



KEYNOTES

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF
THE EVANSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

LAWRENCE ECKERLING, MUSIC DIRECTOR

Russian & Armenian Dances

Our 2023–2024 concert series, *Feel the Passion*, continues with Aram Khachaturian's *Four Dances* from *Gayane*, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Piano Concerto No. 2* in F Major, and Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*. Our own pianist, Rick Ferguson, will perform this popular Shostakovich concerto. Read more about Rick in this edition of *KeyNotes*.

Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978) was born in Tbilisi, Georgia. He has been described as the "Armenian Tchaikovsky" and "the musical ambassador of Armenian culture." We'll bring you four dances from his ballet, *Gayane*: "Young Maidens," "Awakening and Dance," "Sabre Dance," and "Hopak." The ballet's main character, *Gayane*, works on a collective farm near the Armenian border and deals with themes of interethnic love, betrayal, and friendship.

"Sabre Dance" is his best known and most recognizable work. It has been featured in film and television and has been used as performance music by several high-profile figure skaters. In 1948, it became an immediate jukebox hit, and many well-known performers including from classical to pop to rock have also since recorded it. We were ready to perform them for our Covid-canceled March 2020 concert and are excited to bring you them now.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975), the Russian composer known for his many symphonies, chamber works, and concerti studied piano and composition at a young age. He composed the *Piano Concerto No. 2* in F Major for his son, Maxim, as a 19th birthday present.

Keeping the technical difficulty of the piece in mind, he wanted it to be playable for young pianists. As a music student, Maxim premiered the piece at the Moscow Conservatory during his graduation concert. This "simple" concerto has always been admired by audiences worldwide and is one of Shostakovich's most popular pieces. In fact, the composer performed it many times himself.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11

— 2:30 PM

RUSSIAN &
ARMENIAN DANCES



Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) was born into a musical family in the rural Russia. A famous composer and virtuosic pianist, he also spent several years conducting. He didn't immediately find success composing. His *Symphony No. 1* was largely panned by critics in 1897, and he composed very little for four years after that as he battled depression. His skill ultimately prevailed, and in 1901, he completed his very well-received *Piano Concerto No. 2*.

Symphonic Dances, his final composition, was completed in October 1940. It takes on many moods, including light, darting passages by string and wind players, a mysterious and eerie waltz, and even extracts from Russian Orthodox chants. In the outer movements of the piece his signature *Dies Irae* theme, representing death, can be heard. The piece is anything but predictable. Building quickly in its final moments, you're sure to be amazed by the impressively dramatic ending! 🎧



MUSICAL INSIGHTS

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2024

1:30 PM

FREE

MEET RICK FERGUSON

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PUBLIC

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For more information on ESO concerts and events, please contact Michelle Pranger, General Manager, at (847) 864-8804. Write us at [Evanston Symphony Orchestra, 1555 Sherman Avenue, Suite 318, Evanston, IL 60201](mailto:esomusic@evanstonsymphony.org). Email us at esomusic@evanstonsymphony.org. Visit our website evanstonsymphony.org.



BEHIND THE SCENES



COMPOSER ANNIVERSARIES

Dear Subscribers,

It is always interesting when we celebrate composer “Anniversaries” in musical marketing. Many might consider the act of highlighting them as manufactured, or just an excuse to have something to say about a composer. While this notion is often true (to an extent), it IS an opportunity to showcase, or put a spotlight on, composers and their work.

It just so happens that, loosely, all three composers on the program have “Anniversaries” surrounding our next ESO concert. I say “loosely” because our concert falls barely into 2024, with two important Anniversary years just finishing in 2023 and one coming up in 2025.

Sergei Rachmaninoff’s 150th Anniversary of his birth was in 2023, and we will play his *Symphonic Dances* — his very last composition for orchestra. It is truly a GREAT work, and the ESO is proud to have the opportunity to perform this great masterpiece. (And we will be performing it just six weeks outside of his Anniversary year.)

Dmitri Shostakovich actually has a 50th Anniversary of his death coming up in 2025, so we will be playing his 2nd Piano Concerto with local soloist Rick Ferguson a year early. This work is a fun, humorous romp, written for his pianist music student son Maxim, with the joke of evoking remnants of Hanon exercises, which all who

were ever piano students know about all too well. (Who knows... the ESO may also perform some Shostakovich during his actual 50th Anniversary! Stay tuned!)

Aram Khachaturian’s Anniversary year was also 2023, celebrating 120 years after his birth. He wrote a lot of music that doesn’t seem to get played nearly enough. His most famous composition is a section from his ballet *Gayane* entitled “Sabre Dance,” which is included on this concert. We will play this piece, plus a few other sections from that ballet. Khachaturian’s Anniversary in particular is important to spotlight as he is not as well known as either Rachmaninoff or Shostakovich.

On a personal note with Khachaturian, the music from *Gayane* represents my earliest childhood memory in classical music. My father would play this music (he loved it), and I remember loving it too as a toddler. Whenever we got to the “Hopak,” my favorite childhood classical music piece, I played my favorite toddler game. The music starts very slow (a dance), and then it just keeps getting faster and faster. And, as the music got faster and faster, I would spin around in the middle of the living room until I got dizzy and fell to the ground. I played this game, with this piece, more times than I could possibly count. We will be playing the “Hopak” as the last section of our set. I will be conducting it in public for the first time. And, I assume I will not be spinning around and falling to the ground with dizziness... 🌀

—Lawrence Eckerling

Music Director, Evanston Symphony Orchestra

A free Young Persons’ concert—Saturday March 9th, 2:30 pm at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall

The ESO once again presents a free Young Persons’ concert. This one-hour concert is the ideal introductory orchestral concert for children 5–13 years but will also be fun for parents and grandparents. The concert is designed to show the wonderful story telling nature of music.

Enjoy the ever popular *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* by Dukas, and also pieces like the Superman March by John Williams, and the delightful Mozart piece for strings only — *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. The highlight of the afternoon is the finale: the ESO is delighted to be able to welcome all the string orchestra students from District 65’s five middle schools to play two pieces side-by-side with our musicians. We are happy to be supporting D65’s students as they learn the joy of orchestral music. 🌀

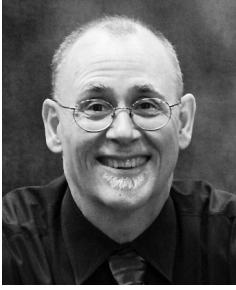


In Memoriam: Barbara Bennett

The ESO was sad to hear Barbara Bennett passed away in October 2023. Barbara was a long-time subscriber to the ESO. Her husband, Ed Bennet, played cello with the ESO, and her daughter, Laura, is our wonderful

photographer at all our concerts. We send our sympathy to Barbara’s family and thank them for all their support over the years. 🌀

Meet Rick Ferguson: Pianist, Composer, Teacher



Rick Ferguson grew up in northeast Alabama, where the Appalachian Mountains end their long march from Canada's Newfoundland down the East Coast of the United States. Rick calls it "beautiful country." It's also a place filled with all kinds

of music. Rick's father was a high school band director who later developed a thriving business selling instruments and his mother was his first piano teacher.

When he was in fifth grade, Rick started paying more attention to music because of a wonderful piano teacher who was both supportive and challenging. He was practicing what he calls "seriously" by the time he was in junior high school and gained a sense of accomplishment, which naturally increased his interest in the piano.

In his junior year in high school, Rick was studying with Roy McAllister, who taught at Birmingham-Southern College. "Mr. Mac" then encouraged Rick to enroll at Birmingham-Southern, but died suddenly in the fall of Rick's freshman year. Rick was understandably in shock and trying to decide what to do when the school came up with a solution. They hired Daniel Ericourt (1903–1988), a Frenchman who had recently retired from a long career as an international performer and faculty member at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, and later at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Ericourt had been a protégé of Claude Debussy and, in 1961, recorded the complete cycle of Debussy's solo piano works to excellent reviews. Rick says he benefitted greatly from his time under Ericourt's tutelage.

Rick graduated magna cum laude from Birmingham Southern with a bachelor's degree in piano performance, and then earned a master's from the University of Houston, where he studied with world-renowned concert pianist, Abbey Simon; Rick describes Simon as very supportive of his love of chamber music, often incorporating it into lessons.

"My musical education has taken me to the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, MA, and Northwestern University, where I undertook post graduate study. I then taught on the faculties of the Houston Conservatory of Music and the Musikschule Kassel in Kassel, Germany." He's also a certified teacher through the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto.

When Rick was a sophomore at Birmingham-Southern, he attended a music festival in the Carolinas, where he met Deborah Sobol. She taught at the Longy School of Music in Boston, then later came to Chicago and founded the Chicago Chamber Musicians and the Rush Hour Concert series. Her interest was in innovative programming that would enhance audience education. Rick says that her impact as a teacher on him was tremendous and she set him on a path of understanding that impact on others is the most important thing in teaching.

With this philosophy in mind — and after a year of post-graduate studies convinced him that academia was

not for him — Rick co-founded The Musical Offering with Kirsten Hedegaard in 2000. They saw a dire need for high-quality music instruction in racially and economically diverse Evanston and wanted that instruction to be accessible to all families. South Evanston was grossly underserved by the arts and the local public school, Oakton Elementary, was struggling to provide musical instruction to its students. Thus, the MO located on Custer Avenue, south of Main Street, where it maintains its studios and its collaborative programs with many Evanston schools.

In addition to his work with the Musical Offering, Rick has an active life as a composer, recording artist and performer. He has been a frequent guest at the Chicago Cultural Center, at WFMT's live radio broadcasts, and in other venues around Chicagoland and beyond. He's also been featured on WTTW's "Chicago Tonight" and the Chicago Latino Music Festival, and has collaborated with Chicago-based Latino composers. Chamber and orchestral engagements take him to various locales in the U.S. and Europe.

Rick will be performing Dmitri Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2 in our February concert. He has always been fascinated by the coming together of a person, time, place and circumstances, and sees interesting paradoxes in Shostakovich.

Shostakovich embraced the Soviet system but not because he was a fervent communist; rather, he wanted to elevate the quality and substance of Soviet art but, paradoxically, that meant being involved with the political party and its tight bureaucracy. Shostakovich worked with the party to develop identifiably *Soviet* artistic substance and worth, and was also a pioneer of cinematic musical scores. However, his relationship with the government authorities was often fractious and the government, of course, held the upper hand; he was censured several times by the authorities for not being "Soviet enough."

Fortunately, there was nothing political about his Second Piano Concerto. Rick calls it a "jubilant romp" and finds the back story particularly delightful. Shostakovich composed this concerto as a graduation present for his 19-year-old son, Maxim, a pianist. We can only imagine Maxim's reaction when, upon hearing the piece for the first time, he discovered that his father had liberally sprinkled the work with bits and pieces from the Hanon exercise books, familiar to all serious piano students!

When not performing or teaching, Rick likes to explore his far-ranging tastes in music. In addition to chamber music, he has collaborated with several Latin American music ensembles and played in a jazz group with his dad. On the non-music front, Rick describes himself as a "gym-rat" but also enjoys reading and people-watching at the interesting cafés that have sprung up in Evanston. And one more thing: he has been an avid football fan since the age of four, but explained that, in Alabama, there are only two kinds of football fans: you either support the Alabama Crimson Tide or the Auburn Tigers. He is firmly in the latter camp! 🌀

—Kelly Brest van Kempen



HOLIDAY CONCERT PHOTOS BY LAURA BENNETT

Chicago Ballet Arts danced selections of "The Nutcracker" accompanied by the ESO

A joyous Evanston Symphony Orchestra Holiday Concert

The Evanston Symphony Orchestra celebrated the holidays with festive music, dance and song under the baton of Maestro Eckerling along with long-time partners and collaborators, Evanston Dance Ensemble, Chicago Ballet Arts, North Shore Choral Society, Evanston Childrens Choir, and our very own Gospel Choir led by Reverend Cherry. We were newly joined by singers from the various choirs at Evanston Township High School. These young singers also entertained our sell-out audience with carols during the intermission. Santa, his reindeer, and some of his elves also turned up. Thank you to everyone who played, danced, sang, organized the front of house, bought raffle tickets (thank you Christopher Duquet Fine Jewelry), donated prizes, or came along to enjoy the afternoon. Also a big thank you to our sponsors, UL Research Institutes and UL Standards & Engagement. We look forward to next year! 🎶



A visit from the big man himself, Santa!



Evanston Symphony Holiday Gospel Choir singing their rendition of "Silent Night" to a sold-out audience



Musical Insights

A free pre-concert event at The Merion
Friday, February 9, 1:30 PM

Enhance your concert experience with a sneak preview. Composers come alive and their passions take center stage when Maestro Lawrence Eckerling takes you on an insider's tour of the history and highlights behind the music.

Meet Rick Ferguson, who will be playing the Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Major in our concert on February 11. 🎶



Support for the ESO

The Evanston Symphony Orchestra is proud to be a financially sound, well-managed organization with an active working board. Grants from state, local government, and other service groups contribute to this success: for the 2023–24 fiscal year we have received grants from the Illinois Arts Council Agency, the City of Evanston Arts Council Cultural Arts Fund, the Woman’s Club of Evanston, BoTB Creative Arts, and Arts MidWest. We also have sponsorship support from Optima Inc, UL Research Institutes, and UL Standards & Engagement. All these funds ensure that we can keep ticket prices low and support our community programs like *Music In Your World*, our free music education classes for D65’s Head Start, Early Head Start, and Early Start programs as well as *KidNotes*, our program notes for younger audience members, and *HighNotes*, our outreach to isolated seniors in our community. We are grateful for this support and also the support of people like you who buy tickets to our concerts and further our mission with generous individual donations. 🎵



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