first movement is being reversed, and the movement ends in a celebratory, rousing A major.