



## Unknown masterpiece

Pianist falls in love with newly discovered Russian concerto

**Joanne Paulson**

The StarPhoenix

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SASKATOON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA WITH DIANNE WERNER, PIANO

TCU Place

Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

Tickets 665-6414 or 938-7800

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Dianne Werner is something of a specialist in Russian music, but even she hadn't heard of Alexander Scriabin's Concerto in F Sharp Minor before last year.

The accomplished concert pianist had agreed to play with the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra in its final master series concert this season. Mulling over her options, she asked her husband -- Peter Simon, president of the Royal Conservatory of Music -- what he thought she should perform.

He suggested the Scriabin.

"I didn't know it existed until a year ago," said Werner last week.

"He suggested the concerto and I fell in love with it. The second movement is one of the most beautiful second movements ever written."

Both she and SSO conductor Douglas Sanford -- who wasn't familiar with the work, either -- are somewhat amazed that the concerto is relatively unknown.

"I'd never heard the piece, when she first talked to me about it. It's one of those pieces you just think, why has this not become part of the major repertoire?" said Sanford.

It's a good bet, then, that most of the audience Saturday night will be treated to a new listening experience.

Scriabin may have been overshadowed by his contemporaries, notably Rachmaninoff, whose teacher he shared. He also had a difficult life, died young, and was considered by some to be completely mad.

"An already neurotic mind encouraged by a huge ego, drugs and the tendency to hear notes in terms of colour instead of actual sound, Scriabin held a position in

musical circles that challenges even Wagner in terms of anointed self-importance," writes Sanford in his concert notes.

Scriabin's mother, a concert pianist, died of tuberculosis when he was only one year old; his father left for Turkey, leaving his son with his grandmother and great-aunt.

He eventually went to study at the Moscow Conservatory, but ironically, failed his composition class -- although that did not seem to slow him down.

Also frustrating was that Scriabin's hands were small; he could only reach an octave and a bit, noted Werner.

"He eventually injured himself practising and that was the end of his performing career," she said.

But his compositions do not show signs of his small hands; indeed, the concerto is quite difficult to play, if beautiful.

"The concerto I'm playing is very romantic, in the style of Rachmaninoff. Scriabin actually went a little bit further tonally; he started to write later on, really stretching the boundaries, which Rachmaninoff did not do as much.

"Scriabin was known to be much more adventurous."

Werner, who is from Toronto, grew up in a home where classical music was always being played. At age five, she began piano lessons with a neighbourhood teacher, but eventually moved on to study with the acclaimed teacher Margaret Parsons-Poole.

She continued her studies in London with Peter Katin and with Louis Kentner, who taught Yehudi Menuhin. She won a number of major prizes, including the silver medal at the prestigious Viotti-Valsesia International Piano Competition in Italy.

She also received a number of major awards in Canada, including three Canada Council grants and a Floyd Chalmers award from the Ontario Arts Council.

Werner is on the faculty of the Glenn Gould School of the Royal Conservatory.

Werner has played extensively with members of large, major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic; but her most recent highlight was the recording of a Juno-nominated CD with ARC (Artists of the Royal Conservatory), which has received incredible reviews internationally.

The CD, *On the Threshold of Hope*, is a performance of works by Mieczyslaw Weinberg, a Polish Jew who lived in the Soviet Union and was arrested under Stalin. ARC will follow this CD with a series in London and New York of composers who survived or did not survive the Holocaust.

The chance to work with Werner again is great for Sanford, who has always enjoyed performing with her.

"I met Dianne when we were at university, so I was maybe 18 or 19. At that time I was a clarinetist. We played all kinds of chamber music together. I've probably done more concerts with her than any other pianist I know.

"It's very rare in this profession to find somebody that you really feel you're a true kindred spirit with, and it's always been like that with Dianne."

The SSO will also play Der Freischutz Overture by Anton Weber, and another Russian offering, Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10 in E minor.

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