

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1882)
Siegfried Idyll

Work composed: 1870

World premiere: December 25, 1870, in Tribschen, Wagner conducting

Wagner's music and life was a roiling torrent of passion that ranged from ecstasy to excess - not that much of a jump! Moments of steady calm were rare indeed for this most willful and self-aggrandizing of composers, but it seems that the period around 1870 was filled with tenderness and domestic bliss. The stigma of his adulterous affair with Cosima, wife of Wagner's gifted and devoted disciple, the conductor Hans von Bülow, had been washed away by the lovers' marriage. (Bülow, nevertheless, said "If it had been anyone else but Wagner, I would have shot him.")

In 1869, Richard and Cosima had their third illegitimate child before the Bülow divorce was finalized, and named the boy Siegfried after the hero of the third and fourth operas in the Ring tetralogy. On August 25, 1870, the adulterous pair married, and Wagner wrote to a friend, "[Cosima] has defied every disapprobation and has taken upon herself every condemnation. She has borne to me a wonderfully beautiful boy, whom I can boldly call Siegfried; he is now growing, together with my work; he gives me a new long life, which as at last attained a meaning. Thus we get along without the world, from which we have wholly withdrawn."

Four months later to the day, Wagner surprised his new wife with a birthday present, a short (especially for this composer) chamber-sized work he called Tribschen Idyll, named after the locale of their villa on Lake Lucerne. In it, Wagner incorporated an old German song, *Schlaf, mein Kind* (Sleep, my child), a birdcall his young son was obsessing over, plus snippets primarily from the love scene in *Siegfried*. The mood is sweet, the melodic material lilting and consonant, and the harmonies as even-keeled as those in *Tristan* are not. The basic musical ideas derived from a projected string quartet promised to Cosima early in their relationship but never, dare we say, consummated.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64

Work composed: 1838-1844

World premiere: March 13, 1845, in Leipzig, Niels Gade conducting, Ferdinand David as soloist

A theme obsessed Mendelssohn in 1838; it was a compelling melody in E minor played by a violin. Excitedly, he wrote to his friend and colleague, violinist Ferdinand David, concertmaster of the famed Gewandhaus Orchestra Mendelssohn had directed since 1835. Once the irresistible tune entered the composer's consciousness, he had no one other than David in mind as intended soloist. Over the next seven years the violinist frequently examined the slowly evolving score, proffering copious technical advice to Mendelssohn (who was no mean fiddler himself).

From the initial performance forward, Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto quickly became a favorite among violinists and audiences alike, and despite a sudden and long-lasting lapse in Mendelssohn's posthumous reputation (happily on the rise of late), the E-minor concerto has always enjoyed a lofty perch in the violin concerto repertory. Though the composer is often described as a classicist within the Romantic era, the concerto opens in an unorthodox fashion by dropping the traditional lengthy orchestral exposition found in most concertos. The model was probably Beethoven's fourth piano concerto, which begins with a statement from the piano before the orchestra even whispers a note—or perhaps Mozart's E-flat piano concerto, K. 271, which begins similarly.

Mendelssohn accords the soloist right of first entry in a main theme of passion and individuality, a memorable tune that energizes the entire first movement. A second, less sweeping tune provides balance and contrast. The movement seems to end as expected, but a soft sustained note on the bassoon serves as a connective thread to the ensuing Andante. The prevailing mood here is quietly rapt, even spiritual, despite a brief interruption of the reverie during an agitated section midway through the movement. Again without pause, the finale rises out of the introspective calm of the Andante, briefly recalling a theme just heard, before launching into a vigorous rondo, dance-like and elfin in its high spirits.

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21

At two centuries remove, some may hear this astonishing first symphony as minor Beethoven, devoid of the drama and romance of his subsequent music. Yet a fresh and attentive listen reveals the audacious sensibility of a burgeoning composer who has mastered the lessons of his older masters—Mozart, dead since 1791, and Haydn, a still-vital presence until 1809 and Beethoven's erstwhile teacher—with a mind emphatically his own. The ears of his contemporaries were evidently acutely tender. Of this symphony one German critic wrote of "the confused explosions of the outrageous effrontery of a young man." A decade later, a Parisian musician wrote of its "astonishing success" that this adventurous symphony was "a danger to the musical art. It is believed that a prodigal use of the most barbarous dissonances and a noisy use of all the instruments will make an effect. Alas, the ear is only stabbed; there is no appeal to the heart." (No wonder that the late Nicholas Slonimsky could assemble music history's most egregious criticism -much of it from composers, interestingly - in his delightful *A Lexicon of Musical Invective*.)

By the time of its premiere, the symphony's composer had already established himself as the pre-eminent pianist in Vienna, as well as an uncommonly inventive composer. In addition to his first two piano concertos, he had already given to the world his splendid set of six string quartets, Op. 18. The Viennese aristocracy embraced him to their collective bosom, sponsoring concerts and commissioning new works. Here, as in later works, Beethoven would test the limits of their tolerance, not just for his social unruliness but for his brazen extensions and/or departures from classical musical decorum.

The First Symphony opens with a short introduction that sets out with a dissonant chord that appears to lead away from the home key of C major. It's all a kind of joke to pique the attention of the (supposedly) sophisticated noble audience, because he does settle into a finely wrought, more or less well behaved sonata-allegro for the remainder of the movement. As if to remind his auditors of his connection to the recent past, the main theme bears a noticeable resemblance to its counterpart in Mozart's Jupiter Symphony. Another "borrowing" from Mozart is the unexpected moments of silence that draw attention to new thematic material, akin to a pause before saying something of special interest.

Two themes animate the lyrical slow movement—a canonic main tune and a gossamer-like subordinate melody. Demonstrating an early mastery of counterpoint (no surprise: as a child he knew by heart Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier), the recap exults in delightfully energetic counterpoint. The Menuetto strains the decorous limits of its nomenclature, reveling in the irrepressible energy and fast tempo of a Scherzo; no courtly musical snuff here!

Beethoven the jokester once again tweaks the audience in the Adagio introduction to the Finale. Using the simplest of materials, the composer begins a series of scalar notes, each phrase containing an additional higher tone with each expanded repetition until the music throws all restraint to the winds in a swirling dance-like romp to its breathless conclusion, interrupted only by more nose-thumbing musical jokes. Bravo!

© 2008 Steven Lowe