

Prodigious Ji-Yong

March 18, 2005 - Town Hall Seattle

March 19, 2005 - Rialto Theater Tacoma

Arriaga: *Los Esclavos Felices* Overture

Saint-Saëns: *Symphony No. 2 in A minor, Op. 55*

Schumann: *Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54*

Program notes by C. Chagnard

### The Genius of Youth

The analogy proved irresistible. Juan Crisostomo de **Arriaga** Balzola was born 50 years after Mozart to the day, on January 27, 1806. He also shared a tragically short life span, passing on January 17, 1826, 10 days short of his 19th birthday! The two men also shared a quasi-miraculous aptitude for music at the earliest age. Arriaga was already a busy composer by age 11. By age 13, he composed his first opera *Los Esclavos Felices* (an oxymoron of a title: "The Happy Slaves") which was greeted with great enthusiasm during its premiere in 1820. We can only wonder about all the sublime music he would have written had his life not been cut so short.

Arriaga left his native Spain (he was born near Bilbao which is now in the Basque region) in 1822 for Paris where he immediately conquered the French musical establishment. His composition teacher at the Conservatoire Fétis described his extraordinary pupil's music as such: "It is impossible to find anything more original, purer or more correctly written." It would be all too easy to equate this superlative description with blind adoration of a teacher to his star pupil. Not so. Mr. Fétis' assessment of Arriaga's unique genius is as eloquent as it is objective. One short listen to the very opening bars of *Los Esclavos Felices* Overture makes it perfectly clear: We are in the presence of a truly inspired 13 year-old composer for whom the creative sky is the limit.

Another astonishing child-wonder is **Camille Saint-Saëns** who by age 5 was composing music with the most natural ease. He was born in Paris in 1835 and showed extraordinary aptitude for the piano and later the organ for which he became one of the French capital's most celebrated virtuosi. Saint-Saëns was endowed with a truly remarkable intellectual curiosity which made him excel in the many fields he explored including poetry, theater, archeology, astronomy and mathematics. Saint-Saëns composed a total of 5 symphonies of which 3 were published. To this day they bear the numbers 1 through 3 as he never allowed his earlier attempts at the symphonic form to be shared with the public. Saint-Saëns' philosophy of music can be best described in his own words: "I write music like an apple tree produces apples!" This somewhat non-transcendental-matter-of-fact philosophy translated into an uneven opus. His piano music and most of his operas for instance has been essentially ignored while his "Organ" Symphony and *Carnival of the Animals* have been held as some of the most successful works of their kind to come from a French composer's pen. Saint-Saëns firmly believed that music does not need to find its roots in extra-musical inspiration and that pursuing originality or emotion for their sake was not conducive to honest creativity.

The **Second Symphony in A, Op.55** was written when Saint-Saëns was 24 and shows his distinct style and craft (listen for instance to the first movement's unusual opening in 6/4 featuring dramatic arpeggios in unison.) It quickly aroused the admiration of such icons as Berlioz, Gounod, Liszt (who became a close friend of Saint-Saëns) and even Wagner who all saw in this up-and-coming French genius a bright musical future. Saint-Saëns was far more fortunate than either Mozart or Arriaga as he enjoyed a long and prosperous life,

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allowing him to hone his craft and compose without interruption until his peaceful death in 1921 at age 86.

It is with the greatest of anticipation that the Northwest Sinfonietta explores, for the very first time, the great music of **Robert Schumann**. His **Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.54** is without a doubt one the finest creations of its kind, as much for its unrelenting outpouring of passionate emotions as for its perfect balance in the piano/orchestra complex relationship. This latter challenge had been at the forefront of Schumann's ambition in tackling a form which had been so successfully mastered by Mozart and Beethoven. Schumann stated "I want to show in a new and splendid way how the orchestra should be united with the pianoforte, so that the protagonist at the keyboard can unfold all the riches of his instrument and his art, while the orchestra, rather than being a mere spectator, weaves its various tones through the whole in a more artistic fashion." And in this lofty goal, he succeeded.

His concerto began in 1841 with the first movement conceived as a "Fantasy for piano and Orchestra." After failing to find a publisher for this stand-alone movement, Schumann added a second (Intermezzo) and third movements (Rondo) in 1845 to make it a full-fledged concerto which he described as "something between a symphony, a concerto and a grand sonata."

The first performance took place in Dresden in 1845 with Clara Schumann as soloist and revealed a totally new approach to the piano concerto medium. Schumann had set a daring goal in his exploration of the piano/orchestra relationship, and his essential contribution opened a new path which inspired the creation of some of the finest concertos of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

As a Music Director programming for each season, I tend to stay away from performing prodigies, most often finding that dazzling displays of precocious technique are often eclipsed by lack of substance. A year ago, I received a recording of Mozart's Piano Concerto No.20 in D minor which I consider Mozart's finest and the most difficult to interpret. The performance was truly excellent and took me by complete surprise at the realization that the pianist featured was (and still is) a very young man/older boy age 12! Ji-Yong is now a 14-year-old stage veteran and we are delighted to share our muse with him with a concerto which, more than any, requires the deepest investment into the complex world of its creator.