

Program 8

Overture to *Genoveva*, Op. 81 Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

*Composed in 1847.
Premiered on June 25, 1850 in Leipzig, conducted by the composer.*

Robert Schumann was a crucial figure in the history of 19th-century German music. Working in the decades after Beethoven's death, when many musicians felt that the possibilities of the grand, abstract genres had been exhausted, he urged his fellow German composers not to succumb to the easy (and lucrative) temptation of cranking out vapid piano pieces and operatic transcriptions, but to search out renewed expressions of symphony and quartet and opera that would not only revere the great traditions of the nation's artistic heritage but also reflect the expanded sensibilities of the Romantic age.

As early as 1842, Schumann issued a call from his platform as editor of the influential periodical *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* ("New Music Journal") to continue the efforts begun by Weber, then already dead sixteen years, to create a German opera as an alternative to the flood of Italian and French theatrical pieces washing across Europe. ("Canary-bird music," he called these imports.) He heeded his own advice, and began casting about for a subject for an opera — Hamlet, Tristan, Mazeppa, Attila, Mary Queen of Scots, Wilhelm Meister and a clutch of others were considered and rejected. It was not until 1847 that he settled on Friedrich Hebbel's 1843 dramatization of the legend of St. Genevieve, itself based on the version of 1799 by Ludwig Tieck, as the stuff of what proved to be his only completed opera. He asked his friend Robert Reinick to help prepare the libretto, but after a few false starts they disagreed, and Schumann turned to Hebbel himself. Upon his arrival in Dresden, however, Hebbel found the composer so distraught over the death of his sixteen-month-old son, Emil, that collaboration was futile. Schumann, a man of some literary pretension, finally wrote his own libretto.

In his biography of Schumann, Peter Ostwald summarized the plot of *Genoveva*: "Siegfried, a crusader, leaves his castle to go to war. He asks Golo, his trusted friend, to watch over his wife, Genoveva. Fearful and lonely, she invites Golo to comfort her by singing of her absent husband. The song excites both of them, and Golo takes advantage of Genoveva by trying to force himself on her. She repulses him. Humiliated and vengeful, Golo searches out Siegfried, who has been wounded in battle, and tells him that his wife has been unfaithful. Siegfried believes him, and condemns Genoveva to death. After returning to his castle, however, he finds that Genoveva is innocent after all, and that his friend has betrayed him. Golo is banished and dies. The opera ends happily, with the lovers reunited and the populace rejoicing."

Schumann prettied up the end of the opera more than fact allowed. (George Bernard Shaw called the libretto "nakedly silly" and "pure bosh.") The historical, fifth-century Genoveva (Genevieve) escaped the ax, but left her husband and went to Paris, where the religious order she established helped to feed the starving inhabitants during the siege of Childeric. Later, her prayers were credited with saving the city from attack by Attila the Hun, though she lost her life in the hostilities. She is the patron saint of Paris. Genevieve's virtues of holiness and purity were essential to her canonization, but were hardly melodramatic fodder for the 19th-century stage. *Genoveva* was finally produced in 1850 in Leipzig after almost two years of delays, but it was only a *succès d'estime*, closing after just three performances and never successfully revived.

The Overture, written in only five days — April 1-5, 1847 — during Schumann's first burst of enthusiasm over *Genoveva*, remains the only part of the opera known to modern audiences. The Overture is his finest work in the genre, except for *Manfred*. It follows conventional sonata form, with a brooding, slow introduction leading to a vigorous main theme and a bounding contrasting melody in the horns that is one of Schumann's greatest orchestral inventions.

Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90 Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

*Composed in 1882-1883.
Premiered on December 2, 1883 in Vienna, conducted by Hans Richter.*

Brahms had reached the not inconsiderable age of 43 before he unveiled his First Symphony. The Second Symphony followed within eighteen months, and the musical world was prepared for a steady stream of similar masterworks from his pen. However, it was to be another six years before he undertook his Third Symphony, though he did produce the *Academic Festival* and *Tragic Overtures*, the Violin Concerto and the Second Piano Concerto during that time. When he got around to the new Symphony, he was nearly fifty, and had just recovered from a spell of feeling that he was "too old" for creative work, even informing his publisher, Fritz Simrock, that he would be sending him nothing more. It seems likely — though such matters always remained in the shadows where Brahms was concerned — that his creative juices were stirred anew by a sudden infatuation with "a pretty Rhineland girl." This was Hermine Spiess, a talented contralto who was 26 when Brahms first met her in January 1883 at the home of friends. (Brahms was fifty.) A cordial, admiring friendship sprang up between the two, but this affair, like every other one in Brahms' life in which a respectable woman was involved, never grew any deeper. He used to declare, perhaps only half in jest, that he lived his life by two principles, "and one of them is never to attempt either an opera or a marriage." Perhaps what he really needed was a muse rather than a wife. At any rate, Brahms spent the summer of 1883

not at his usual haunts in the Austrian hills and lakes, but at the German spa of Wiesbaden, which just happened to be the home of Hermine. Work went well on the new Symphony, and it was completed before he returned to Vienna in October.

Brahms' Third Symphony, the shortest of his four works in the form, is the most clear in formal outline, the most subtle in harmonic content and the most assured in contrapuntal invention. No time is wasted in establishing the conflict that charges the first movement with dynamic energy. The two bold opening chords juxtapose bright F major and a somber chromatic harmony in the opposing moods of light and shadow that course throughout the work. The main theme comes from the strings "like a bolt from Jove," according to Olin Downes, with the opening chords repeated by the woodwinds as its accompaniment. Beautifully directed chromatic harmonies — note the bass line, which always carries the motion to its close- and long-range goals — lead to the pastoral second theme, sung softly by the clarinet. The development section is brief, but includes elaborations of most of the motives from the exposition. The tonic key of F is re-established, not harmonically but melodically (note how the bass leads the way), and the golden chords of the opening proclaim the recapitulation. A long coda based on the main theme reinforces the tonality and discharges much of the music's energy, allowing the movement to close quietly, as do, most unusually, all the movements of this Symphony.

The second and third are the most intimate and personal movements in Brahms' orchestral music. A folk-like theme appears in the rich colors of the low woodwinds and low strings to open the second movement. The central section is a Slavic-sounding plaint intoned by clarinet and bassoon that eventually gives way to the flowing rhythms of the opening and the return of the folk theme supported by a new, rippling string accompaniment. The romantic third movement replaces the usual scherzo. It is ternary in form, like the preceding movement, and utilizes the warmest tone colors of the orchestra.

The finale begins with a sinuous theme of brooding character. A brief, chant-like processional derived from the Slavic theme of the second movement provides contrast. Further thematic material is introduced (one theme is arch-shaped; the other, more rhythmically vigorous) and well examined. Brahms dispensed here with a true development section, but combined its function with that of the recapitulation. As the end of the movement nears, the tonality returns to F major, and there is a strong sense of struggle passed. The tension subsides, and the work ends with the ghost of the opening movement's main theme infused with a sunset glow.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major, Op. 23 **Franz Liszt (1811-1886)**

Composed in 1839 and 1849.
Premiered on January 7, 1857 in Weimar, conducted by the composer with Hans von Bronsart as soloist.

"Franz Liszt was one of the most brilliant and provocative figures in music history. As a pianist, conduc-

tor, composer, teacher, writer and personality — for with Liszt, being a colorful personality was itself a profession — his immediate influence upon European music can hardly be exaggerated. His life was a veritable pagan wilderness wherein flourished luxuriant legends of love affairs, illegitimate children, encounters with great figures of the period, and hairbreadth escapes from a variety of romantic murders. Unlike Wagner and Berlioz, Liszt never wrote the story of his life, for, as he casually remarked, he was too busy living it." If it were not for the fact that Liszt's life had been so thoroughly documented by his contemporaries, we might think that the preceding description by Abraham Veinus was based on some profligate fictional character out of E.T.A. Hoffmann. Not so. By all accounts, Liszt led the most sensational life ever granted to a musician. In his youth and early manhood, he received the sort of wild and unbuttoned adulation that today is seen only at the appearances of a select handful of rock stars. He was the first musical artist in history with enough nerve to keep an entire public program to himself, rather than providing the grab-bag of orchestral, vocal and instrumental pieces scattered across an evening's entertainment that was the typical early-19th-century concert. He dubbed those solo concerts "musical soliloquies" at first, and later called them by the now-familiar term, "recitals." ("How can one *recite* at the piano? Preposterous!" fumed one British writer.)

By 1848, Liszt had made his fortune, secured his fame and decided that he had been touring long enough, so he gave up performing, appearing in public during the last four decades of his life only for an occasional benefit concert. Amid the variegated patchwork of duchies, kingdoms and city-states that constituted pre-Bismarck Germany, he chose to settle in the small but sophisticated town of Weimar, where Sebastian Bach had held down a job early in his career. Once installed at Weimar, Liszt took over the musical establishment there, and elevated it into one of the most important centers of European artistic culture. He stirred up interest in such neglected composers as Schubert, and encouraged such younger ones as Saint-Saëns, Wagner and Grieg by performing their works. He also gave much of his energy to his own original compositions, and created many of the pieces for which he is known today — the symphonies, piano concertos, symphonic poems and choral works. Liszt had composed before he moved to Weimar, of course — his total output numbers between 1,400 and 1,500 separate works — but the early pieces were mainly piano solos for use at his own recitals. His later works are not only indispensable components of the Romantic musical era in their own right, but also were an important influence on other composers in their form, harmony and poetic content.

As if composing, conducting and performing were insufficient, Liszt was also one of the most sought-after piano teachers of the 19th century. He was popular with students not just because he possessed an awesome technique that was (and remains) the despair of every serious pianist. Liszt was also a direct link to that nearly deified figure, the glorious Beethoven, who had, so the story went, actually kissed the young prodigy with his own lips. Furthermore, Liszt was a pupil of Carl Czerny,

the most eminent student of Beethoven. To make this already unassailable combination of technique and tradition absolutely irresistible, Liszt brought to it an all-encompassing view of man and his world that enabled the mere tones of the piano to surpass themselves and open unspeakable realms of transcendent delight. He was a truly remarkable man, arguably the most important figure in terms of his cumulative influence on the art in all of 19th-century music.

Liszt sketched his two piano concertos in 1839, but they lay unfinished until he went to Weimar. He completed the Second Concerto, in A major, in the summer of 1849, but he did not get around to having it performed for more than seven years. Liszt required of a concerto that it be “clear in sense, brilliant in expression, and grand in style.” In other words, it had to be a knockout. While it was inevitable that this Concerto would have a high percentage of finger-churning display, it was not automatic that it should also be of high musical quality — but it is.

The procedure on which Liszt built this Concerto and other of his orchestral works is called “thematic transformation”; or, to use the rather more jolly phrase of William Foster Apthorp, “The Life and Adventures of a Melody.” Never bothered that he was ignoring the Classical models of form, Liszt concocted his own new structures around this transformation technique. (“Music is never stationary,” he pronounced. “Successive forms and styles can only be like so many resting places — like tents pitched and taken down again on the road to the Ideal.”) Basically, the “thematic transformation” process consists of inventing a theme that can be trotted out in a wide variety of moods, tempos, orchestrations and rhythms to suggest whatever emotional states are required by the different sections of the piece.

There are at least six such scenes in Liszt’s Piano Concerto No. 2. The composer provided no specific plot for any of these, but wrote music of such extroverted emotionalism that it is not difficult for listeners to provide their own: languor, storm, love, strife, resolve and battle is only one possible sequence. It is a diverting game to play, and Liszt has invited all to take part. The melody on which this Concerto is based is presented immediately at the beginning by the clarinet. It courses through each section, and can most easily be identified by the little half-step sigh at the end of the first phrase.

***Don Juan, Tone Poem (after Nicolaus Lenau), Op. 20*
Richard Strauss (1864-1949)**

Composed in 1888.

Premiered on November 11, 1889 in Weimar, conducted by the composer.

It was in the 1630 drama *El Burlador de Sevilla* (“*The Seducer of Seville*”) by the Spanish playwright Tirso de Molina that the fantastic character of Don Juan first strutted upon the world’s stages. Tirso based his play on folk legends that were at least a century old in his day, and whose roots undoubtedly extend deeply into some Jungian archetype of masculine virility shared, from complementary viewpoints, by men and women alike. Don Juan found frequent literary representations

thereafter, notably in works by Molière, Dumas, Byron, Espronceda, de Musset, Zorrilla and Shaw. A story of such intense passion was bound to inspire composers as well as men of letters, and Gluck, Delibes, Alfano, Dargomyzhsky and half a dozen others wrote pieces based on the character and his exploits. The most famous treatment of the tale is, of course, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, and it was through that opera that Richard Strauss first became acquainted with the Spanish Lothario. In June 1885, Strauss attended a production of Paul Heyse’s play *Don Juans Ende* with his mentor, Hans von Bülow, and the drama and its subject, building on the influence of Mozart’s masterpiece, made a powerful impression on the young composer.

Strauss started sketching his own *Don Juan* late in 1887, soon after he had met Pauline de Ahna in August. Pauline, a singer of considerable talent, got on splendidly with Strauss, and they were soon in love and married. The impassioned love themes of *Don Juan* were written under the spell of this romance. For the program of his tone poem, Strauss went not to da Ponte or the Spanish authors, but to the 19th-century Hungarian poet Nicolaus Lenau. Lenau, born in 1802, was possessed by a blazing romantic spirit fueled in part by a hopeless love for the wife of a friend. In a fit of idealism in 1832, he came to America and settled on a homestead in Ohio for a few months. Disappointed with the New World, he returned to Europe, where he produced an epic on the Faust legend in 1836, and then undertook a poetic drama based on Don Juan. Lenau left this latter work unfinished in 1844 when he lost his mind and was admitted to an asylum, where he died six years later. Lenau’s *Don Juan* was not a rakish extrovert but rather a vain, sensual idealist. In the author’s words, “My Don Juan is no hot-blooded man, eternally pursuing women. It is the longing in him to find a woman who is to him incarnate womanhood, and to enjoy in the one all the women on earth whom he cannot as individuals possess. Because he does not find her, although he reels from one to another, at last Disgust seizes him, and this Disgust is the Devil that fetches him.” In Lenau’s version, Don Juan meets his death in a sword duel with the father of one of the women he has seduced. Disillusioned and empty, ready for death, he drops his guard and welcomes his fate.

Strauss’ tone poem captures the feverish emotion and charged sensuality of Lenau’s drama, but other than three abstruse excerpts from Lenau’s poem that appear in the score, the composer never gave a specific program for *Don Juan*. The body of the work comprises themes associated with the lover and his conquests. The vigorous opening strain and a stentorian melody majestically proclaimed by the horns near the mid-point of the work belong to Don Juan. The music depicting the women in his life is variously coquettish, passionate and ravishing. (Norman Del Mar called the beautiful oboe melody “one of the greatest lovesongs in all music”). In the closing pages, an enormous crescendo is suddenly broken off by a long silence. A quivering chill comes over the music. A dissonant note on the trumpets marks the fatal thrust. Quietly, without hope of redemption, the libertine dies.

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