

Kataklysmos

Steven C. Smith (1959—)

Written: 2009

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Eighteen minutes

Richmond Symphony audiences know of Steven Smith as their Music Director. However, he is also an ASCAP award-winning composer. In addition to the Richmond Symphony, his works have been performed by numerous orchestras including the Santa Fe Symphony, Kansas City Symphony, Chautauqua Symphony, Colorado Springs Symphony, Eugene Symphony, Grand Rapids Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra Youth Orchestra, Eugene Youth Symphony and Colorado Springs Youth Symphony. In addition to orchestral music, Smith has composed for numerous smaller ensembles. He was named Ohio Composer of the Year by the Ohio Music Teachers Association and is the recipient of the Cleveland Institute of Music Alumni Association Alumni Achievement Award. Speaking of his music, Steven Smith says that he attempts to

convey the magnificence, breadth and life force of the natural world. I believe in the interconnectedness of all things, and the necessity of human beings to confront the crucial reality that we are merely a small part of the larger natural world. I gain inspiration from a variety of natural settings, and particularly the close and repeated contact with specific geographies, plant systems or archaeological resources. . . . Through my compositions I hope to raise overall awareness of the importance of our environment, its residents, human and otherwise, and foster an appreciation and reverence for the world we all share.

Steven wrote *Kataklysmos* for the Santa Fe Symphony, and they premiered it in 2010. Maestro Smith offers the following comments on *Kataklysmos*:

From the Greek word for “cataclysm,” *Kataklysmos* was inspired by the ancient and continuing effects of geologic forces upon the earth’s landscape. While the sculpturing wrought by these forces occurs in numerous locations throughout the world, New Mexico’s dramatic landforms were a more direct stimulus for the composer. The area familiarly known as Tent Rocks is a magical and awe-inspiring place in which to hike and contemplate the power, variety and sense of humor inherent in nature. Kasha-Katuwe is the traditional name for these “white cliffs” in the original Keresan language of neighboring pueblo people.

The work begins with a musical depiction of a volcanic eruption giving way to stillness, the passage of time. Gradually, fragments of melodies begin to evolve, and with increasing variation, intensity and volume lead to the majestic tutti statement that forms the bedrock of all the melodic and harmonic material for the entire piece. The final section begins with overlapping melodic motives against shimmering textures. As the tempo becomes faster by degrees, rising and falling arpeggios appear,

mimicking the shape of the tent-like formations. The boisterous rhythmic activity that drives to the end reflects elemental human emotions akin to childhood feelings of awe and joy at being surrounded by such a magical natural realm.

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Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 74, "Pathétique"

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Written: 1893

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 46 minutes

Shortly after he compiled a suite from his *Nutcracker* ballet, Tchaikovsky scribbled down the plan for what he hoped would be his next symphony: "The ultimate essence of the plan of the symphony is LIFE." However, he never finished the work. "There is nothing particularly interesting or symphonic in it," he wrote to his nephew. "I decided to throw it away and forget about it. This is an irreversible decision, and it is wonderful that I made it."

Tchaikovsky didn't really destroy the work; he eventually used parts of it for a piano concerto. He didn't give up the *idea* of the symphony either. In another letter to his nephew he wrote, I had the idea of writing a program symphony . . . The theme of it is full of subjective feeling, so much so that as I was mentally composing it . . . I frequently shed tears. There will be numerous innovations from the formal point of view: the finale, for instance, is to be not a noisy allegro, but a long adagio.

The symphony begins with an introductory motive played very quietly and slowly by the bassoon. Shortly after, the body of the work begins with the same motive played faster by the strings. The character of this first theme is full of impulsive passion. The famous second theme is a real contrast. It is slow and hushed. These two themes form the exposition of the first movement that, in spite of its unique sentiment, still follows the standard form with a development and recapitulation.

The second and third movements, however, do not follow the normal scheme of a symphony. The second movement is a lilting sort of waltz instead of a slow somber thing. It has a strange limp to it: Its rhythm is in five, not the typical three. The third movement is an entirely unexpected march! Both themes of the finale are based upon descending melodic motives, giving it a brooding and sorrowful character. The symphony ends with the same gloominess with which it begins.

After he finished writing the symphony, Tchaikovsky confessed, "I consider this symphony the best thing I have ever done. In any case, it is the most deeply felt. And I love it as I have never loved any of my compositions." He died nine days after its premiere, a victim of cholera.

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Piano Concerto No.1 in F-sharp Minor, Op.1

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Written: 1890–91; revised in 1917

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 27 minutes

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born into the Russian aristocracy. He learned the piano from a professional pianist from St. Petersburg, imported by his grandfather to the family estate. Eventually, at the age of fourteen, he enrolled at the Moscow Conservatory. Rachmaninoff studied and lived with his teacher Nikolai Zverev until the constant demands of practice fueled his desire to become a composer.

Rachmaninoff wrote his *First Piano Concerto* while he was still a student at the conservatory and performed the first movement with the student orchestra as part of his senior year. He was disappointed with audience reception to his concerto, and a disastrous first performance of his *First Symphony* put him into such a funk that he literally stopped composing. (Leo Tolstoy's pointed remark to Rachmaninoff about his music—"Is such music needed by anyone?"—didn't help.) Rachmaninoff wasn't too wild about his concerto, either. "It is so terrible in its present form that I should like to work at it and, if possible, get it into decent shape," he wrote. However, it was only in an attempt to widen his performing repertoire before he left for America—he had to play 40 concerts in four months—that he actually completed a revision of the concerto. He didn't change the tunes so much as tighten up the construction and rework the accompanying orchestra.

The French horns begin the first movement with a bold fanfare and then the piano gets a dramatic statement in octaves. The orchestra gets first crack at the lush, romantic theme and then the piano gets to augment it with all sorts of filigree. The piano introduces the much faster second theme. After an extended orchestral interlude, Rachmaninoff plays around with the various elements; there is a restatement of both of the principal tunes, and then a monumental solo cadenza before the movement ends.

A solo French horn opens the second movement that is, essentially, one long lyrical song. When the piano isn't singing out the tune, it is busy ornamenting the orchestral utterance of it. If the first two movements don't provided enough technical fireworks, the impetuous third movement does. Rachmaninoff can't keep the capriciousness going for long and so transitions into another long, fluid melody. The movement ends with even more flash and dash than it began.

JPV