

Oscar-winning film composer has world premiere with RPO

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(Photo: Provided)

Oscar-winning film composer Elliot Goldenthal devised his new work, *Waltz and Agitato*, “*Pravda*,” to be the ideal overture to two orchestral masterworks.

Because you don’t just jump from a pleasant, mild-winter Rochester afternoon into the Russian landscape of Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, even if it’s followed by soprano Nicole Cabell singing in Ravel’s *Shéhérazade*.

And so, it’s *Pravda* to the rescue. It’ll have its world premiere in the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra’s next Philharmonics Series concert, on Thursday, Jan. 26, and again Saturday, Jan. 28.

Goldenthal, who won an Academy Award in 2002 for his score to the motion picture *Frida*, was a protégé of Aaron Copland and also studied with John Corigliano. If you’ve seen such films as *Interview with the Vampire*, *Alien 3*, *Michael Collins*, *Batman Forever*, and *Heat*, you’ve heard his music.

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Dmitri Shostakovich himself, coincidentally, also wrote music for film. When the official Soviet newspaper *Pravda* assailed his work in early 1936, he was working on his fourth symphony, and the Stalin-driven critique left him beyond shaken. In the aftermath, he went on to write his fifth symphony in three months in 1937.

“I’m not being political, personally, about that time,” Goldenthal said, “other than the fact that composers and artists and writers and playwrights lived under a tremendously tight screw under that regime — journalists as well.”

“So *Pravda* struck me as a funny thing because it was a state-run newspaper meaning ‘truth,’ and quite often it was a manipulation of the truth for their own means and ends. Kind of like Breitbart or something.”

Goldenthal’s work manages to create a bridge between the early 20th century and now. In a way, he said, the piece he has written is a tribute to composers of that earlier era and a warning and reminder of what can happen when the press isn’t free.

“It’s really reflective of the difficult times, the tenuous times that Soviet composers like Prokofiev, Kabalevsky, Shostakovich, to name a few, had in trying to write with always having censorship issues, and having a newspaper called *The Truth*, or *Pravda*, that was constantly manipulating their lives in the sense that many reviews about their work were just self-serving in terms of the propaganda of the government at the time.”

Two opposing elements clash in *Waltz and Agitato*, “*Pravda*,” as romance and a carefree existence tangle with agitation.

“So it’s the idea of dancing with a kind of abandon and at the same time realizing that just outside your window, where you’re dancing around, there’s a tremendous turbulence,” Goldenthal said.

Throughout Shostakovich’s compositions, Goldenthal added, listeners can pick up on his personal code.

“His composition was, in a sense, a series of enigmas that couldn’t really be figured out by the art police. His symphonies have glimpses into the psychological, personal world that former composers like Mahler had achieved. He had a fierce personal style, where his tapestry, his canvas, was a giant symphony orchestra.”

For Goldenthal, writing for film is one thing, and writing for, well, others is something else entirely.

“A lot of film works are huge orchestral pieces, and others are solo guitar or solo piano, so there’s no formula in writing for film. Many of my film works are for full orchestra. They’re the same forces. But the difference between writing a personal piece that’s not attached to another work is just that word: personal.”

The performance of Goldenthal’s work continues the thread of music by American composers throughout this season for the RPO. And Music Director Ward Stare is confident the work will be a perfect introduction to the evening.

“It deals with the conflict of the machinery and the brutal dictator in Stalin and sort of the soulless atmosphere,” Stare said, “and contrasts that with kind of a troubadour, romantic, more hopeful element.”

Stare and Goldenthal first collaborated about two years ago, when the string ensemble that Stare conducts at the McDuffie Center for Strings at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, premiered Goldenthal’s “Lyric Suite for Strings.”

Over the course of rehearsing, the two talked about other music Goldenthal had written that hadn’t found a proper place to be performed.

“He’s an Academy Award-winning film composer, so that tends to get one pigeonholed, in some ways,” Stare said.

Waltz and Agitato, “Pravda” originated a few years ago, as Goldenthal was working on a movie project.

“It came up as shards,” he said. “I wanted to have a futuristic, totalitarian feel to a waltz I was writing. And then some years after that, I realized I should revisit this because it had good kernels of ideas in it.”

Goldenthal said he ultimately designed the piece to function as an introduction to Stare’s program, but Stare insisted that the work wasn’t written expressly for Rochester.

“This was something that he already had composed,” Stare said. “But he made a few adjustments to it. He did revise it a little bit for us. But it just happened that it worked out really well.

“I’m thrilled to be able to feature his music in Rochester because many of us have heard it on the big screen, but it really deserves to be heard in the concert hall as well.”

Jann Nyffeler, a Rochester-based freelance journalist, is a recovering violinist who began her classical music career at WCPE-FM in North Carolina.

If you go

What: The Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, performing the world concert premiere of *Waltz and Agitato, “Pravda,”* by Elliot Goldenthal; *Shéhérazade* by Maurice Ravel, featuring soprano Nicole Cabell; and *Symphony No. 5* by Dmitri Shostakovich. Music Director Ward Stare conducts.

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 26; 8 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 28

Where: Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre, Rochester

Tickets: \$23-103. Go to [rpo.org](http://www.rpo.org). (http://www.rpo.org/p_2128/Stare_Conducts_Shostakovich_5/) or call (585) 454-2100, at most Wegmans locations and at the RPO Patron Services Center, 108 East Ave.

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