

# SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

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## ABOUT THE MUSIC

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### RACH & THE HOLLYWOOD SOUND MAR 19, 20 & 21, 2022

Program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

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#### HILDUR GUÐNADÓTTIR *From the Other Place*



**COMPOSER:** born September 4, 1982, Reykjavík, Iceland  
**WORK COMPOSED:** 2014  
**WORLD PREMIERE:** undocumented  
**INSTRUMENTATION:** unspecified  
**ESTIMATED DURATION:** around 8 minutes

#### ABOUT THE MUSIC

*“My intention is to let things be themselves.” – John Cage*

In the early years of the last century, a Connecticut life insurance salesman who had studied composition at Harvard and spent 14 years as a professional organist started writing some highly unusual music. At the time, few people understood what he was doing, or even agreed that what he was writing was in fact music, so radical, chaotic and dissonant did it sound. One like-minded young composer 3,000 miles away in California did appreciate it, however. Thanks in part to Henry Cowell, a modernist composer from Menlo Park, the music of Charles Ives did not fade into obscurity after the older composer’s death in 1954.

Why begin a program note on Icelandic composer, cellist and singer Hildur Guðnadóttir by talking about Charles Ives? Because Ives was perhaps the first modern composer to use what have come to be known as *indeterminate* or *aleatoric* techniques in his compositions, just as Guðnadóttir does in *From The Other Place* (more about this later). Ives pioneered the use of improvisation in American classical music – a few of his compositions include notes in the score asking the performers to insert improvised measures within the full score.

As the 20th century progressed, other composers began incorporating aspects of randomness or unpredictability into their own works. *The Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music* defines this kind of compositional approach as “Music in which the composer introduces elements of chance or unpredictability with regard to either the composition or its performance. The terms *aleatoric*, *chance music*, [and] *music of indeterminacy* have been

applied to many works created since 1945 by composers who differ widely as to the concepts, methods and rigor with which they employ procedures of random selection.” The avant-garde composer John Cage is the best-known proponent of indeterminate music in the United States.

In the 1960s and 1970s, composers also began experimenting with non-traditional notation. Some invented their own idiosyncratic symbols to indicate pitches such as the quarter-tones or microtones found in Asian and Middle-Eastern music, that Western notation does not easily accommodate. Others abandoned notation entirely and began creating scores using graphics: ascending lines, geometric shapes, arrows, spirals, even colors. Some of these graphic scores have become visual as well as aural art, like George Crumb’s *Mikrokosmos*. To view more graphic scores, visit [theguardian.com/music/gallery/2013/oct/04/graphic-music-scores-in-pictures](https://theguardian.com/music/gallery/2013/oct/04/graphic-music-scores-in-pictures) or [classicfm.com/discover-music/latest/graphic-scores-art-music-pictures/](https://classicfm.com/discover-music/latest/graphic-scores-art-music-pictures/)

Guðnadóttir, who comes from a large family of musicians, fuses her classical cello training with experimental pop and contemporary art music. In her solo works, Guðnadóttir draws out a broad spectrum of sounds from her instrument, ranging from intimate simplicity to huge expansive soundscapes. In the last few years, Guðnadóttir’s work has received worldwide attention, thanks to her Oscar-winning score for the 2019 film, *The Joker*. She has won numerous awards for her other film and television works, including music for *Sicario: Day of the Soldado*, *Mary Magdalene*, *Tom of Finland*, *Journey’s End*, and the Icelandic Scandinavian noir TV series *Trapped*. In September 2021, Guðnadóttir and her husband Sam Slater released their score for the video game *Battlefield 2042*.

In his notes for a Eugene Symphony concert featuring film music, Music Director Francesco Lecce-Chong writes, “*From the Other Place* was not written specifically for a film, but it is representative of [Guðnadóttir’s] ethereal sounds and spontaneous musicmaking. Instead of traditional sheet music, musicians are asked to create music in the moment by choosing their own path through a map of colored dots representing notes. Instead of the chaos that one might imagine, the result is something almost meditative.”

Guðnadóttir described her approach to her work in an interview for the online music magazine *15 Questions*: “Time is ... very important for me. I enjoy music the most that slows time down. I need time to take in every little nuance of a sound. I need to have time and space for breath within music. So when writing music these are elements that are almost always there. As a result the music I write is normally quite slow.

“I think it’s important that the audience has the freedom to interpret music personally, without me telling them, ‘You should feel this,’ or that this is great music because of some ingenious mathematical equation that I figured out. It’s just like speaking to someone. The listener doesn’t need to understand what’s happening in my vocal chords to appreciate what I am saying. If the listener is really interested in anatomy he might want to find those things out, and it might add something to the meaning for him. But I feel the listener shouldn’t need to do that.”

# NINO ROTA

## Ballet Suite from *La Strada* [*The Road*]



**COMPOSER:** born December 3, 1911, Milan; died April 10, 1979, Rome

**WORK COMPOSED:** 1966

**WORLD PREMIERE:** September 2, 1966, at the Teatro alla Scala in Milano.

**INSTRUMENTATION:** 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, celesta, cymbals, sleighbells, suspended cymbals, tambourine, tam-tam, woodblock, xylophone, drum set, piano, harp and strings

**ESTIMATED DURATION:** 30 minutes

### ABOUT THE MUSIC

Stop a random person walking down the street in Anytown, USA, and ask them to name a movie composer; most likely they will reply, “John Williams.” In Italy, the passerby would probably answer, “Nino Rota.” The Milano-born composer is best known for his more than 150 film scores, and particularly for his long collaboration with director Federico Fellini, which began in 1951 and continued until Rota’s death in 1979. When asked about Rota, Fellini remarked, “The most precious collaborator I have ever had, I say it straightaway and don’t even have to hesitate, was Nino Rota – between us, immediately, a complete, total, harmony ... He had a geometric imagination, a musical approach worthy of celestial spheres.”

Rota, a composing prodigy, began performing and publishing his own music while in his teens. He graduated from Rome’s Conservatoria Santa Cecilia in 1930, whereupon conductor Arturo Toscanini encouraged the 19-year-old to continue his studies in the United States. Rota attended the Curtis Music Institute in Philadelphia from 1930-32, where he studied conducting under Fritz Reiner. After he returned to Milan, Rota earned an additional degree in literature from his hometown university. In 1950, Rota became director of the Liceo Musicale in Bari, where he remained until 1978.

Although best known for his Fellini scores, which include *La Dolce Vita*, *Amarcord*, and *8 ½*, Rota also worked with other notable directors, including Luchino Visconti (*Le notti bianche*); Franco Zeffirelli (*Romeo and Juliet*), and Francis Ford Coppola (*The Godfather* and *The Godfather, Part II*; Rota won an Oscar for Best Score for the latter).

The film *La Strada* won the inaugural Oscar for Best Foreign-Language Film. Twelve years later, Rota arranged a suite from the score for a ballet based on the movie. The suite’s seven movements capture Rota’s deft handling of an eclectic variety of musical styles, and his innate sense of musical storytelling. Gelsomina, an innocent, simple-minded young girl, is sold by her mother to Zampano, a loutish street performer whose specialties are feats of strength. Gelsomina becomes a sidekick clown, luring in crowds with her drums and trumpet. The two join a circus where Gelsomina befriends tightrope walker Il Matto, who encourages her to break away from the abusive Zampano and make a life for herself. In a murderous rage, Zampano kills Il Matto; afterwards, consumed by guilt, he abandons Gelsomina, who, unable to cope on her own, wastes away and dies. Zampano, hearing of her death, is further crushed by despair.

Rota’s jaunty syncopated brasses, cymbals and drums reflects the hurly-burly of life in the circus. Gelsomina’s primary theme is heard throughout, most prominently sounded by the solo trumpet near the end, just after Il Matto expresses his concern for her in a poignant violin solo. Rota, usually known for his unforgettable melodies, writes effective orchestral dissonances to depict the murder. Just as Gelsomina fades away, so does the music, in a disembodied, slightly eerie manner featuring strings harmonies and an otherworldly celeste.

# SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

## Symphony No. 1



**COMPOSER:** born April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia; died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills  
**WORK COMPOSED:** Between January and October 1895. Dedicated to “A.L.” (Anna Lodyzhenska).

**WORLD PREMIERE:** Alexander Glazunov led the Russian Symphony Society in concert in St. Petersburg on March 27, 1897.

**INSTRUMENTATION:** 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, military drum, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle and strings

**ESTIMATED DURATION:** 42 minutes

### ABOUT THE MUSIC

The right person on the podium can make all the difference. Consider the case of 22-year-old Sergei Rachmaninoff, a rising star in Russian musical circles, and the notoriously disastrous premiere of his first symphony. Critic and composer Cesar Cui, one of “The Mighty Five,” a group of Russian composers that also included Mily Balakirev, Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, was particularly vicious. His review of the premiere has become famous in its own right, particularly the following:

“If there were a conservatory in Hell, and if one of the students were given an assignment to compose a programmatic symphony on the theme of ‘The Seven Plagues of Egypt’ and composed a symphony like Rachmaninoff’s, he would have fulfilled his assignment brilliantly and thrilled the inhabitants of Hell.”

Others in the audience agreed that the performance was awful, but were more sympathetic to Rachmaninoff, like conductor Alexander Khesin, who, recalling the premiere, remarked, “The Symphony was insufficiently rehearsed, the orchestra was ragged, basic stability in tempos was lacking, many errors in the orchestral parts were uncorrected; but the chief thing that ruined the work was the lifeless, superficial, bland performance, with no flashes of animation, enthusiasm or brilliance of orchestral sound.”

A more thoughtful assessment appeared in the April issue of *Russkaya Muzykalnaya Gazeta*:

“The climax of the concert, Rachmaninoff’s D minor symphony, was not very successfully interpreted, and was therefore largely misunderstood and underestimated by the audience. This work shows new impulses, tendencies toward new colors, new themes, new images, and yet it impresses one as something not fully said or solved. However, I shall refrain from expressing my final opinion, for it would be too easy to repeat the history of Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, only recently ‘re-discovered’ by us, and which everyone now admires as a new, marvelous, and beautiful creation. To be sure, Rachmaninoff’s first symphony may not be wholly beautiful, integrated and definite, but some of its pages seem far from mediocre. The first movement, and especially the furious finale with its concluding Largo, contains much beauty, novelty, and even inspiration ...”

Given Rachmaninoff’s own abilities as a conductor (although today he is best known as a composer, during his lifetime, Rachmaninoff had three successful musical careers: composition, performance, and conducting) with the 20/20 benefit of hindsight, he and his music would have been better served had he conducted the premiere of the Symphony No. 1 in D minor himself. But in 1897, Rachmaninoff was at the beginning of his musical career, and not yet established as a conductor. Logic and convention dictated that a better-known colleague should conduct the

premiere of Rachmaninoff's highly-anticipated first symphony. Unfortunately, the colleague in this instance was fellow composer, pedagogue, and conductor Alexander Glazunov. Although Glazunov had an established reputation as a conductor, Rachmaninoff was dismayed by his lackluster performance at Op. 13's premiere. Six weeks later, Rachmaninoff wrote to his friend and colleague Aleksandr Zatyayevich:

"I am not at all affected by its lack of success, nor am I disturbed by the newspapers' abuse; but I am deeply distressed and heavily depressed by the fact that my Symphony, though I loved it very much and love it now, did not please *me* at all after its first rehearsal. This means, you'll say, that it was poorly orchestrated. But I am convinced, I reply, that good music can shine through poor instrumentation, nor do I consider the instrumentation to be wholly unsuccessful. So two surmises remain. Either, like some composers, I am unduly partial to this composition, or this composition was poorly performed. And this is what really happened. I am amazed – how can a man with the high talent of Glazunov conduct so badly? I speak not merely of his conducting technique (there's no use asking this of him), but of his musicianship. He feels nothing when he conducts – as if he understands nothing! ... If the public were familiar with the symphony, they would blame the conductor ... but when a composition is both unknown and badly performed, the public is inclined to blame the composer."

Others present at the premiere corroborated Rachmaninoff's opinion regarding Glazunov, whose alcoholism was an open secret in Russian musical circles. (Glazunov's most famous composition student, Dmitri Shostakovich, recalled that Glazunov habitually kept a bottle hidden in his desk, from which he would surreptitiously sip through a tube during lessons.)

Glazunov's role in the fiasco notwithstanding, lasting damage was done to both Rachmaninoff himself and his aspiring career. As a result, Rachmaninoff sank into a depression so severe he abandoned composition entirely for three years. In 1900, he tried and failed to write his second piano concerto. As Rachmaninoff recounted in his *Memoirs*: "I did nothing and found no pleasure in anything. Half my days were spent lying on a couch and sighing over my ruined life." Desperate, Rachmaninoff sought help from a hypnotist, Dr. Nicolai Dahl, who was also an amateur string player. Dahl, using hypnotic techniques, planted encouraging thoughts in Rachmaninoff's head during their sessions. "I heard the same hypnotic formula repeated day after day while I lay half asleep in my armchair in Dr. Dahl's study," Rachmaninoff wrote. 'You will begin to write your concerto ... You will work with great facility ... the concerto will be of excellent quality ...' It was always the same, without interruption. Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me."

Rachmaninoff recovered, but the D minor Symphony did not, at least not during his lifetime. Rachmaninoff refused to revise or publish it, and neglected to take the manuscript score with him when he left Russia for the United States in 1917. The orchestral score has since been lost, but some months after Rachmaninoff died, a two-piano transcription of Op. 13 surfaced in Moscow. Not long afterwards, the orchestra parts were found at the Leningrad (formerly St. Petersburg) Conservatory; together these discoveries allowed for a reconstruction of the full score. In 1945, when the refurbished symphony received its first performance since its premiere, audiences and critics hailed it as a triumph.

Fans of Rachmaninoff's music know that he had a lifelong preoccupation/mild obsession with the opening notes of the *Dies irae* (Day of Wrath), the plainchant taken from the liturgy of the Mass for the Dead. Rachmaninoff embedded the *Dies irae* in many of his own compositions, including *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, *Isle of the Dead*, his first piano sonata, and the tone poem *The Bells*. Many other composers have also incorporated the *Dies irae* into their music, but for Rachmaninoff this stark, powerful fragment had a lifelong magnetism that kept him returning to it throughout his life.

In the D minor Symphony, Rachmaninoff treated the *Dies irae* as a behind-the-scenes motivator. He never quotes it directly, but the opening theme of the Allegro ma non troppo, which recurs at the opening of each subsequent movement, borrows the contours of the *Dies irae*'s rise and fall in a manner that tempts the listener to believe they have heard the actual tune.

Russian-ness permeates this work. Rachmaninoff's profound connection with and love for the music of his homeland is evident throughout, as is his signature combination of unabashedly lush melodies tinged with melancholy poignancy. His orchestration is effective, showing his skills at handling the multiverse of timbres found in an orchestra. Additionally, Rachmaninoff ventures into bold statements, particularly in the closing Allegro con fuoco (with fire). A confident brass fanfare opens a triumphal march with military flourishes (snare drum and other percussion). This contrasts with ominous muttering in the strings, which riff on that *Dies irae*-esque fragment so insistently one could swear the gates of Hell were about to open. Instead we hear sweeping themes for horns, in a manner that nods at Mahler and anticipates Shostakovich.

The Czar's official title was "Czar of All the Russias." This symphony translates that geographical concept into music with its broad scope, range of moods, shifting colors, and inherent power.

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years, and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media).

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