

Rachmaninoff and Belhaven prof to take center stage

BY GREG WAXBERG
Special to Northeast Ledger

Even though it's not a Valentine's Day concert, the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra will offer three versions of romance on Saturday.

Music Director Crafton Beck conducts *Bravo II: Colors in Sound* (Some Strings Attached) at 7:30 p.m. at Thalia Mara Hall in Jackson.

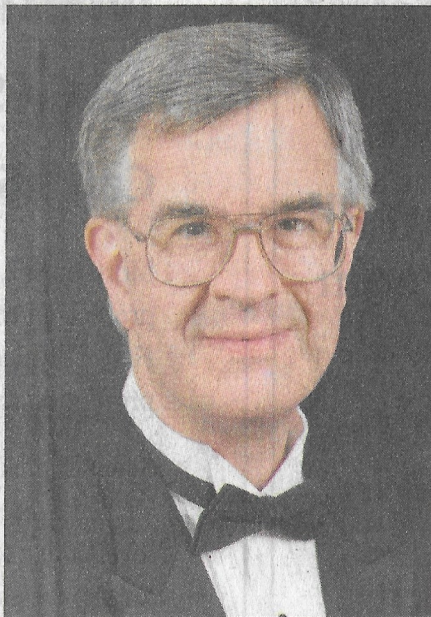
First is the impressionistic *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* by Claude Debussy, his illustration of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *The Afternoon of a Faun*. In the poem, a sleepy faun lusts after nymphs on a hot summer afternoon before falling asleep. The orchestration is serene, mostly for strings, and features a gentle flute solo.

"We need to do more Debussy, and it's a great standard work," Beck said.

One of the most famous works written for piano and orchestra will close the first half. Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* was inspired by the last of Paganini's 24 caprices for violin. Instead of calling it a concerto, Rachmaninoff referred to it as a rhapsody because the piece consists of 24 variations on that theme.

The soloist is Stephen Sachs, chair of the Music Department at Belhaven College, who has previously performed with the symphony as an orchestral pianist.

"In his very short time in Jackson, he has become an integral and important



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Stephen Sachs, chair of the Music Department at Belhaven, will play Rachmaninoff.

part of the MSO family," Michael Beattie, MSO president and executive director, said.

Sachs, a native of Gettysburg, Pa., moved to Jackson in July 2004 after 26 years at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va. He taught piano, music theory, jazz and other courses in Virginia and now teaches piano and directs the orchestra at Belhaven. In addition to solo and chamber performances in Jackson,

IF YOU GO

► Tickets are available in advance at (601) 960-1565 or www.msorchestra.com. The box office opens at 6:30 on Saturday.

he's active as an accompanist and chamber musician in the eastern United States.

He performs in the Sachs Piano Duo with his wife, Carolyn, an adjunct piano teacher at Belhaven who also directs the college's Singing Christmas Tree. They were freshmen at Lebanon Valley College when they met at an off-campus concert. She had an extra ticket her roommate couldn't use and invited him to sit with her. They've been married for 32 years and have performed together for two decades.

Sachs began playing piano before he turned 3, in part because of his mother, a professional musician.

"At age 2, I developed rheumatic fever and, through the recuperation process, the doctors ordered that I not be allowed to run around. Mom was still teaching piano lessons at that point, and she held me on her lap for those six months teaching piano lessons."

Eventually, he was so interested in learning piano that his mother found a private teacher who could work with a child who wasn't yet capable of reading.

Sachs has not played the rhapsody since he tackled it 20 years ago for his Doctor of Musical Arts degree at The

Catholic University of America. He chose it when Beck asked him what he'd like to play with the orchestra.

"I've had a number of opportunities to play with symphonies. It's often been Baroque or Classic repertoire, rather than Romantic repertoire, and I love the colors and richness of the Romantic repertoire. Even though this piece was written in 1934, it's still highly romantic, and that variation 18 is worth learning the whole piece. It's the romance variation."

Beck was happy to program it. "This piece (is) something that we've not done. We've done two Rachmaninoff concertos here, and our audience loved it. Both concertos were extremely well-received."

The concert concludes with the 1947 version of Igor Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, about puppets at a fair, originally created as an orchestral work with a sizable role for the piano. Serge Diaghilev was so impressed with the music that he commissioned Stravinsky to produce a ballet for his Ballets Russes in Paris.

The music, which Beattie describes as fun and colorful, includes folk tunes, waltzes and dances, and much of it has a carnival atmosphere. Continuing the romance theme from earlier in the concert, *Petrouchka* is in love with a ballerina, but she rejects him.

"I am looking forward to doing *Petrouchka*, simply because we have not done much Stravinsky or 20th century repertoire," Beck said.