NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2016

Zhang Conducts Beethoven's Seventh

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Prokofiev: Symphony No. 1, "Classical." "I intended to write a symphony as Haydn would have written had he lived in the 20th century," Prokofiev asserted. His modernist spin on traditional forms employs a small orchestra and keeps movements short. The harmonic vocabulary is tonal, with flashes of quirky wit. Haydn—a master of humor—would have been delighted!

Shostakovich: Piano Concerto No. 1. This piece's unusual instrumentation derives from its origins as a trumpet concerto. Eventually, piano superseded trumpet, but that brassy voice retained a central role, enhancing its character and audience appeal. The mood veers wildly from heroic to sly, from lyric to manic. Quotations from other composers and references to ragtime and jazz make it a joyous romp.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 7. Public, aggressive, decisive in its gestures and filled with boundless enthusiasm and exhilarating energy, the Seventh Symphony is one of Beethoven's most gregarious and optimistic compositions. Yet its Allegretto is among the most sublime and mysterious slow movements ever composed. Its second movement memorably underscores the powerful and emotional apex of the Oscar-winning film *The King's Speech*.

PROKOFIEV: Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25 ("Classical")

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born: April 23, 1891, in Sontzovka, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, USSR

Composed: 1916–17

World Premiere: April 21, 1918, in St. Petersburg; the composer conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1941–42 season; Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 13 minutes

In February 1917, Russian peasantry revolted against the Tsarist regime, overthrowing the Romanov dynasty in favor of a provisional government. Eight months later, the Bolsheviks replaced the provisional government, establishing Soviet rule in Russia and changing the face of world politics. During this tumultuous period, Prokofiev composed his First Symphony, a work miraculously free of any reference to the chaotic events transpiring at the time.

Prokofiev acknowledged his intention of writing a symphony such as Haydn might have composed had he lived in the 20th century. But his real challenge was to write without the piano. He intentionally removed himself from the keyboard, believing that melodies conceived without its aid were simply better melodies.

He also harbored the hope that, in dubbing the work "Classical," he might encourage it actually becoming a classic. In fact, that is exactly what happened—and with good reason. The symphony is a masterful achievement in economy of means. With small performing forces, miniature scale of movements and effective understatement, Prokofiev did indeed create a timeless masterpiece. His transparent clarity pays homage to the elegant 18th-century style of Haydn and Mozart; his ironic sense of humor and inventive modulations tie the work to our time.

Instrumentation: flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets and horns in pairs; timpani and strings.

SHOSTAKOVICH: Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 35

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born: September 25, 1906, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: August 9, 1975, in Moscow, Russia, USSR

Composed: March 6–July 20, 1933

World Premiere: October 15, 1933; Yevgeny Mravinsky conducted the Leningrad Philharmonic. Shostakovich was the soloist; Alexander Schmidt played the solo trumpet part.

NJSO Premiere: 1992–93 season. Hugh Wolff conducted; Emanuel Ax was the soloist.

Duration: 21 minutes

Laced with savage irony and technical fireworks, Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto is deservedly among the most famous of the Soviet composer's early compositions. Written when he was only 27, it reveals his youthful exuberance and personal keyboard style. Shostakovich himself performed the concerto frequently during the 1930s and 40s.

Much of its character derives from the unusual scoring for two solo instruments (piano and trumpet) plus string orchestra—something of a throwback to Baroque instrumental concertos. Shostakovich had been thinking about writing a trumpet concerto for Alexander Schmidt of the Leningrad Philharmonic. Although he abandoned that project, he salvaged his sketches for re-use in the piano concerto. The trumpet part is *concertante*: calling for soloistic display, but complementing the piano soloist without obscuring him. The trumpet is sufficiently prominent that Shostakovich customarily directed the trumpeter to stand stage front, adjacent to the piano.

Biographer Victor Seroff has written that this concerto "sounds as though it might have been written by a schoolboy with his cap set rakishly on the back of his head." His point is not musical immaturity but rather attitude. More recently, Ronald Stevenson has called the work "a celebration of the Russian circus." The trumpet is a key component of the sardonic tone that permeates the concerto and prompts such descriptions.

After a stately opening tinged with Russian melancholy, the pianist is off and running, dispatching rapid

passage work, octaves and other bravura writing. Shostakovich employs the trumpet for heroic touches in the first movement, with single notes or in fanfares, yet his sense of humor is never far off. Insolent trumpet licks provide commentary on the piano part.

The slow movement is a gentle waltz that remains lyrical nearly throughout. A luminous string theme opens the movement, providing a gracious introduction to the piano's entrance in octaves. Shostakovich's melodies are extended and meandering, building to surprising intensity at the climax. Once quiet and calm have reestablished themselves, the trumpet has a prominent solo, showing its warm and tender side. A sober dialogue between piano and strings brings the movement to a close.

An intermezzo—essentially an introduction to the precipitous conclusion—functions as third movement. Improvisatory piano writing and chorale-like passages for strings lead directly to the madcap finale. Sassy tunes prevail; we are in circus mode. Shostakovich quotes briefly from Bach, Weber, Haydn and Mahler—and tosses in some jazz licks for good measure. His solo piano cadenza takes a bow to Beethoven's "Rage over a Lost Penny."

On one level, the young composer was thumbing his nose at the establishment via this pastiche. His constantly changing musical landscape is also a reminder that Shostakovich spent much of his youth improvising at the piano in silent movie houses.

Instrumentation: strings, solo trumpet and solo piano.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1811–12

World Premiere: December 8, 1813, in Vienna

NJSO Premiere: 1934–35 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 36 minutes

If the string quartets are the realm in which Beethoven made his most profound philosophical observations, the nine symphonies were his venue for adventure, expansion and exploration of his musical language. Beethoven's orchestra grew gradually as his own ideas grew, and the sheer sound of the middle and late symphonies seems to beg for an expanded string section to deliver the power of his ideas. This concept of his music is, of course, a generalization. The more intimate and smaller-scale Eighth Symphony, for example, almost seems like a conscious look back over Beethoven's shoulder toward the 18th century. But the Eighth Symphony's companion piece, the Seventh Symphony in A Major (the two works were composed in 1811 and 1812, respectively; published with contiguous opus numbers and premiered within five days of each other in December 1813), is anything but intimate. Public, aggressive, decisive in its gestures and filled with boundless enthusiasm, it is one of Beethoven's most gregarious and optimistic compositions.

The Seventh Symphony falls into what Beethoven's biographer Maynard Solomon calls "the heroic decade." During this period—1802 to 1812—Beethoven wrote in a grand manner that melded elements of the Viennese symphonic tradition and the French orchestral style. French music of this era frequently bore a martial stamp. Among Beethoven's orchestral works, the Fifth Symphony is the easiest one in which to discern French "military" motifs, but in its day, the Seventh Symphony was strongly associated with the victory over Napoleon.

The Seventh opens with the lengthiest slow introduction of any Beethoven symphony. Music historian J.W.N. Sullivan has written of it: "The great introduction to the first movement seems to convey the

awakening and murmuring of the multitudinous life of an immense forest. Much more than in the 'Pastoral' Symphony do we feel here in the presence of Nature itself. It is life, life in every form, not merely human life, of which the exultation is here expressed." Exultation bursts forth in the ensuing Allegro, whose pronounced dotted rhythm dominates the entire fabric of the movement.

The Allegretto enjoyed enormous popularity in the 19th century and proved to be one of Beethoven's most influential compositions. Essentially a march, it is closely related to the slow-movement funeral march of the "Eroica" Symphony; among other similarities, it switches back and forth between the parallel major and minor (in this case A major and A minor), and it features triplet accompaniment in the contrasting trio sections. Beethoven emphasizes the string section in the minor sections and the woodwinds in the A-major parts. Combining elements of rondo, march and variation, he spins a remarkable tale from the simplest of means.

Beethoven's scherzo is a vibrant Presto in F major, the only case in the nine symphonies where he strays from his practice of using the tonic for this movement. He closes with a jubilant *Allegro con brio*, an overwhelmingly optimistic movement that captivates us with its distinctive flourish in its opening measures and a compelling rhythmic drive throughout. Indeed, rhythm is the most memorable feature of the Seventh Symphony, delivering Beethoven's personality more convincingly than the work's melodies do and setting in relief the understated calm of the unconventional slow movement.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani and strings.