

Program 5

The Washington Post

John Philip Sousa (1854-1932)

Sousa composed the *Washington Post March* in 1889 to promote an essay contest sponsored by that newspaper. The work created a sensation when it was premiered on June 15th, and was directly responsible for inspiring the composer's famous nickname — "The March King."

Le Roi Lear, Op. 4

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Composed in 1831.

Premiered on December 22, 1833 in Paris, conducted by Narcisse Girard.

After three unsuccessful attempts, Berlioz finally won the Prix de Rome at the end of 1830, but he then pried himself away from Paris only with the greatest reluctance. His reputation as a leader of the city's musical avant garde was just beginning to blossom (the *Symphonie Fantastique* was premiered on December 5th), and a recent passion conceived for the pianist Camille Moke had resulted in their betrothal. Upon his arrival in Rome, Berlioz installed himself in the French Academy at the Villa Medici, and proceeded to worry more about the lack of correspondence from Camille than about his creative work. He passed his time poking about the ancient ruins, touching up the score of the *Symphonie Fantastique*, and immersing himself in Byron's poem *The Corsair*, reading much of it in, of all places, St. Peter's Basilica. By April, waiting for word from Paris had proven intolerable to him, and he broke the terms of his Prix appointment by bolting north from Rome.

Berlioz's journey was halted for several days in Florence by fever and a sore throat, and he speeded his recovery by reading Shakespeare's *King Lear* on the banks of the Arno. He was overwhelmed by the drama: "I uttered a cry of admiration in the face of this work of genius; I thought I would burst from enthusiasm, I rolled around (in the grass, honestly), I rolled convulsively to appease my utter rapture." Immediately upon the heels of this literary revelation, however, came a letter from Camille's mother, who reported to Berlioz that her daughter had married the noted piano maker Ignaz Pleyel. Revenge, the jilted composer vowed, must be done upon his faithless fiancée. He purchased two revolvers and a measure of laudanum and strychnine, as well as some serving maid's clothes (!) that he planned to use as a disguise to sneak into the Pleyel-Moke abode. He got as far as Nice, where his reason apparently snapped, and threw himself into the ocean in an attempted suicide. After being "yanked out like a fish," as he put it in his memoirs, his rage completely drowned, and he spent the next three weeks recovering ("the happiest twenty days of my existence"). He sketched out some ideas later used in his *Corsaire Overture*, but worked mainly on a concert overture inspired by *King*

Lear. He returned to Rome, made amends with Horace Vernet, the French historical painter then heading the Academy, and finished *King Lear* by May 10th. The work had to await its premiere until December 22, 1833, when Narcisse Girard led it (Berlioz did not debut as a conductor until 1835) on a program that also featured the *Symphonie Fantastique* and the composer's friend Franz Liszt playing Weber's *Konzertstück*. It was following that concert that Niccolò Paganini approached Berlioz with the commission for *Harold in Italy*. Berlioz valued his early *King Lear* highly, and conducted it many times after its publication in 1839. At one concert in Germany a few years before his death, he was again amazed by his own inspiration: "Why, it is overwhelming. Did I really write that? ... Perhaps Father Shakespeare would not curse me for having made his old British King and his sweet Cordelia speak in such strains."

Though Berlioz left no specific program for *King Lear* relating the score's progress to the characters and events of the drama (the eminent English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey claimed that this work was not programmatic at all, but simply "a magnificent piece of orchestral rhetoric in tragic style"), he did give a hint that the music has some pictorial qualities. In responding to a letter from the Baron von Donop in 1858 asking how the work was to be interpreted, Berlioz noted, "It used to be the custom at the court of Charles X, as late as 1830, to announce the King's entrance into his chambers (after Mass on Sundays) to the sound of an enormous drum. From this, I had the idea of accompanying Lear into his council chamber for the scene of the division of the kingdom by a similar effect on the timpani. I did not intend his madness to be represented until the middle of the *Allegro*, when the basses bring in the theme of the introduction in the middle of the storm." Lear himself seems to be evoked by the commanding unison string figure that begins the extended slow introduction. Cordelia enters with the plaintive melody in the oboe above pizzicato strings. The return of Lear's theme at the end of the introduction is heightened by thundering rolls on the timpani. The main body of the work, in fast tempo, largely follows traditional sonata form, with a violent main theme placated by two gentle strains unfolded by oboe and bassoon. There is much contention between the contrasting emotional states of the principal thematic material in the development and recapitulation sections until Lear's motto from the introduction reappears as a menacing recitative for basses that leads to the work's stormy closing pages.

Petite Symphonie Concertante for Harpsichord, Piano, Harp and Double String Orchestra

Frank Martin (1890-1974)

Composed in 1944-1945.

Premiered on May 27, 1946 in Zurich, conducted by Paul Sacher.

Frank Martin (mar-TAN, as in French) was one of Switzerland's greatest composers. The tenth child of

a Calvinist minister whose ancestors fled from France to Geneva with the Huguenots in the 18th century, he began composing when he was only eight. He studied piano, composition and harmony privately with Joseph Lauber, but never attended a formal conservatory music course. From 1918 to 1923, he lived in Zurich and Rome, then moved to Paris, where he was strongly influenced by the trends in modern French music. He returned to an active professional life in Geneva in 1926 that included criticism, performance as a pianist and harpsichordist, administering the Association of Swiss Musicians, directing the Dalcroze Institute and composing. His earliest works were indebted to the German tradition, but after his stay in Paris, he turned increasingly to experimenting with new styles and techniques, including those of ancient, Indian, Bulgarian and folk music. By 1932, those explorations had led Martin to the serial technique of Arnold Schoenberg, which he handled with an individuality that did not eschew traditional tonal elements. *Le Vin Herbé* (“*The Doctored Wine*”), his retelling of the old Tristan legend in the form of a “secular oratorio,” won him international prominence despite the difficult conditions at the time of its premiere in Zurich in 1942. After the war, he settled in Naarden, near his wife’s home city of Amsterdam, remaining active as a composer, conductor and teacher until his death in 1974. Of the style of Martin’s later compositions, Jacques de Menasce wrote, “[They] are characterized by broad melodic lines of a chromatic nature, subtle harmonic and rhythmic patterns, and a sustained contrapuntal texture. The common denominator can be described as an organic blend of several methods, which as a composite make for an idiom that is clearly personal.”

The *Petite Symphonie Concertante* of 1944-1945 is one of Martin’s best-known compositions, the work that first brought him international acclaim. Its orchestration for harp, harpsichord and piano with double string orchestra is unusual, and Martin made an alternate version for full orchestra on the assumption that the original scoring would be considered merely a curiosity, thereby limiting the number of its performances. He was wrong, and the work is always heard in its original form. The organization of the performing forces suggests the old Baroque *concerto grosso*, and there is a large amount of concerted writing in which the various instruments, not excluding the principals of the two string orchestras, are called upon to participate as soloist or part of a smaller group. The forms, however, are more closely related to Classical than Baroque models, and this *Petite Symphonie* is a fine example of the wide-ranging influences which Martin brought to bear in his best works.

The work comprises two large sections each divided into a pair of smaller component parts, all played without pause. The opening, for strings alone, is a broad introduction in slow tempo. The first section continues with the entry of the keyboards and harp in a faster tempo. This *Allegro* resembles sonata form, with two main themes — one jagged and rhythmically active, the other more stately and with smoother contours. The second section commences with solemn, arpeggiated chords from the piano accompanying a stark melody in octaves played by the harp. The music continues in this mood,

acquiring some elaborate rhythmic embroidery as it goes, until a sudden martial spirit takes hold to bring the work to a close.

In his preface to the score, the composer wrote about the structure of his *Petite Symphonie Concertante*, “I was led by this instrumental arrangement to choose the Classical form for the *Allegro*, not with the specific intention of molding my musical ideas into a pre-established pattern, but to see whether such musical material could thrive and develop in this form with two themes. Thus came into being the first part of the symphony with its *Introduction* and its *Allegro*. In the *Allegro*, the second theme and the further development again take up the essential elements of the *Introduction*. This *Allegro* resembles a concerto, with its solo parts (and two always accompanying the other), and the continually recurring orchestral part.

“In the second part of the work I have been carried forward by the spontaneous movement of the music. The melodious main theme, introduced in a slow movement by the harp and taken up by the piano, develops into a lively march. In contrast to the first part, and despite numerous episodic elements, there is only one main theme. It rises to a climax, and then subsides with a short cadence.”

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73 Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Composed in 1877.

Premiered on December 30, 1877 in Vienna, conducted by Hans Richter.

“The new symphony is merely a ‘sinfonia,’ and I shall not need to play it for you beforehand. You have only to sit down at the piano, put your little feet on the two pedals in turn, and strike the chord of F minor several times in succession, first in the treble, then in the bass, *fortissimo* and *pianissimo*, and you will gradually gain a vivid impression of my latest work.” With the premiere of his pastoral Second Symphony only a month away, Brahms served up this red herring in early November to his friend, correspondent and supporter Elisabeth von Herzogenberg to playfully mislead her about the character of this lovely work. He tossed another false clue to Clara Schumann when he told her that the halcyon first movement was “quite elegiac in character,” and, again to Elisabeth, that so sad a piece would require the orchestra to play with crepe bands on their sleeves and the printed score would have to be bordered in black. “The new Symphony is so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it,” he told his publisher, Fritz Simrock. Such statements are characteristic of Brahms both in their eccentric, sometimes cranky humor, and their reticence to divulge any information about a work that had not been publicly displayed. He was always reluctant to discuss or even mention new pieces to anyone, even to such trusted friends as Clara Schumann. (Clara begged him for years to complete his First Symphony without knowing that the project was almost constantly on his mind and on his desk during the time.) He usually destroyed all his drafts and tentative sketches for a finished composition so that his preliminary thoughts

and working procedures remain a mystery. He refused to be disturbed while composing. Once, a youthful admirer, unable to gain an audience with Brahms, set up a ladder to climb to the composer's second-story window to deliver his encomium. Brahms, deep in work and detesting any distraction, angrily threw the ladder from the sill, causing the young man no little harm. It is because of such secretiveness that little is known about the actual composition of the Second Symphony.

In the summer of 1877, Brahms repaired to the village of Pörschach in the Carinthian hills of southern Austria. He wrote to a Viennese friend, "Pörschach is an exquisite spot, and I have found a lovely and apparently pleasant abode in the Castle! You may tell everybody this; it will impress them.... The place is replete with Austrian coziness and kindheartedness." The lovely country surroundings inspired Brahms' creativity to such a degree that he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, "So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them." Brahms plucked from the gentle Pörschach breezes a surfeit of beautiful music for his Second Symphony, which was apparently written quickly during that summer — a great contrast to the fifteen-year gestation of the preceding symphony. He brought the manuscript with him when he returned to Vienna at the end of the summer, and played it at an informal gathering in a four-hand piano version with Ignaz Brüll in September. Brahms kept the true nature of the piece from the friends who were not at that gathering, and he was delighted by their surprised response at the public premiere late in December.

Brahms' misleading statements depicting the Second Symphony as a tragic work were plausible in view of the stony grandeur of its predecessor. The premiere audience had every expectation of hearing a grand, portentous statement similar in tone to the First Symphony, but was treated instead to the composer's most gentle and sun-dappled music. After their initial befuddlement had passed, they warmed to the occasion as the performance progressed, and such was their enthusiasm at the end that they demanded an encore of the third movement. Brahms himself allowed, "[The work] sounded so merry and tender, as though it were especially written for a newly wedded couple." Early listeners heard in it "a glimpse of Nature, a spring day amid soft mosses, springing woods, birds' notes, and the bloom of flowers." Richard Specht, the composer's biographer, found it "suffused with the sunshine and warm winds playing on the waters." Comparisons with Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony were inevitable, though Brahms never revealed any specific programmatic intention rippling among these notes.

Its effortless technique, rich orchestral writing and surety of emotional effect make this composition a splendid sequel to Brahms' First Symphony. The earlier work, probably the best first symphony anyone ever composed, is filled with a sense of struggle and hard-won victory, an accurate mirror of Brahms' monumental efforts over many years to shape a worthy successor to Beethoven's symphonies. ("You have no idea how it feels

to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven," Brahms lamented.) The Second Symphony, while at least the equal of the First in technical mastery, differs markedly in its mood, which, in Eduard Hanslick's words, is "cheerful and likable ... [and] may be described in short as peaceful, tender, but not effeminate." So taken aback by the work's pastoral quality was the Leipzig critic Dörffel that he wrote of the performance conducted by the composer in his city only two weeks after the Viennese premiere, "We require from him music that is something more than simply pretty ... when he comes before us as a symphonist." Though this Symphony is more "simply pretty" than any other by Brahms, there is also a rich emotional vein and inevitable structural logic that motivates the music.

The Symphony opens with a three-note motive, presented softly by the low strings, which is the germ seed from which much of the thematic material of the movement grows. The horns sing the principal theme, which includes, in its third measure, the three-note motive. The sweet second theme is given in duet by the cellos and violas. The development begins with the horn's main theme, but is mostly concerned with permutations of the three-note motive around which some stormy emotional sentences accumulate. The placid mood of the opening returns with the recapitulation, and remains largely undisturbed until the end of the movement.

The second movement plumbs the deepest emotions in the Symphony. Many of its early listeners found it difficult to understand because they failed to perceive that, in constructing the four broad paragraphs that comprise the Second Symphony, Brahms deemed it necessary to balance the radiant first movement with music of thoughtfulness and introspection in the second. This movement actually covers a wide range of sentiments, shifting, as it does, between light and shade — major and minor. Its form is sonata, whose second theme is a gently syncopated strain intoned by the woodwinds above the cellos' pizzicato notes.

The following *Allegretto* is a delightful musical sleight-of-hand. The oboe presents a naive, folk-like tune in moderate triple meter as the movement's principal theme. The strings take over the melody in the first Trio, but play it in an energetic duple-meter transformation. The return of the sedate original theme is again interrupted by another quick-tempo variation, this one a further development of motives from Trio I. A final traversal of the main theme closes this delectable movement.

The finale bubbles with the rhythmic energy and high spirits of a Haydn symphony. The main theme starts with a unison gesture in the strings, but soon becomes harmonically active and spreads through the orchestra. The second theme is a broad, hymnal melody initiated by the strings. The development section, like that of many of Haydn's finales, begins with a statement of the main theme in the tonic before branching into discussion of the movement's motives. The recapitulation recalls the earlier themes, and leads with an inexorable drive through the triumphant coda (based on the hymnal melody) to the brazen glow of the final trombone chord.

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