Program 2

Overture to *The Flying Dutchman*
Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Composed in 1841.
Premiered on January 2, 1843 in Dresden, conducted by the composer.

"A Dutch sea captain attempts to round the Cape of Good Hope, vowing to succeed if it takes eternity. Taken at his word by the devil, he is condemned to sail the seas forever, but an angel intervenes with the possibility of redemption. The Dutchman is allowed one day every seven years on land; if he can find a woman who will follow him to death, he will be released." Thus Richard Wagner described the old legend from which sprang his first masterpiece, *The Flying Dutchman*. Wagner gave this précis of his opera: "[Act 1] As the opera opens two ships take refuge in a cove on the coast of Norway, one commanded by Daland, the other by the Dutchman. Impressed by the Dutchman's wealth, Daland offers hospitality and promises the hand of his daughter Senta to the Dutchman. [Act II] Senta is waiting with the other maidens for the return of her father's ship. She reveals that she is strangely moved by the story of the Flying Dutchman's suffering and has a strong desire to save him. Erik, her lover, tries to persuade her to abandon her wild dreams. Daland and the Dutchman arrive together, and Senta agrees to marry the Dutchman. [Act III] Outside Daland's house, the ships lie at anchor. The Dutchman hears Erik accusing Senta of breaking a past promise to him. Assuming her incapable of fidelity, the Dutchman puts out to sea. Senta calls that she is faithful to death and throws herself from the rocky cliff into the sea. At once the Dutchman's ship sinks beneath the waves, and Senta and the Dutchman are seen rising toward heaven."

The Overture, more than simply setting the stage for the drama to follow, is a highly effective summary of the opera's musical and emotional progression. Three essential thematic elements of the tale comprise the Overture — the tempestuous music depicting the accursed Dutchman and his ceaseless quest for salvation; the beneficent strains of Senta, representing redemption through love; and the lively dance of the Norwegian sailors, which characterizes the world of mortal reality, simultaneously hated and envied by the Dutchman. The Dutchman's enraged theme, hurled forth immediately at the outset and occupying much of the Overture, is perhaps the most evocative depiction of the ocean in seething tempest ever created by any musician. Senta's music, sweet, comforting and given in a lilting meter almost suggestive of a lullaby, is initiated by the English horn. The spirited hornpipe of the Norwegian sailors is entrusted to the woodwinds. These melodies interact as the Overture unfolds, with the climax provided by a transformation of the Dutchman's theme intertwined with Senta's motive to achieve a triumphant apotheosis which depicts, in the composer's words, the title character "redeemed and whole, led by his redemptress' hand to the dawn of an exalted love."

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Composed in 1794-1795; revised in 1798.
Premiered on March 29, 1795 in Vienna, with the composer as soloist.

In November 1792, the 22-year-old Ludwig van Beethoven, full of talent and promise, arrived in Vienna. So undeniable was the genius he had already demonstrated in a sizeable amount of piano music, numerous chamber works, cantatas on the death of Emperor Joseph II and the accession of Leopold II, and the score for a ballet, that the Elector of Bonn, his hometown, underwrote the trip to the Habsburg Imperial city, then the musical capital of Europe, to help further the young musician's career (and the Elector's prestige). Despite the Elector's patronage, however, Beethoven's professional ambitions consumed any thoughts of returning to the provincial city of his birth, and, when his alcoholic father died in December, he severed for good his ties with Bonn in favor of the stimulating artistic atmosphere of Vienna.

During his first years in Vienna, Beethoven was busy on several fronts. Initial encouragement for the Viennese junket came from the venerable Joseph Haydn, who had heard one of Beethoven's cantatas on a visit to Bonn earlier in the year and promised to take the young composer as a student if he came to see him. Beethoven, therefore, became a counterpoint pupil of Haydn immediately after his arrival late in 1792, but the two had difficulty getting along, and their association soon broke off. Several other teachers followed in short order — Schenk, Albrechtsberger, Förster, Salieri. While he was busy completing fugal exercises and practicing setting Italian texts for his tutors, he continued to compose, producing works for solo piano, chamber ensembles and wind groups. It was as a pianist, however, that he gained his first fame among the Viennese. The untamed, passionate, original quality of his playing and his personality first intrigued and then captivated those who heard him. When he bested in competition Daniel Steibelt and Joseph Wölffl, two of the town's noted keyboard luminaries, he became all the rage among the gentry, who exhibited him in performance at the *soirées* in their elegant city palaces. In catering to the aristocratic audience, Beethoven took on the air of a dandy for a while, dressing in smart clothes, learning to dance (badly), buying a horse and even sporting a powdered wig. This phase of his life did not outlast the 1790s, but in his biography of the composer Peter Latham described Beethoven at the time as "a young giant exulting in his strength and his success, and youthful confidence gave him a buoyancy that was both attractive and infectious." It was with understandable anticipation that Vienna looked forward to the public debut of this young lion.

The occasion of Beethoven's first Viennese public

appearance was a pair of concerts — "A Grand Musical Academy, with more than 150 participants," trumpeted the program in Italian and German — on March 29/30, 1795, at the Burgtheater whose proceeds were to benefit the Widows' Fund of the Artists' Society. It is likely that Antonio Salieri, Beethoven's teacher at the time, had a hand in arranging the affair, since the music of one Antonio Cordellieri, another of his pupils, also shared the bill. Beethoven chose for the occasion a piano concerto in B-flat major he had been working on for several months, but which was still incomplete only days before the concert. In his reminiscences of the composer, Franz Wegeler recalled, "Not until the afternoon of the second day before the concert did he write the rondo, and then while suffering from a pretty severe colic which frequently afflicted him. I relieved him with simple remedies so far as I could. In the anteroom sat copyists to whom he handed sheet after sheet as soon as they were finished being written." The work was completed just in time for the performance. It proved to be a fine success ("he gained the unanimous applause of the audience," reported the *Wiener Zeitung*), and did much to further Beethoven's dual reputation as performer and composer. For a concert in Prague three years later, the Concerto was extensively revised, and it is this version which is known today. The original one has vanished.

The B-flat Concerto now seems a most classical and untroubled work, yet it caused considerable consternation when it was new. So moved and shaken was the Bohemian composer Johann Wenzel Tomaschek by Beethoven's performance of the Concerto in Prague in 1798 that he was unable to bring himself to touch the piano for several days. Tomaschek's thoughts are typical of the criticisms that followed Beethoven throughout his life, accusing him of too freely blending genius and near-irrationality. "I admire his forceful and brilliant playing," wrote the Bohemian composer, "but his frequent bold leaps from one motive to another, interrupting the organic connection and the gradual development of ideas, did not escape me. Evils of this kind frequently weaken his greatest compositions, those which spring from too exuberant a conception.... The odd and the novel seem to be his chief aims in composition." For his part, Beethoven apparently placed little stock in this Concerto that drew such a deep response from Tomaschek. Beethoven's letter of December 15, 1800, offering the piece for publication to Franz Hoffmeister noted, "I do not claim it to be my best work ... but it will not disgrace you to print it." When prices were discussed a month later, Beethoven asked only ten ducats for the Concerto, half the amount he demanded for the Septet.

Though the B-flat Concerto is known as "No. 2," it was composed before the "First" but published later. Actually, the B-flat was Beethoven's third attempt at the form. When he was a lad of fourteen in Bonn, he wrote a Concerto in E-flat of which only the solo part and a piano transcription of the orchestral preludes and interludes exist. Guido Adler reconstructed the work for piano and small orchestra, and published it in 1888 as a supplement to the complete Beethoven Edition. In that same year, Adler discovered the first movement of another early Beethoven concerto, this one in D major, in the possession of Joseph Bezeczny, head of education for an institute for the blind in Prague. Adler determined that the work was written between 1788 and 1793 ("probably before rather than after 1790," he added), and that Beethoven apparently attached little importance to it and simply laid it aside, unfinished. The B-flat Concerto (No. 2, published as Op. 19) was completed in 1795 (though revised in 1798 and again in 1800); the C major (No. 1, Op. 15) dates from 1798. Both were published in 1801, and ordered according to the opus numbers assigned to them by the composer.

Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto is a product of the Classical age, not just in date but also in technique, expression and attitude. Still to come were the heaven-storming sublimities of his later works, but he could no more know what form those still-to-be-written works would take than tell the future in any other way. "Beethoven is present in the Concerto's notes, but concealed — and to listen for him is probably to miss the classical charm and 18th-century polish that mark it so definitely with the manners of Haydn and Mozart," advised Herbert Weinstock. Such a traditional device — one greatly favored by Mozart — is used to open the Concerto: a forceful fanfare motive immediately balanced by a suave lyrical phrase. These two melodic fragments are spun out at length to produce the orchestral introduction. The piano joins in for a brief transition to the re-presentation of the principal thematic motives, applying brilliant decorative filigree as the movement unfolds. The sweetly simple second theme is sung by the orchestra alone, but the soloist quickly resumes playing to supply commentary on this new melody. An orchestral interlude leads to the development section, based largely on transformations of the principal theme's lyrical motive. The recapitulation proceeds apace, and includes an extended cadenza. (Beethoven composed cadenzas for his first four concertos between 1804 and 1809.) A brief orchestral thought ends the movement.

The touching second movement is less an exercise in rigorous, abstract form than a lengthy song of rich texture and operatic sentiment. The wonderfully inventive piano figurations surrounding the melody are ample reminder that Beethoven was one of the finest keyboard improvisors of his day, a master of embellishment and piano style. The finale is a rondo based on a bounding theme announced immediately by the soloist. Even at this early stage in his career, it is amazing how he was able to extend and manipulate this simple, folk-like tune with seemingly limitless creativity. Though Beethoven's music was soon to explore unprecedented areas of expression and technique, this Concerto stands at the end of an era, paying its debt to the composer's great forebears and announcing in conventional terms the arrival of a musician who was soon to change forever the art of music.

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Composed in 1855-1876.
Premiered on November 4, 1876 in Karlsruhe, conducted by Felix Otto Dessoff.

Brahms, while not as breathtakingly precocious as Mozart, Mendelssohn or Schubert, got a reasonably early start on his musical career: he had produced several piano works (including two large sonatas) and a goodly number of songs by the age of nineteen. In 1853, when Brahms was only twenty, Robert Schumann wrote the famous article in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, his first contribution to that journal in a decade, hailing Brahms as the savior of German music, the rightful heir to the mantle of Beethoven. Brahms was extremely proud of Schumann's advocacy and he displayed the journal with great joy to his friends and family when he returned to his humble Hamburg neighborhood after visiting Schumann in Düsseldorf, but there was the other side of Schumann's assessment as well, that which placed an immense burden on Brahms' shoulders.

Brahms was acutely aware of the deeply rooted traditions of German music extending back not just to Beethoven, but even beyond him to Bach and Schütz and Lassus. His knowledge of Bach was so thorough, for example, that he was asked to join the editorial board of the first complete edition of the works of that Baroque master. He knew that, having been heralded by Schumann, his compositions, especially a symphony, would have to measure up to the standards set by his forebears. At first he doubted that he was even able to write a symphony, feeling that Beethoven had nearly expended all the potential of that form, leaving nothing for future generations. "You have no idea," Brahms lamented, "how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven."

Encouraged by Schumann to undertake a symphony ("If one only makes the beginning, then the end comes of itself," he cajoled), Brahms made some attempts in 1854, but was unsatisfied with the symphonic potential of the sketches, and diverted them into the First Piano Concerto and the *German Requiem*. He began again a year later, perhaps influenced by a performance of Schumann's *Manfred*, and set down a first movement, but this music he kept to himself, and even his closest friends knew of no more than the existence of the manuscript. Seven years passed before he sent this movement to Clara, Schumann's widow, to seek her opinion. With only a few reservations, she was pleased with this C minor sketch, and encouraged Brahms to hurry on and finish the rest so that it could be performed. Brahms, however, was not to be rushed. Eager inquiries from conductors in 1863, 1864 and 1866 went unanswered. It was not until 1870 that he hinted about any progress at all beyond the first movement.

The success of the superb *Haydn Variations* for orchestra of 1873 seemed to convince Brahms that he could complete his initial symphony, and in the summer of 1874 he began two years of labor — revising, correcting, perfecting — before he signed and dated the score of the First Symphony in September 1876. He was at work right up to the premiere, making alterations after each rehearsal. The C minor Symphony met with a good but not overwhelming reception. It was considered by some to be stern and ascetic, lacking in melody (!). One critic suggested posting signs in concert halls warning: "Exit in case of Brahms." But Brahms' vision was greater than that of his audiences, and some time was needed by listeners to absorb the manifold beauties of this work. It is a serious and important essay ("Composing a symphony is no laughing matter," according to Brahms), one that revitalized the symphonic sonata form of Beethoven and combined it with the full contrapuntal resources of Bach, a worthy successor to the traditions Brahms revered. It has become the most performed of Brahms' symphonies and one of the most cherished pieces in the orchestral literature.

The success and popularity of the First Symphony are richly deserved. It is a work of supreme technical accomplishment and profound emotion, of elaborate counterpoint and beautiful melody. Even to those who know its progress intimately, it reveals new marvels upon each hearing. The first movement begins with a slow introduction in 6/8 meter energized by the heart-beats of the timpani supporting the full orchestra. The violins announce the upward-bounding main theme in the faster tempo that launches a magnificent, seamless sonata form. The second movement starts with a placid, melancholy song led by the violins. After a mildly syncopated middle section, the bittersweet melody returns in a splendid scoring for oboe, horn and solo violin. The brief third movement, with its prevailing woodwind colors, is reminiscent of the pastoral serenity of Brahms' earlier Serenades.

The finale begins with an extended slow introduction based on several pregnant thematic ideas. The first, high in the violins, is a minor-mode transformation of what will become the main theme of the finale, but here broken off by an agitated pizzicato passage. A tense section of rushing scales is halted by a timpani roll leading to the call of the solo horn, a melody originally for Alphorn that Brahms collected while on vacation in Switzerland. The introduction concludes with a noble chorale intoned by trombones and bassoons, the former having been held in reserve throughout the entire Symphony just for this moment. The finale proper begins with a new tempo and one of the most famous themes in the repertory, a stirring hymn-like melody that resembles the finale of Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony. (When a friend pointed out this affinity to Brahms he shot back, "Any fool can see that!") The movement progresses in sonata form, but without a development section. The work closes with a majestic coda in the brilliant key of C major featuring the trombone chorale of the introduction in its full splendor.

Of Brahms' symphonies, and this one in particular, Lawrence Gilman wrote, "The essential fact to remember and to celebrate about Brahms is that he possessed not only the mechanisms of the grand style, but that he was able to exert it as a vehicle for ideas of authentic greatness, and he achieved this miracle with a continence, a sense of balance and proportion, an instinct for the larger contours as well as the finer adjustments of musical design, that were almost unerring."

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