

The Cycle of Life

Apr. 21-22



The Cycle of Life

Knoxville Symphony Orchestra
Moxley Carmichael Masterworks Series
Apr. 21-22, 2022
Tennessee Theatre

Sponsored by:



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Aram Demirjian, conductor

Tessa Lark, violin

MICHAEL SCHACHTER

Violin Concerto: *The Cycle of Life* (KSO Commission; World Premiere)

Tessa Lark, violin

- INTERMISSION -

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27

I. Largo - Allegro moderato

II. Allegro molto

III. Adagio

IV. Allegro Vivace

This concert will be broadcast on WUOT 91.9 FM on Tuesday, May 10, at 8 p.m.

Latecomers will be seated during the first convenient pause in the performance.
The use of recording devices and/or cameras is strictly forbidden. Please remember to silence all electronic devices and refrain from text messaging during the concert. Mobile devices may be used to read program notes during the concert.
Programs and artists subject to change.

Artist: Tessa Lark



Tessa Lark

violin

Violinist Tessa Lark is one of the most captivating artistic voices of our time, consistently praised by critics and audiences for her astounding range of sounds, technical agility, and musical elegance. In 2020 she was nominated for a GRAMMY in the Best Classical Instrumental Solo category and received one of Lincoln Center's prestigious Emerging Artist Awards: the special Hunt Family Award. Other recent honors include a 2018 Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship and a 2016 Avery Fisher Career Grant, Silver Medalist in the 9th Quadrennial International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, and winner of the 2012 Naumburg International Violin Competition. A budding superstar in

the classical realm, she is also a highly acclaimed fiddler in the tradition of her native Kentucky, delighting audiences with programming that includes Appalachian and bluegrass music and inspiring composers to write for her.

Ms. Lark has been a featured soloist at numerous U.S. orchestras, recital venues, and festivals since making her concerto debut with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra at age sixteen. She performed at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall in 2017 on Carnegie's Distinctive Debuts series, and again the following year as part of APAP's Young Performers Career Advancement showcase. Ms. Lark has appeared with the Louisville Orchestra and the Buffalo Philharmonic; the Albany, Indianapolis, Knoxville and Seattle symphonies, and at such venues as New York's Lincoln Center, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, the Music Center at Strathmore, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, San Francisco Performances, Ravinia, the Seattle Chamber Music Society, Australia's Musica Viva Festival, and the Marlboro, Mostly Mozart, Bridgehampton, and Music@Menlo festivals.

Her 2019-20 season included debuts with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, the Erie Philharmonic, and the Delaware, Pasadena, Springfield (MO), Topeka, Tucson, and West Virginia symphony orchestras. Highlights for 2020-21 include online appearances with Cal Performances, the La Jolla Music Festival, the Seattle Chamber Music Society, Caramoor, Musical Masterworks, and Clarion Concerts, as well as debuts with Friends of Chamber Music (Denver), the West Michigan Symphony Orchestra, and the Heartland Festival Orchestra.

Three recordings featuring Ms. Lark were released in 2019: Fantasy, an album on the First Hand Records label that includes fantasias by Schubert, Telemann and Fritz Kreisler, Ravel's Tzigane, and Ms. Lark's own Appalachian Fantasy; SKY, a GRAMMY-nominated Albany Symphony Orchestra release whose title selection is a bluegrass-inspired violin concerto written for her by Michael Torke that she premiered with the ASO in January 2019; and Invention, a debut album of the violin-bass duo Tessa Lark & Michael Thurber that comprises arrangements of Two-Part Inventions by J.S. Bach along with non-classical original compositions by Ms. Lark, Mr. Thurber, and Eddie Barbash.

A fourth recording, The Stradgrass Sessions, will be released in early 2021. It includes collaborations with composer-performers Jon Batiste, Edgar Meyer, Michael Cleveland, and Sierra Hull; works by Bartók and Ysaÿe; and the premier recording of John Corigliano's solo violin composition STOMP.

A passionate chamber musician, Ms. Lark has toured with Musicians from Marlboro and musicians from Ravinia's Steans Music Institute. In 2012 her piano trio, the Namirovsky-Lark-Pae Trio (then known as Trio Modêtre), was awarded one of the top prizes in the Fischoff National Chamber Music Competition, and in 2020 the ensemble's

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debut recording was honored with the German Record Critics' Award in the Chamber Music category. Ms. Lark's musical collaborators have included Mitsuko Uchida, Itzhak Perlman, Miriam Fried, Donald Weilerstein, Pamela Frank, Kim Kashkashian, Peter Wiley, Ralph Kirshbaum, Mark O'Connor, and Edgar Meyer.

Keeping in touch with her Kentucky roots, Ms. Lark performs bluegrass and Appalachian music regularly and collaborated with Mark O'Connor on his album MOC4. She also plays jazz violin, most recently performing with the Juilliard Jazz Ensemble at Dizzy's Club Coca Cola in New York City. She premiered her own Appalachian Fantasy as part of her Distinctive Debuts recital at Carnegie Hall, where she also gave the world premiere of Michael Torke's Spoon Bread, written specifically for her stylistic capabilities.

Ms. Lark is an alumna of NPR's From the Top, the premier radio showcase for the nation's most talented young musicians, and is serving as Co-Host/Creative for the show's 2020-21 season.

Her primary mentors include Cathy McGlasson, Kurt Sassmannshaus, Miriam Fried, and Lucy Chapman. She is a graduate of New England Conservatory and completed her Artist Diploma at The Juilliard School, where she studied with Sylvia Rosenberg, Ida Kavafian, and Daniel Phillips. Ms. Lark plays a ca. 1600 G.P. Maggini violin on loan from an anonymous donor through the Stradivari Society of Chicago.

Program: Cycle of Life

Violin Concerto: *Cycle of Life* (World Premiere)

In the fall of 2017, my old friend Aram Demirjian, fresh off his appointment as the new music director of the Knoxville Symphony, called to bend my ear about an intriguing project idea: the possibility of a concerto inspired by "Cycle of Life: Within the Power of Dreams and the Wonder of Infinity," a masterful glass-and-metal installation at the Knoxville Museum of Art by local artist Richard Jolley. Did a composer come to mind that might be interested in such a thing? In a moment of uncharacteristic chutzpah, I responded, "Yeah. Me."

Despite me having no initial familiarity with Jolley's work beyond its title, the decision was a no-brainer. Aram and I had been close friends and collaborators since we overlapped as underclassmen in college, and it was exciting to level up together for a project of this scale. I had just finished my first commission for the KSO, an overture for Aram's inaugural concert as music director, and had already established a good base of rapport and trust. And finally, the theme of "Cycle of Life" hit me right in my personal/creative sweet spot.

Since I was a young child, I've been fascinated with questions of the nature of life and our place in the cosmos—my grandmother recently discovered a drawing she kept from when I was about eight years old, in which I drew myself at various ages from seven months (a baby with toothless grin) to one hundred and twenty-seven (a gravestone marked "RIP"). My relationship to music and creativity flows directly from this existential bent: nowhere else do we get closer to the unknowable mystery than through a collective of instruments and voices in harmony. To top it off, my wife and I had recently become first-time parents. As I quickly learned, no amount of imaginative rumination can possibly prepare one for the lived experience of creating and nurturing a life.

Embarking on the project, little did Aram and I suspect quite how much the stuff of life would impact and inform "Cycle of Life," the project. My wife and I welcomed a second child and navigated multiple interstate moves; I finished my doctorate and a post-doctoral fellowship; I overcame a chronic migraine condition that left me bedridden with vertigo for nearly half a year; and Aram bravely battled through his own brush with mortality in Hodgkin lymphoma.

And though it must seem overworn at this point, it's hard to underestimate the role of the COVID pandemic in the process. We were set to premiere in the spring of 2020, only to call it off with months to spare. In the intervening two years, I found the pandemic immensely impactful on my thinking around the piece. As scary and disorienting as the initial months of fear and quarantine were, I felt humbled in the growing realization that this kind of population-level disruption wasn't a fluke of our time: it was the norm of human history, indeed the history of all life. And yet, through all uncertainty and unrest, through war, plague and famine, the human need to gather and make community through music and artistic expression has been universal, knowing no boundary of race, creed, or status. The arts are no superfluous privilege, as our school budgets might have one believe: they are absolutely core to whatever it is that makes us human. Locked down at home with two small children for many months on

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end, I found myself stripping the concerto down to the studs, rewriting it from the ground up. I wanted something less polished, less deferential to its predecessors or accommodating of my artistic insecurities. More raw. Elemental. Less head, more heart.

In this evolution, the collaboration with our soloist, Tessa Lark, was absolutely crucial. Tessa hails from Kentucky, and is equally at home with a bluegrass reel as she is in the concert hall. My creative imagination owes a great debt to her uncommon combination of technical skill, stylistic versatility, and radical openness to discovery through collaboration.

And of course, through it all, the piece owes its inspiration and frame to Richard's magisterial "Cycle of Life" installation. Soaring, radiant, emotional, somehow both intimate and colossal. Nothing was more motivating (and, at times, daunting) in the compositional process than the looming presence of his mastery, like a quiet whisper challenging me to do it justice.

Though the concerto is not overtly programmatic, my approach to its structure is essentially narrative in conception, with the solo violin as a kind of central character navigating the journey of the life cycle. Depending on the listener, this can be mapped onto any one of several levels of symbolic meaning, or perhaps multiple at once: the solo violin as the avatar of an individual person or living being navigating the journey from birth to death, or as the incomprehensible miracle of life itself amidst the forbidding vastness of the universe. In all of these conceptions, the orchestra plays the collective against the violin's individual, the cosmic against the intimate, at times dialoguing, leading, following, supporting, antagonizing.

As the concerto's conception came into sharper focus, the more its aims seemed at odds with traditional stagecraft. Customarily, a concerto soloist will wait for the orchestra to be seated and tuned before making a grand entrance, along with the *maestro* – in dress and reception, signaling their high status in distinction with the orchestra. Beyond the old-fashioned class implications of this pageantry, it also seemed to reify a certain parochial mythology: if the soloist is the avatar for life or an individual life, then marking the soloist as Different and Special reminds me of the way we as humans long fancied ourselves the center of the universe, the sun and stars revolving around us, destined to live forever through salvation, free from obligations of care to our natural environment and animal neighbors. With Aram and Tessa's blessing, I proposed an alternative approach more in line with my vision of the life cycle: the individual inextricably a part of the collective and the natural world, from whence we come and are destined to return. Thus, rather than starting apart from and superior to the orchestra, Tessa starts and ends the piece seated amidst the violin section. We are all made of stardust, after all.

The concerto consists of an unusual seven movements, following the divisions established in Richard's original artwork. In part, this is because of the elegance of his design. And in part, this is because I felt creatively galvanized by the expressive canvas of such a structure – the architecture of the piece flowed very naturally from the initial concept. In brief:

1. "Primordial" -

The first sound we hear is the pluck of the harp, like the vibrational thrum of the birth of the universe, from which emanates the "harmony of the spheres." Chords and clusters swell in and out from one another like celestial bodies orbiting, refracting, and colliding: forces much older and larger than ourselves, with movements beyond our understanding. Beauty and terror.

2. "Emergence" -

The solo violin makes their first entrance, also emerging physically from the violin section. The first notes are gentle, even halting, like a baby foal finding its balance on wobbly legs. The soloist introduces a ritornello theme built on an ornately decorated major scale traversing up an octave from root to root. The orchestra, still with forbidding echoes of the universal forces, reflects and amplifies this ritornello theme as the violin builds confidence and expressive power through escalating variations and interludes.

3. "Flight" -

The solo violin builds up speed and takes off like a shot, launching into a *moto perpetuo* showpiece in the Romantic

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virtuoso tradition. This is adolescence in all its charisma and vanity – thrilling but not a little dangerous, driving too fast. The orchestra is a colorful dance partner here, all too willing to goad the violin along through propulsive rhythms and flourishes. Ultimately, our Icarus flies too close to the sun and is forced to reckon with melted wings.

4. "Desire" -

The solo violin gives space as a solo cello sounds a long, sensuous melody derived from the inversion of the "emergence" theme, supported by the intimate accompaniment of the harp and alto flute. The solo violin responds with a melody of their own, and soon the violin and cello enmesh themselves in a coy duet. After playing around and over one another, ultimately the two lovers' melodies join in unison to finish the movement.

5. "Tree of Life" -

The most texturally varied of the movements, here the solo violin begins with a very high singing melody executed freely, like an improvisation. This is followed in close canonic imitation by the orchestral violins: the solo violin's words and deeds rippling out through the generations. This canonic texture is interposed by a *Maestoso* brass texture, the majesty of the great tree of life with roots and branches expanding ever outward, and with a tempestuous passage of overlapping rhythms, the generations cascading through time like a raging river.

6. "Contemplation" -

In a free cadenza, the solo violin turns their thoughts inward, recapitulating fragments of melodies, textures, and figurations heard to this point with increasing hysteria, as if raging and trembling against the dying of the light. What has been? What could have been? Why are we here? What does it all mean?

7. "Sky" -

The harp and strings usher the return of the "Primordial" universe, and the solo violin sings a somber but radiant melody of catharsis. Supported by ever-widening chords in the strings, the solo violin makes a grand ascent into the sky, ultimately accepting their destiny of being reabsorbed into the stars. As the solo violin joins the orchestra in a final unison, the soloist physically returns to the violin section, at one again with the orchestra.

- Michael Schachter

Program: Symphony No. 2

Symphony No. 2 in E minor, Op. 27 (1907)

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born in Semyonovo, Russia, on April 1, 1873, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on March 28, 1943. The first performance of the Second Symphony took place in St. Petersburg, Russia, on February 8, 1908, with the composer conducting. The Second Symphony is scored for three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), three oboes (3rd doubling English horn), two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drums, cymbals, glockenspiel, and strings. Approximate performance time is sixty minutes.

"A conservatory in Hell"

Sergei Rachmaninoff completed his First Symphony in August of 1895. Thanks in large part to the efforts of composers Sergei Taneyev and Alexander Glazunov, the Symphony received its premiere in St. Petersburg on March 28, 1897.

Glazunov conducted, but it seems he didn't do much to advance the cause of Rachmaninoff's new composition. A few months later, Rachmaninoff lamented:

I am amazed how such a highly talented man as Glazunov can conduct so badly. I am not speaking now of his conducting technique (one can't ask that of him) but about his musicianship. He feels nothing when he conducts. It's as if he understands nothing...So I assume that the performance might have been the cause of the failure. (I do

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not say for certain; I am just assuming.) If the public had been familiar with the symphony, then they would have blamed the conductor (I continue to “assume”); if a symphony is both unfamiliar and badly performed, then the public is inclined to blame the composer.

Rachmaninoff remained backstage during the entire premiere. After the wretched performance, Rachmaninoff escaped to the street, rather than face the audience’s negative reaction. Still, he could not avoid the ire of such critics as composer César Cui, who wrote:

If there were a conservatory in Hell, if one of its many talented students were instructed to write a programme symphony on the “Seven Plagues of Egypt,” and if he were to compose a symphony like Mr. Rachmaninoff’s, then he would have fulfilled his task brilliantly and would delight the inhabitants of Hell.

Rachmaninoff’s First Symphony was neither performed again nor published during the composer’s lifetime.

“Does anybody need music like this?”

The disastrous premiere of the First Symphony precipitated a three-year crisis for the young Rachmaninoff, who lost all confidence in his abilities as a composer. In 1900, Princess Alexandra Lieven attempted to lift Rachmaninoff’s spirits by arranging for him to visit Leo Tolstoy. Rachmaninoff met the Russian author on two occasions, the second time accompanied by the basso Feodor Chaliapin. But the encounters with Tolstoy did little to buoy Rachmaninoff’s confidence. In fact, they only served to heighten his feelings of inadequacy. After Rachmaninoff gathered the nerve to play one of his compositions for Tolstoy, the author responded by inquiring: “Tell me, does anybody need music like this?”

However, a breakthrough for Rachmaninoff occurred that same year. On the advice of relatives, Rachmaninoff consulted Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a psychiatrist who used hypnosis in the treatment of his patients. The consultations with Dr. Dahl were an extraordinary success. Rachmaninoff experienced a tremendous resurgence of confidence and immediately began to compose his Second Piano Concerto (1901), a work he dedicated to Dr. Dahl.

The Second Symphony

Rachmaninoff even summoned the courage to attempt another Symphony. In the fall of 1906, Rachmaninoff and his family traveled to Dresden. There, Rachmaninoff found the solitude to devote himself entirely to composition. In October, Rachmaninoff began his Second Symphony and finished the first draft of the score on New Year’s Day, 1907. Rachmaninoff tried to keep the project a secret, but a Russian newspaper announced the Symphony’s completion. In February of 1907, Rachmaninoff admitted to a friend:

I have composed a symphony. It’s true! It’s only ready in rough. I finished it a month ago, and immediately put it aside. It was a severe worry to me and I am not going to think about it any more. But I am mystified how the newspapers got into it!

Rachmaninoff later refined the score of his Second Symphony and conducted its premiere in St. Petersburg on February 8, 1908. The work’s favorable reception by the audience and critics did much to vindicate Rachmaninoff after the humiliating premiere of his First Symphony. The Second Symphony proved to be immensely popular throughout Rachmaninoff’s life, and remains one of his most beloved orchestral works. The rich orchestration and passionate melodies make it one of the finest Russian symphonies of the late-Romantic era.

The Second Symphony is in four movements. The first begins with an extended slow-tempo introduction (*Largo*), opening with a motif that will appear in various guises throughout the work. The principal quick-tempo section (*Allegro moderato*) follows. The second movement is a vibrant scherzo (*Allegro molto*), culminating with the brass’s chorale transformation of the Symphony’s opening measures. The beautiful third movement (*Adagio*) is based upon two melodies, presented at the outset. The finale (*Allegro vivace*), recalling music from previous movements, propels to an exuberant close.

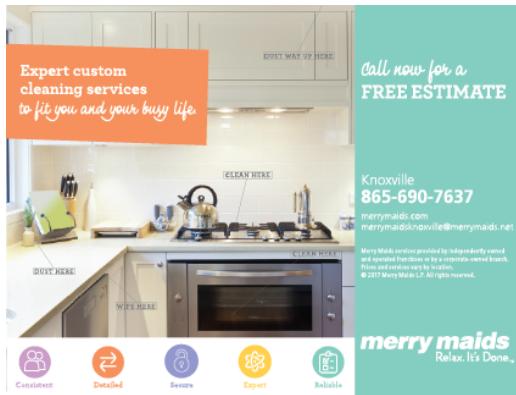
Program notes by Ken Meltzer

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