

Orlando Philharmonic 2005-06 “Phil at Carr Series III” - Classical Splendor:

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Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) – Scherzo a la Russe:

Igor Stravinsky is universally considered to be one of the greatest and most influential composers of the previous century. He was a dynamic innovator in a number of styles employing strikingly original harmonies, orchestrations, polytonalities, and rhythms. His styles ranged from Romanticism to Impressionism to Neoclassicism to Serialism to Jazz and even to Hollywood. The composer Nicholas Nabokov has written, “Despite his many twists and turns, Stravinsky became the unquestioned leader of Western music [in our time]. . . . Stravinsky and Schoenberg remain the lonely founding fathers of the strangely eccentric and highly anarchic state of modern music.”

Having spent the better part of his life in Russia and then in Europe, settling in Switzerland and later in France, he fled World War II. Approaching sixty years of age, he moved to America in 1939 and settled in Los Angeles. While there he spent time in the company of other notable émigrés and became familiar with the Hollywood entertainment industry. During the war, he saw commissions and performance royalties come to a screeching halt and so his income virtually dried up. To get back on his feet, Stravinsky looked for some sort of work. He practically figured that living in Hollywood, it made good sense for him to write some music for the cinema. Happily entering into various arrangements with movie producers, he gave Hollywood a go. However, none of the music he produced ever ended up in a movie. It didn't take Stravinsky long to realize that the exigencies of making a film would require that he make unacceptable concessions to his musical ideals and intentions.

Rather than waste his efforts, he reworked some of his film score attempts into various concert pieces. One of the most successful of these pieces was the *Scherzo a la Russe*. It was intended to be part of the soundtrack for *The North Star*, a movie made in response to President Roosevelt's desire that Hollywood produce some films to honor the Russian troops fighting the Nazis. The picture depicts the German invasion of a Ukrainian village and the heroic response of the town's citizens. The main part of the *Scherzo* was meant for the film, but its inclusion never came to pass (Copland ended up writing the score). In part to salvage his music and partly to satisfy a 1943 commission from jazz band leader Paul Whiteman, Stravinsky refashioned his *Scherzo* and scored it for jazz ensemble. Not panning out, however, a few years later Stravinsky had much better luck with another version written for symphony orchestra. It was given its premiere in 1946 by the San Francisco Symphony under his own direction.

With the unmistakable flavor of Stravinsky's native Russia, the *Scherzo a la Russe* may have been influenced by the composer's fond memories of the Russian carnivals visited as a child. Structurally, the work is made of three separate sections including the *Scherzo* proper and two *Trios*. The *Scherzo* is stated three times, occurring at the beginning and the end, and as separation for the two *Trios*. It is a bright and infectious tune based on a Russian dance song called “The Maids Went Walking in the Meadow.” The first *Trio* is a canon in close imitation, featuring ringing Oriental timbres sounded from the harp and piano and decorated with rapid passages by the solo violin. The second *Trio* was originally written as a “little chorus for children” and is based on two Russian songs strung together: “In My Little Garden” and “By the Brook, by the Bridge.”

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) – Piano Concerto No. 3 in C Major:

Andante - Allegro

Theme (Andantino) with Variations

Allegro ma non troppo

The chief merit of my life (or, if you prefer it, its chief inconvenience) has always been the search for originality in my own musical language. I abhor imitation and I abhor the familiar.

- Sergei Prokofiev

Only twelve years of age when he entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory, the precocious Sergei Prokofiev was the kind of student who would test the patience and mettle of any teacher. Even from an early age he would question tradition and seek to push boundaries. He challenged his instructors and gave them fits because of his refusal to accept the status quo. At the Conservatory he quickly became known as

an arrogant, rebellious composer of brash and unconventional “modern” music. He even challenged the likes of Rimsky-Korsakov and Liadov, arguing that he did not need academic rules. Nonetheless, he graduated with honors and won the Rubinstein Prize, the highest honor afforded to a pianist, for the performance of his own bouncy and brilliant Piano Concerto No. 1.

Although arrogance would eventually mature into confidence, throughout his life Prokofiev retained his insistence on finding an original voice. With the upheavals of the Bolshevik Revolution, Prokofiev feared that the unsympathetic policy-makers of the Central Committee of the Communist Party would stifle his creativity. So in 1918 the young virtuoso pianist and composer left his homeland for the West. What he thought would be a short trip abroad turned out to be an 18 year sojourn. The first two years were spent in the United States and the remaining years saw Prokofiev living mainly in Paris. Eventually he would succumb to homesickness and return to the Soviet Union in 1935, then in the grip of Stalinist Terror. This has to go down as one of the worst timed decisions ever made by a creative artist. During many of his remaining years, though sometimes revered by the public, he was subjected to continuous criticism from the government for not towing the party line. Like all composers, he was expected to write only heroic and programmatic music containing political propaganda. Brought before the Committee to account for his individuality, Prokofiev nonchalantly insulted it by turning his back when his indictment was read aloud. But the Committee’s brutal bullying eventually wore Prokofiev down. His natural optimistic attitude gave way to discouragement and he died a broken man, worn down by chronic heart troubles. His passing took place, ironically, just hours from Stalin’s death.

While living in France, Prokofiev completed his Piano Concerto No. 3 in 1921 while on vacation at St. Brevin-les-Pins in Brittany. Actually, the Concerto had been in gestation for quite some time. He took most of its main themes from material that had been accumulating over the span of a decade. But this is no patchwork piece of bits and pieces taken from here and there and awkwardly strung together. Rather, it is cast in the traditional three movement form and has achieved the status of being one of the 20th century’s greatest and most popular piano concertos.

The success of the concerto has much to do with its wonderful balance of the composer’s many stylistic signatures: a propulsive rhythmic energy, a steely percussive pulse, episodes of sardonic wit, an imaginative orchestral palette, and a warm lyrical heart. Since its premiere in Chicago in 1921 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Frederick Stock, with the composer as soloist, it has remained a favorite in the repertory and has tested the mettle of many a pianist since.

The first movement begins leisurely and quietly with the solo clarinet sounding a warm yet melancholy theme. The tempo soon quickens and the piano leaps in with the first subject, an *Allegro* of non-stop action that develops into a lively discussion involving piano and orchestra. With the texture thinning, a burlesque and piquant second theme is brought out to play by the woodwinds and pizzicato violins. Castanets add humor and a light touch to the proceedings. This is taken up by the piano and given a bravura treatment. Before we know it the *Allegro* returns and the pianist is off again running with a cascade of scale runs. The first and second subjects are recapitulated and the movement ends with a dashing crescendo.

In the second movement Prokofiev shifts gears and takes us to an emotional realm of beauty and depth. This movement offers us five variations on a sinuous theme. Prokofiev provides this description: “The theme is announced by the orchestra alone, *Andantino*. In the first variation, the piano treats the opening of the theme in quasi-sentimental fashion, and resolves into a chain of trills as the orchestra repeats the closing phrase. The tempo changes to *Allegro* for the second and third variations, and the piano has brilliant figures, while snatches of the theme are introduced here and there in the orchestra. In Variation IV the tempo is once again *andante*, and the piano and orchestra discourse on the theme in a quiet and meditative fashion. Variation V is energetic. It leads without pause into a restatement of the theme by the orchestra, with delicate chordal embroidery in the piano.”

In the final movement the bassoons and pizzicato strings galumph along and introduce the main theme. The piano then interrupts, which, as the composer Francis Poulenc aptly put it, “literally slaps the strings in the face.” The piano then acts like a rascal by inciting what Prokofiev characterized as “frequent differences of opinion as regards key” between orchestra and soloist. Following a climax, there is a yearning and somewhat melancholy theme introduced by the woodwinds and carried forward by the strings. Back comes the piano with a biting little tune, and is then promptly mocked by the winds. Who will win this “discussion”? The battle for ascendancy careens along and we are treated to new themes and ever shifting changes in mood and character. Pyrotechnics fly into the musical sky with Prokofiev allowing the main theme to reappear every now and then. Finally, we are swept over by a thrilling splash of sound as the pianist and orchestra struggle for supremacy to the very end.

While working on his Third Concerto, Prokofiev befriended the French symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont. After the composer introduced him to the work, the admiring poet put into verse his own vibrant impressions, ending with the lines:

*Prokofiev! Music and youth in bloom,
In you, the orchestra yearned for resonant summer
And the invincible Scythian strikes the tambourine of the sun.*

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

Allegro non troppo

Adagio non troppo

Allegretto graziosi

Allegro con spirito

Although the German composer Johannes Brahms wrote music imbued with intense passion, expressivity, and the fervor associated with late nineteenth century Romanticism, he often felt like a man who lived in an era after his own time. Not only did Brahms have a penchant for the forms and styles of the Classical and Baroque traditions, he actually felt rooted in them. When you think “Brahms,” what often comes to mind is music that goes so far as to epitomize the Romantic spirit. But never does Brahms drift afar from the discipline and structure of a Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven.

German music in the nineteenth century was basically split into two antagonistic factions. One side – the so called “progressive” – was headed by Richard Wagner, who endeavored to join art forms together into one unified roof under the name, “music drama.” The story provided the driving force behind how the music should be executed. The other camp – the so called “conservative” – was typified by Brahms, who adhered to established traditions and who had no desire to forge significantly new directions in music.

Wagner it could be argued was self-aggrandizing about his music, writing propaganda on where he thought music should be headed and interested in the past only in so far as it advanced his own agenda. Brahms, on the other hand, would just as soon talk about something else and let his music speak for itself. By so doing he reasoned that his musical aesthetic would be most convincingly argued. Wagner wrote almost exclusively for the musical stage while Brahms produced works almost entirely in the chamber and symphonic realms. The division is useful as a means of illuminating the two composers’ antithetical approaches to music.

Although Brahms never asked for it, he became anointed heir to Beethoven as the champion of “absolute music.” Brahms’ goal was to follow the concepts of the classicist while at the same time moving forward with music rich in lyricism and the personal expressiveness of his time. However, he strongly rejected ultra emotional and overtly programmatic paths and to some extent was daunted by the shadow of Beethoven. That it took him until his mid-forties to complete his First Symphony, a work with a very long gestation, demonstrates that he accepted Beethoven’s mantle with tremendous seriousness. In his words, “You don’t know what it’s like to be dogged by *his* footsteps.”

Brahms First Symphony turned out to be a sensational creation and he went on to write three more symphonic masterpieces, establishing him as the greatest symphonist not only of his time, but possibly *the* greatest of all since Beethoven. Characterized by deep lyrical beauty, impeccable craftsmanship, emotional gravity, and remarkable staying power, who has written more convincing and moving symphonies since Beethoven?

Having taken over twenty years for Brahms’ Symphony No. 1 to come to fruition, the following year saw a relieved composer who must have felt as though a gargantuan monkey had been taken of his back. In the summer of 1887, Brahms retreated 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 beauty and peace of these country surroundings so inspired Brahms that he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, “So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them.” In contrast to the long and painful birth of the First Symphony, thanks to the melody rich breezes of this setting the Symphony No. 2 took only four months to complete.

Not surprisingly, the Second is as sunny and warmly lyrical as his First had been stormy and dramatic. After its premiere in December of 1887 at a concert given by the Vienna Philharmonic under Hans Richter,

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.” It became only natural, then, that the symphony would find comparison with Beethoven’s Symphony No. 6. Critics were quick to point out the similarities and dubbed the Symphony No. 2 as the *Pastoral* of Brahms’ four symphonies.

Different in mood as Brahms’ first two symphonies are, however, both are equals in technical mastery. Each is rich in its own emotional vein and they share an inevitable structural logic driving the music forward. Remarkably sophisticated, much of Brahms Second Symphony’s thematic content is based on the three-note motive (D, C sharp, D) heard at the beginning of the *Allegro non troppo* in the low strings. This brief figure serves as the germ seed for what is to follow, manifesting itself in various guises in all of the symphony’s four movements. While the symphony is indeed leisurely in pace and relaxed in mood, it is interesting to observe that the Second is as tightly constructed as anything Brahms wrote and is a masterful integrated and concentrated symphony.

Following the several statements of the melodic kernel that begin the first movement, the French horns gently sing the principal theme. After a striking transition theme played by the violins, the violas and cellos then introduce the second theme. This theme bears some resemblance to the much-loved Brahms’ “Wiegenlied” (“Lullaby”). After both themes are developed and worked out, Brahms brings them back for the recapitulation. The movement ends placidly and largely undisturbed.

The second movement, *Adagio non troppo*, is the symphony’s most profound section and plumbs the deepest emotions. Although rich and complex in musical content, the movement is structured in simple three-part (ABA) form, with an interior section that softens the gravity of the outer two parts.

The third movement, *Allegretto grazioso*, is a delightful and lilting joining-together of a casual and laid-back intermezzo with a spry and mischievous scherzo. The form is organized in five parts as: intermezzo; scherzo (beginning as an accelerated version of the intermezzo); abbreviated repeat of the intermezzo; new scherzo cousin; intermezzo and coda.

Beginning in a hushed and dramatic fashion, the concluding *Allegro con spirito* overflows with the rhythmic energy and high spirits of a Haydn symphony. The melodies are new and distinctive, but with the same motto heard in previous movements appearing here as well, the symphony sounds satisfyingly unified and complete. While still preserving the work’s overall lyrical character, this *Allegro* is dynamic and joyous and serves as a wonderful climax to an extraordinary symphony.

Brahms’ Symphony No. 2 has had no shortage of champions over the years. The conductor Felix Weingartner pronounced it the finest of the four symphonies: “The stream of invention has never flowed so fresh and spontaneous in other works of Brahms, and nowhere else has he colored his orchestration so successfully.” Equally enthusiastic was the critic Olin Downes: “In his own way, and sometimes with long sentences, he formulates his thought, and the music has the rich chromaticism, depth of shadow and significance of detail that characterizes a Rembrandt portrait.”