

program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

***The Palace of Nine Perfections* (2004)**

ZHOU TIAN ■ b. 1981

Chinese-American composer Zhou Tian (JOH TEE-en) was born in 1981 in the city of Hangzhou, China, 100 miles southwest of Shanghai, and did his undergraduate work in composition and piano at the Shanghai Conservatory. In 2001 Zhou came to the United States to attend the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he studied composition with Richard Danielpour and Jennifer Higdon and piano with Meng-Chieh Liu. Zhou subsequently earned a master's degree at the Juilliard School as a student of Christopher Rouse and a doctorate at the University of Southern California, where he studied composition with Stephen Hartke and Donald Crockett and piano with Antoinette Perry. Zhou taught at Colgate University from 2011 until 2016, when he was appointed Associate Professor of Composition at the Michigan State University College of Music. Zhou's distinctions include First Prize in the Washington International Competition for Composers, First Prize in the Kathryn Thomas International Composition Competition, Julius Hemphill International Composers Award, Presser Foundation Music Award, three ASCAP/Morton Gould Awards, an Excellence Award in the 16th Musical Composition Award by the Ministry of Culture of China (given only every five years), and composition fellowships from the Aspen, Tanglewood

and Fontainebleau music festivals; he has also served as Composer-in-Residence for the Green Bay Symphony and the chamber series Music In the Loft in Chicago.

Zhou wrote, "*The Palace of Nine Perfections* [2004] was inspired by a Chinese painting by Yuan Jiang, believed to date from 1691. Though I learned about the painting growing up in China, it was not until 2003 that I first saw the original work in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I was immediately moved by its honesty and unusual vividness. Inspired, I wanted to create a musical reaction to Yuan's vision, hoping that we could hear as well as see *The Palace of Nine Perfections*. The work, consisting of three major parts, is a fusion of Chinese musical elements and contemporary orchestral writing. In *Palace*, I wanted to use the modern symphony orchestra to convey a sense of unfamiliar beauty and energy."

The commentary on the web site of the Metropolitan Museum accompanying the image of the painting describes *The Palace of Nine Perfections* as a "set of twelve hanging scrolls; ink and color on silk; 18 ft. 5-3/4 in. [long] by Yuan Jiang (active ca.1680-ca.1730).... Yuan Jiang thrived in the commercial world of his native Yangzhou. Catering to the vogue for large-scale hanging scrolls and multi-paneled screen paintings as decoration in the ostentatious mansions of the city's mercantile elite, Yuan specialized in intricate visions of palatial complexes set within sumptuous blue-and-green landscapes intended to evoke

Tang and Song prototypes. This screen-like set of scrolls depicts an 8th-century imperial retreat in the hills north of the Tang capital, Chang'an (present-day Xi'an). Destroyed by the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907), the Palace of Nine Perfections is remembered as one of the most splendid residences ever built, with grounds so vast that it was necessary to travel between halls by horseback. Yuan's vision ... [is] set in a fantastic landscape that suggests the enchanted realm of the immortals."

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 43 (1934)

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF ■ 1873-1943

The legend of Nicolò Paganini has haunted musicians for over two centuries. Gaunt, his emaciated figure cloaked in priestly black, Paganini performed feats of wizardry on the violin that were simply unimagined until he burst upon the European concert scene in 1805. Not only were his virtuoso pyrotechnics unsurpassed, but his performance of simple melodies was of such purity and sweetness that it moved his audiences to tears. So far was he beyond the competition that he seemed almost, well, superhuman. Perhaps, the rumor spread, he had special powers, powers not of this earth. Perhaps, Faust-like, he had exchanged his soul for the mastery of his art. The legend (propagated and fostered, it is now known, by Paganini himself) had begun. Paganini, like most virtuoso instrumentalists of the 19th century, composed much of his own music. Notable among his *oeuvre* are the breathtaking *Caprices* for Unaccompanied Violin, works so difficult that even today they are accessible only to the most

highly accomplished performers. The last of the *Caprices*, No. 24 in A minor, served as the basis for compositions by Schumann, Liszt and Brahms, and was also the inspiration for Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, which he combined with the ancient chant melody *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath") from the Requiem Mass for the Dead.

The *Rhapsody*, a brilliant showpiece for virtuoso pianist, is a set of 24 variations. The work begins with a brief, eight-measure introduction followed, before the theme itself is heard, by the first variation, a skeletal outline of the melody. The theme, 24 measures in length, is stated by the unison violins. The following variations fall into three groups, corresponding to the fast-slow-fast sequence of the traditional three-movement concerto.

Scheherazade, Op. 35 (1888)

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV ■ 1844-1908

"In the middle of the winter [of 1888], engrossed as I was in my work on *Prince Igor* and other things, I conceived the idea of writing an orchestral composition on the subject of certain episodes from *Scheherazade*." Thus did Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov give the curt explanation of the genesis of his most famous work in his autobiography, *My Musical Life*. His friend Alexander Borodin had died the year before, leaving his *magnum opus*, the opera *Prince Igor*, in a state of unfinished disarray. Rimsky-Korsakov had taken it upon himself to complete the piece, and may well have been inspired by its exotic setting among the Tartar tribes in 12th-century central Asia to undertake his own embodiment of musical Orientalism. The stories on which he based his orchestral work

were taken from *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of millennium-old fantasy tales from Egypt, Persia and India that had been gathered together, translated into French, and published in many installments by Antoine Galland beginning in 1704.

To refresh the listener's memory of the ancient legends, Rimsky-Korsakov prefaced the score with these words: "The sultan Shakriar, convinced of the falsehood and inconstancy of all women, had sworn an oath to put to death each of his wives after the first night. However, the sultana Scheherazade saved her life by arousing his interest in the tales she told him during 1,001 nights. Driven by curiosity, the sultan postponed her execution from day to day, and at last abandoned his sanguinary design." To each of the four movements Rimsky gave a title: *The Sea and Sinbad's Ship*, *The Story of the Kalandar Prince*, *The Young Prince and the Young Princess* and *Festival at Baghdad—The Sea—Shipwreck*. At first glance, these titles seem definite enough to lead the listener to specific nightly chapters of Scheherazade's soap opera. On closer examination, however, they prove too vague to be of much help. The *Kalandar Prince*, for instance, could be any one of three noblemen who dress as members of the Kalandars, a sect of wandering dervishes, and tell three different tales. "I meant these hints," advised the composer, "to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled, and leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each listener. All I had desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as *symphonic music*, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders."

ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

FEBRUARY 10 AND 11, 2018
8:00 P.M., SYMPHONY HALL

P R O G R A M

DIANE M. WITTRY MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

The Palace of Nine Perfections

ZHOU TIAN

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini
for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 43
Piano Soloist: Joyce Yang

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

I N T E R M I S S I O N

Scheherazade, Symphonic Suite, Op. 35 NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV
The Sea and Sinbad's Ship
The Story of the Kalandar Prince
The Young Prince and the Young Princess
Festival at Baghdad — The Sea — Shipwreck