



COLLEGE OF MUSIC

University of North Texas
College of Music

Ensemble Concert | Wednesday, March 5, 2025 | 7:30 p.m.
Margot and Bill Winspear Hall - Murchison Performing Arts Center

Symphony Orchestra
with Misha Dichter, piano
David Itkin, conductor

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43 (1934) Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873–1943)

Misha Dichter, piano

-INTERMISSION-

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98 (1885) Johannes Brahms
(1833–1897)

I. Allegro non troppo

II. Andante moderato

III. Allegro giocoso

IV. Allegro energetico e passionato

Program three hundred thirty-nine of the 2024–2025 season
Photography and videography are prohibited

Program Notes

by Sarah Addison, doctoral teaching assistant in music history, supervised by
Brian Anderson, Senior Lecturer of Music History Pedagogy and
Bernardo Illari, Associate Professor of Music History and Musicology Area Coordinator

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43 (1934) **Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)**

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini occupies a unique position in Rachmaninoff's output. Though structured as a theme and variations, it functions as a concerto in disguise, following a three-part form resembling the movements of a traditional piano concerto. Written in the summer of 1934 at his Villa Senar in Switzerland, the *Rhapsody* was one of the few major works Rachmaninoff composed after leaving Russia in the wake of the 1917 Revolution. He devoted much of his time to performing during his exile, limiting his ability to compose; however, this work emerged in a brief period of inspiration and was completed in a matter of weeks. The *Rhapsody* was premiered on November 7, 1934, in Baltimore, with the composer as soloist and Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra. It was immediately successful and remains a staple of the piano repertoire.

The *Rhapsody* is built on Niccolò Paganini's (1782–1840) *Caprice No. 24*, a virtuosic étude for solo violin. This theme had already inspired composers such as Brahms and Liszt, but Rachmaninoff's distinctive approach transforms the theme and variations—a genre often viewed as light salon entertainment—into a continuous, evolving symphonic structure. The *Rhapsody* subjects Paganini's familiar melody to a kaleidoscopic series of transformations and expands its expressive scope, pitting the piano against the orchestra in a way that is as dramatic and structured as that of the author's piano concertos.

Rachmaninoff opens with an unexpected turn: rather than stating the theme outright, the piano first plays its skeletal outline by way of musical tease (Var. 1), which the orchestra responds with the full melody (*Tema*). The variations unfold as a continuous exploration of the theme's possibilities, shifting between brilliance, lyricism, and intensity to create momentum. A first set of nine variations conventionally increase musical interest. The slower Variation 7, however, breaks the pattern, as it ushers in an unexpected visitor: The *Dies irae*, a medieval chant from the Catholic Mass for the Dead associated with fate and mortality, is presented by the piano, harmonized with colorful chords. This melody introduces an element of foreboding and acts as a counterweight to Paganini's theme; subsequently, these two themes interact to shape the work's dramatic character. The improvisatory Variation 11 serves as a transition to the lyrical middle section.

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The central variations (12–18) provide diversified contrast, culminating in the famous 18th variation, where Rachmaninoff plays Paganini's theme upside down, transforming it into a broad, sweeping, sentimental piano melody in D-flat major supported by lush string orchestration. Later, Rachmaninoff humorously stated that this iconic moment was dedicated to his agent due to its immediate and lasting popular appeal. The final section (Variations 19–24) returns to the work's earlier energy, restoring Paganini's theme in increasingly virtuosic transformations. The *Dies irae* resurfaces prominently in the march-like Variation 22, reinforcing the underlying tension as the piece drives toward its conclusion. The piano and orchestra engage in a final display of technical brilliance before the work ends with Paganini's theme disappearing with a sly wink.

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98 (1885) | Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Brahms's *Symphony No. 4* is the self-conscious, self-designated culmination of his symphonic writing. More austere and tragic—and immensely more powerful—than its predecessor, the symphony explores themes of struggle, resignation, and fate. Shaped by Brahms's characteristic motivic development and intricate contrapuntal textures, the piece carries an overarching sense of existential searching, perhaps a reflection of his reckoning with mortality and artistic legacy. Though Brahms expressed doubts about its reception, the symphony was a success at its premiere in Meiningen under his own baton and has since remained a cornerstone of the orchestral repertoire, admired for its structural brilliance and emotional depth.

Brahms composed the symphony in E minor, a key traditionally associated with weighty, tragic content, as seen in works like Antonin Dvořák's *New World Symphony*. Rather than resorting to conventional thematic contrast, the symphony employs the continuous unfolding of small motivic ideas that Arnold Schoenberg, ever the Brahms champion, labeled as “developing variation.” The whole symphony rests upon the opening motive, with a characteristic pattern of descending thirds which appears in all four movements and serves as a structural thread.

Brahms's first movement opens abruptly, without introduction, presenting the descending third motif in the strings. This unassuming yet tense opening soon gains dramatic weight as the orchestral texture expands. Structurally, the movement follows a modified sonata form, though Brahms departs from convention with an abundance of thematic material. A fanfare in the winds introduces a broad, lyrical second theme, played by the cellos, while the closing section brings two additional themes. The development intensifies the primary motif through rhythmic and harmonic transformation, culminating in a stormy climax. The recapitulation hesitates at first, as though wounded by the preceding drama, before proceeding with greater force. Rather than providing resolution, the coda expands into a second development, pushing the movement toward a final, anguished climax.

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The second movement begins with a stark horn call outlining the Phrygian mode, imparting an archaic quality to the music. The main theme, introduced by winds and low strings, unfolds with a measured, processional character. Structured in a three-part A–B–A form, the movement contrasts its austere opening with a middle section in B major, where warmer harmonies and fuller orchestration provide a moment of lyricism before the return of the Phrygian motif. The movement closes in E major, offering a moment of respite within the symphony's broader drama.

The third movement provides a striking contrast to the somber tone of the first two movements. Here, Brahms expands his orchestral palette with piccolo, triangle, and contrabassoon, lending the movement an unexpected brightness. Rhythmically energetic and bursting with vitality, the music recalls elements of scherzo and rondo form while maintaining the motivic unity characteristic of the entire symphony. Despite its exuberance, this movement remains structurally rigorous, with offbeat accents and orchestral dialogues adding layers of complexity. The forceful closing gestures set the stage for the gravity of the final movement.

Brahms' penchant for variation is showcased in the monumental passacaglia that closes the piece. By choosing this Baroque form in which variations unfold over a repeating bass line, he freed himself from traditional constraints, allowing for a rigorously constructed but emotionally devastating conclusion. At the same time, he once again drew upon his admiration for Classical models—this movement recalls Beethoven's passacaglia finale for the *Eroica* Symphony. However, while Beethoven's variations keep the light mood expected of a classical symphonic finale, Brahms used his passacaglia for ending on a tragic note, a solution rarely found in the mainstream repertory.

The movement comprises 31 variations of an eight-bar theme borrowed from Bach's *Cantata No. 150*, whose chorale text is in turn based on Psalm 25. The form and heightened drama of the piece assumes a deeply personal struggle, between life on earth and a longing for connection with God. The theme, first stated in unison by low strings and winds, serves as foundational bass for twelve variations that alternate between austere counterpoint and orchestral grandeur. A set of four variations shifts to major mode to provide a fleeting sense of warmth, and culminates in a brass chorale reminiscent of Schumann's *Rhenish* Symphony. Yet the music inevitably returns to E minor, reinforcing the movement's tragic arc and intensifying its dramatic force. A last replay of the opening chords ushers in a faster coda that closes the symphony with unrelenting power, hammering home its inexorable conclusion.

Biographies

Now in the sixth decade of a distinguished global career, **Misha Dichter** remains one of America's most popular artists, extending a musical heritage from the Russian Romantic School, as personified by Rosina Lhevinne, his mentor at The Juilliard School, and the German Classical style that was passed on to him by Aube Tzerko, a pupil of Artur Schnabel. He also studied composition and analysis with Leonard Stein, a disciple of Arnold Schoenberg.

Born in Shanghai to parents who had fled Poland at the outbreak of World War II, Misha Dichter and his family moved to Los Angeles when he was two; he began studying the piano at five. At the age of 20, while enrolled at the famed Juilliard School in New York City, he won the Silver Medal at the 1966 International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, which helped launch an enviable concert career. Shortly thereafter, on August 14, 1966, Mr. Dichter was the guest soloist in a Tanglewood performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 with Erich Leinsdorf and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, a concert that was broadcast nationally on NBC and subsequently recorded for RCA. Two years later, he made his New York Philharmonic debut under the baton of Leonard Bernstein, collaborating on the same concerto. Appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra, the principal London orchestras and every major American orchestra soon followed.

Misha Dichter has performed and recorded with some of the most illustrious conductors of the 20th and 21st centuries, among them Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, Colin Davis, Lawrence Foster, Valery Gergiev, Carlo Maria Giulini, Bernard Haitink, Mariss Jansons, Kiril Kondrashin, Erich Leinsdorf, James Levine, Lorin Maazel, Neville Marriner, Kurt Masur, Riccardo Muti, Eugene Ormandy, Carlos Prieto, André Previn, Simon Rattle, Gerard Schwarz, Robert Shaw, Leonard Slatkin, Robert Spano, William Steinberg, Michael Tilson Thomas, Hans Vonk, Edo de Waart, David Zinman and Pinchas Zukerman, while notable chamber music collaborations have included violinists Itzhak Perlman, Mark Peskanov and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, cellists Lynn Harrell and Yo-Yo Ma and the American, Argus, Cleveland, Emerson, Guarneri, Harlem, St. Petersburg and Tokyo string quartets. With his wife, pianist Cipa Dichter, he has toured North America and Europe, presenting both masterworks and neglected scores of the two-piano and piano-four-hand repertoires. Mr. Dichter has been seen frequently on national television and was the subject of an hour-long European television documentary.

Misha Dichter's discography on the Philips, RCA, MusicMasters and Koch Classics labels are legendary, iconic and musically omnivorous, encompassing the major scores of Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Gershwin, Liszt, Mussorgsky, Schubert, Schumann, Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky. A noted exponent of Liszt's piano works and a champion of the composer's forward-looking contributions to the development of music, Mr. Dichter was honored in 1988 with the "Grand Prix International du Disque Liszt," presented for his Philips recording of the master's piano transcriptions. His first recording with Cipa Dichter is a three-CD set of Mozart's complete piano works for four hands and is available on the Nimbus label. American Record Guide called the album "an unmitigated delight," and Music Web International named it a 2005 "Record of the Year." In 2024, Newton Classics reissued his Philips album of Liszt's complete Hungarian Rhapsodies, performances newly hailed by Gramophone as "From Dichter everything is deeply considered, every musical possibility explored and this, combined with a comprehensive and unfaltering technique, makes the reappearance of his presentation a special contribution to the Liszt celebrations."

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In 2007, Misha Dichter took a three-month hiatus from the concert stage to deal with the onset of Dupuytren's Disease, a contracting of one or more fingers. After totally successful surgery and physical therapy, Mr. Dichter returned to public performance and became a supporter of, and spokesperson for, the American Society for Surgery of the Hand. A brief audio/video presentation, "Dupuytren's Contracture: Misha Dichter - A Pianist Reborn," is accessible on YouTube.

Misha Dichter is an accomplished writer, having contributed articles to many leading publications, including The New York Times. He is also a talented sketch artist, and in 2012 an e-book of his music-related illustrations, "A Pianist's World in Drawings," was released by Rosetta Books. Available on Amazon.com, BN.com and from iTunes, the e-book compiles over 50 original drawings that were created over the span of Mr. Dichter's half-century career. (For more information, visit www.apianistsworldindrawings.com)

Fiercely dedicated to extending his artistic traditions to new generations of pianists, Misha Dichter conducts widely attended masterclasses at major conservatories, universities, and music festivals, including Aspen, Curtis, Eastman, Harvard, Juilliard, Yale, and Holland's Conservatorium van Amsterdam.

Misha Dichter and his wife, Cipa Dichter, reside in New York City, in a household ruled over by Baxter, their amiable Springer Spaniel. They have two sons and five grandchildren.

The 2024-2025 season marks Maestro **David Itkin's** 20th season as Music Director and Conductor of the Abilene Philharmonic, and his 17th year serving as Professor of Music and Director of Orchestral Studies at the University of North Texas College of Music, where his recent performances have included Mahler Symphony No. 6, the Verdi Requiem, Beethoven Symphony No. 9, Puccini's *Turandot*, Verdi's *Otello*, Puccini's *Tosca*, and Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen*.

Following a distinguished 17-year tenure, Maestro Itkin was named Conductor Laureate of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra in July 2010. Previously Mr. Itkin served as Music Director & Conductor of the Las Vegas Philharmonic, Artistic Director and Conductor of the McCall Summerfest in McCall, Idaho, and as Music Director of the Lake Forest Symphony (Chicago), the Kingsport Symphony, the Birmingham Opera Theatre, and the Lucius Woods Music Festival (Wisconsin).

During past seasons Maestro Itkin's career has taken him to 45 U.S. states and 15 countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, including concerts and recordings with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, the Transylvania State Philharmonic, the Slovenska Filharmonija, the San Diego Symphony, and the Seoul Philharmonic. Other guest conducting appearances include concerts with the Colorado Philharmonic, the Annapolis Symphony, the National Repertory Orchestra, the Fort Worth Symphony, the Illinois Symphony, the Delaware Symphony, the New Hampshire Symphony, the Cheyenne Symphony, and the Indianapolis, Baltimore, and Reno Chamber Orchestras. During the Summer of 2006 Maestro Itkin appeared once again with the Slovenska Filharmonija in Ljubljana, Slovenia, conducting the opening concert of the 14th World Saxophone Congress.

His books, *The Conductor's Craft* [2021] and *Conducting Concerti* [2014], have received wide acclaim. Leonard Slatkin "highly recommended" *Conducting Concerti* as "a valuable textbook for the aspiring Maestro," and Samuel Adler wrote of *The Conductor's Craft*, "a real breakthrough aid for anyone studying or teaching conducting at any level." Mr. Itkin's third book, *Right Back Where I Started*, will be published in spring 2025.

Symphony Orchestra Personnel

Violin 1

Kevork Esmeryan ‡
Olivia Corporon
Kevin (Qiang) Fu
Lucas Furtado
Olivia Dinardis
Miguel Guillén-Merino
Ming-Wei Hsieh
Ray (Jui-Chen) Hsu
Emma Millian
Gabriel Parker
Anna Seo
Xiachu Song
Eleanor (Szu Yun) Wang
Hongrui Wang

Violin 2

Hyun Jung Kim †
Mia Caliri
Ella Curb
Alfiia Mansurova
Delane Marsh
Michelle Martey
Oscar Morales
Arsenio Peña
Chloe Svadlenka
Thi Tang
Peng Yi
Emilia Yoon

Viola

Kelsey Felton †
Shanya Chynwat
Anthony Couvillion
Margot Elder
Qianqian Fu
Cameron Halsell
Leonardo Sobral

Cello

Julia Jiho Choi †
Tyler Aguiard
Iris (Chao) Fang
Maddy Dykhouse
Minching Lin
Jiapeng Liu
Xiyang Liu
Ethan Nelsen
Eric Rau
Camilo Vasquez

Bass

Zoe Czarniecki †
Ruben Borges
Joe Ferris
Wyatt Gaugler
Joseph La Marca
Jason (Kuan-Chieh) Lo
Ricardo Puche
Xuan Xu

Flute

Mary Chamoun
Allyson Kreider *
James (Chen-Yu) Lee
Alison Parker #
Carter Reynolds

Oboe

Alexander Kang #
Hayley Monk
Hyungju Oh *

Clarinet

Andrew Rutten
Lucas Shroyer
Ayuna Sumi #
Brandon Von *

Bassoon

Keliang Li *
Emily O'Donnell
Sam Viebrock #

Horn

Justin Beyer +
Daniel Castillon *
Isaac Fowler
Becca Geitzenauer #
Patrick Ring

Trumpet

Georgia Hageman
David Hall #
Lexy Kilgore *
Joseph Williams

Trombone

Benjamin Hahn †
Thomas Spencer

Bass Trombone

Aaron Anderton-Coss

Tuba

Parker Burkey

Timpani

Raina Liao

Percussion

Ryan Blankenship
Ryan Hurford
Jack Spelman
Caleb Yurasek

Harp

Victoria Gonzalez

‡ Concertmaster

† Principal

Principal on Rachmaninoff

* Principal on Brahms