

Overture in D major, In the Italian Style, D. 590

Work composed: 1817

FRANZ SCHUBERT
(1797-1828)

Proud of its own great musical tradition, the city of Vienna joined the rest of Europe in its unbridled enthusiasm for Italian opera, especially those of Rossini. Even stern and gruff Beethoven—who had complained in the early 1820s about the Viennese obsession for Italian opera—admitted to liking, even admiring Rossini’s lyric operatic gifts, especially *The Barber of Seville*. So too did Franz Schubert, barely two decades old when the Rossini mania swept through the Austrian capital like virus. Because of prodding by his erstwhile mentor, the unfairly maligned Antonio Salieri—Schubert composed three Italianate overtures, all dating from 1817. The second and third, in particular, strongly recall Rossini, and both carry the subtitle *In the Italian Style*, bestowed on them by Schubert’s brother Ferdinand. The easiest way to distinguish the latter two is by key. One in C major dates from November; the other one—which we hear tonight—dates from two months earlier.

The two-part overture, first performed in 1818 in Vienna, opens with a lyrical Adagio that reminds us of—as if we need the cue—Schubert’s innate gift for melody. The ensuing Allegro, quick and fleet, brings the brief overture to a Rossini-inspired close.

Composed for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two French horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.

Duration: 8 minutes

“Verleih uns Frieden” (“Grant Unto Us Thy Peace, O Lord”)

Work composed: 1831

FELIX MENDELSSOHN
(1809-1847)

Felix Mendelssohn’s family’s converted from Judaism to Protestantism in 1816, adding “Bartholdy” to their now-to-be-hyphenated surname. Despite the conversion, Felix continued to pay honor to both religious persuasions throughout his life, setting liturgical texts drawing from both Jewish and Christian sources. In 1830, Mendelssohn visited the Vatican; thus inspired he composed *Three Sacred Choruses*, Op. 23, including the hymn tune “Verleih uns Frieden.” Anyone familiar with the young composer’s baker’s-dozen string symphonies knows of Mendelssohn’s love for and absorption of Bachian counterpoint. Perhaps more to the point, it was Mendelssohn who resurrected Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in an abridged performance of that magnum opus in 1829, thereby returning Bach’s music to public awareness. Unquestionably, the publication of the *Bach Gesellschaft* (complete edition of Bach’s music) two decades later—considered by Johannes Brahms to be the most joyous event in his life along with the unification of Germany under Bismarck—might have been delayed without Mendelssohn’s advocacy. Like the venerated Cantor of Leipzig, Mendelssohn didn’t let his Protestantism get in the way of setting texts associated with Catholicism. No doubt, Mendelssohn’s religious feelings were “catholic” in the lower-case, non-sectarian sense.

Though often accompanied by organ (in typical church performance), Mendelssohn originally provided an orchestral backdrop for Martin Luther’s hymn, “Verleih uns Frieden.” The brief work opens with a quiet instrumental introduction that sets the mood for the emergence of the hymn tune sung initially by basses.

The texture is enriched when the altos join in two-part counterpart. Finally, rich Bach-inspired four-part harmony brings to life the final stanza, serenely concluding the piece in unforced bliss.

Composed for two flutes, two clarinets, two bassoons, strings and chorus.
Duration: 6 minutes

Fantasia in C minor for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra, Op. 80, Choral Fantasy

Work composed: 1808

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770-1827)

Half-jestingly referred to as the “rehearsal” for Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the Fantasia in C minor for Piano, Chorus and Orchestra received its first performance in what must have been one of the all-time inaugural concerts. The episodic and endearing “Choral Fantasy” (as it is usually called) appeared on the same program that included Beethoven’s Fifth and Sixth (“Pastoral”) symphonies, Fourth Piano Concerto, the passionate concert aria, “Ah, Perfido” and part of the Mass in C major (a “rehearsal” for the eventual Missa solennis, one may suggest). Granted: it was a bitter cold night in December 1808 in the unheated Theater-an-der-Wien, but what an occasion that must have been!

The “Choral Fantasy” is an amalgam of concerto, symphony and cantata, beginning with an extended introduction for solo piano. At the first (under-rehearsed and consequently disastrous) performance, Beethoven essentially improvised this section, which was probably considerably longer than the written final version. The introduction is the only part of the piece actually residing in the minor mode.

Having “introduced” the music, Beethoven posits horn fanfares answered by the winds in anticipation of a folk-like tune, “Gegenliebe” (which he composed in 1794) that animates the remainder of the work through a series of variations that kaleidoscopically shift from instrument to instrument, either solo or by group or kindred sonority. As in the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven saves the chorus for last. Always the gentleman (Not!), Beethoven has the women enter first, briefly answered by the men after a piano-dominated section supported largely by string pizzicatos. Given the almost universal popularity of the Ninth Symphony, virtually all listeners will recognize the similarity of “Gegenliebe” to the “Ode to Joy” tune, as well as a magical chord progression Beethoven saw fit to employ in the Ninth’s finale. As with that transcendent choral movement, the equivalent section in the “Choral Fantasy” succeeds because of its joyful spirit and seeming simplicity of the music.

Composed for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two French horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings, chorus, solo piano, and solo soprano, alto, tenor and bass.
Duration: 19 minutes

Symphony No. 8 in F major, Op. 93

Work composed: 1811-12

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

World premiere: February 27, 1814, in Vienna, Beethoven conducting; this was preceded by a private performance at the home of Archduke Rudolph the previous April.

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

Beethoven wrote his Seventh and Eighth symphonies more or less simultaneously. The two contemporaneous works are as different as can be from one another. If No. 7, with its rhythmic fervor and affecting second movement, seems a full-fledged avatar of Romanticism, the modestly scored and essentially good-natured Eighth recalls the Classicism of Haydn and Mozart. A friend of the composer commented that the Eighth received less applause than the Seventh, unleashing a hot response from the composer: “That’s because it’s so much better!” Perhaps Beethoven’s gnarly response was defensive; perhaps he meant it. A century later, when asked if he liked any Beethoven symphonies, Igor Stravinsky said that, indeed, there were parts of the 8th Symphony that he emphatically did like! In any case, Beethoven was evidently quite fond of his latest creation, referring to it as his “little Symphony.”

Unlike the Seventh, the F-major Symphony begins without a slow introduction, asserting its bold and simple theme in 3/4 time briskly and without undue ceremony. A quirky theme in the relatively remote key of D major follows, after which emerges in the “correct” key of C major. The development section finds the composer maintaining the light burlesque mood, whipping up a comedic maelstrom from the unsuspecting first theme.

In B-flat, the second movement evokes the only recently invented metronome by Beethoven’s contemporary and friend, Johannes Mälzel (1772-1838). Against the “metronomic” regularity of this tune, the composer jokes ceaselessly as the winds spit out the tune in almost robotic fashion while the violins weave a charmingly silly tune around it. Hector Berlioz waxed enthusiastically about this movement, suggesting that “this sort of thing falls entire from heaven into the composer’s brain. He writes it at a single sitting, and we are amazed hearing it.” This speaks to the apparent spontaneity of the music, though Beethoven’s copious notebooks suggest that he worked long and hard on this musical joke.

The Classical orientation of the Eighth Symphony is especially clear in the third movement, where Beethoven presents an 18th-century minuet in lieu of the more emphatic scherzos that inhabit most of his symphonies. This is the very movement whose clarity and chaste orchestration so impressed Stravinsky. The Finale, boisterous, good-humored, and surprisingly lengthy (it is almost as long as the previous three movements combined), is a hybrid sonata/rondo boasting a coda more extensive than the development section. The music is impelled by a rhythmic urgency that is not diminished by its essentially high spirits. Unexpected (especially to his contemporaries) harmonic twists add to the humor and inventiveness of this bracing, absurdly underplayed masterpiece.

Composed for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two French horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.

Duration: 26 minutes

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