

Thanksgiving Feast with Mozart & Schumann

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Smetana: *The Bartered Bride Overture*

A synthesis of Bohemian dances, folk tradition and real people in everyday situations made this 1866 opera immensely appealing. The zesty overture remains a landmark of 19th-century Czech music.

Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 21

Festive trumpets and timpani give the Allegro a ceremonial character: majesty with a light touch. A long, dreamy melody floats above gentle triplets in the Andante, which was used in the soundtrack to *Elvira Madigan*. Humor and confidence abound in the cheery finale.

Schumann: Symphony No. 2

Saluting both Haydn and Beethoven, Schumann allies himself firmly with his classical predecessors in his Second Symphony. The slow introduction theme recurs in the Allegro, and strings get a dazzling workout in the second-movement scherzo. Great melodies abound throughout, making this symphony arguably Schumann's greatest orchestral achievement.

SMETANA: *The Bartered Bride* Overture

BEDŘICH SMETANA

Born: March 2, 1824, in Litomyšl, Czechoslovakia

Died: May 12, 1884, in Prague

Composed: 1863–64

World Premiere: May 30, 1866, at Prague's Provisional Theatre

NJSO premiere: 1927–28 season; Philip James conducted.

Duration: 7 minutes

The exuberant opening chords of Smetana's *Bartered Bride* overture are so familiar that we can hardly imagine the world of orchestral music without them. Yet this overture and the opera it precedes were landmarks for the 19th century. *The Bartered Bride* was the pivotal work toward the foundation of a Czech national opera. It was also the first comic opera for Czechoslovakia, and it did much to spread Smetana's reputation outside his homeland. The strong hold it has taken in international opera houses and the immense popularity of the overture are even more remarkable when we consider that it was only the second opera Smetana had composed.

While visiting the German city of Weimar in 1857, Smetana took umbrage when a Viennese conductor made a disparaging remark about Czech composers. Conceding that Czechs were competent instrumental players, the fellow insisted that as composers they lacked individuality and national character. Incensed, Smetana determined to prove him wrong, and *The Bartered Bride* was the vehicle he chose as his proof.

The opera celebrates ordinary people in ordinary situations. One of Smetana's diary entries from 1865 reads: "I determined to try and see whether, if I succeeded in writing in a lighter style, I could not prove to all my opponents that I knew my way about very well in the minor musical forms, a thing they disputed, considering me to be too confirmed a Wagnerian to manage it. I sought also to preserve the national character of the music everywhere."

He *did* succeed admirably. Its brilliant overture has a folk flavor but no actual folk tunes. Smetana hints at the material used for the marriage contract in the second act of the opera, thus binding the overture thematically with the drama. But the overture stands independently, with vigorous, energetic music that celebrates the sheer joy of being alive. As such, it is fine tribute indeed to the ebullient spirit of Smetana's mid-19th-century homeland.

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani and strings.

MOZART: Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major, K. 467

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: February 1785

World Premiere: March 10, 1785, in Vienna

NJSO premiere: 1973–74 season. Henry Lewis conducted; Lorin Hollander was the soloist.

Duration: 29 minutes

Mozart and the piano concerto

No 18th-century composer was more central to the development of the piano concerto than Mozart. He was a natural: an immensely gifted keyboard player with an equally virtuosic command of violin who understood both the art and craft of orchestral composition. The remarkable development of his genius may be traced through his keyboard concertos, which, along with his operas, are regarded by most music lovers to represent the highest point of his achievement.

The conventional number of concertos for piano associated with Mozart is 27. Of those, the first seven are arrangements of works by other composers—sometimes a different composer for each

movement, in a sort of pastiche. They are likely the result of assignments that Mozart's father gave him to transfer keyboard sonatas to the orchestral realm, incorporating piano solo. The first original works date from the 1770s, when Mozart was still in Salzburg.

His move to Vienna in 1781 unleashed the richest period of his creativity, particularly in the areas of opera and the piano concerto. Seventeen concertos date from the Vienna years, concentrated in the first half of the decade. Beginning in 1782 and continuing through 1785, Mozart produced a steady stream of solo concertos that represent, collectively, one of western music's greatest achievements. Among those 17 was this weekend's concerto.

Mozart completed the great Piano Concerto in D minor, K. 466, and this one in C major, K. 467, within four weeks of one another. He often paired two works of like origin and genre that were different in their atmosphere and overall message. (Other such examples are the two piano quartets, K. 478 in G Minor and K. 493 in E-flat Major, and the late string quintets K. 515 in C Major and K. 516 in G Minor.) Where the D-minor piano concerto was passionate and stormy, the one in C major is resolute and positive, unflinching in the majesty and supreme control of its outer movements. Though the two works are almost exactly contemporary, they are spiritual opposites.

Mozart's concept of the piano concerto expanded in these two concerti, not only in length but also in his orchestration, which became more symphonic. The Andante from Piano Concerto No. 21 achieved pop-hit status because of its use in the soundtrack to Bo Widerberg's 1967 film *Elvira Madigan*. It is unique among Mozart concertos' slow movements. Gentle triplets pulsate beneath seamless, shimmering melody. The strings play with mutes, further sweetening the sound. Music critic and author Philip Radcliffe has written:

In this movement, if anywhere, Mozart can be seen as the forerunner of the 19th century. The dissonances in the second subject have the vivid foretaste of Schumann and the way in which they gently melt into the major key is equally prophetic of Schubert. The variety of phrase-lengths gives a fascinatingly rhapsodic feeling to the music, and there is much unobtrusive skill in the way in which the background of throbbing triplets is shifted periodically from one tone-

color to another.

The finale returns to the grandeur of the opening movement—perhaps with a touch of mischief, but equally bright, assertive and confident in its demeanor. Mozart’s balance of superb orchestral writing, brilliant pianistic passages and delicate woodwind commentary is masterful.

Soloist Inon Barnatan plays his own cadenza in the first movement and the late Romanian pianist Dinu Lipatti’s cadenza for the finale.

Instrumentation: flute; oboes, bassoons, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani; strings and solo piano.

LENTEN SUBSCRIPTION SERIES

In our society, a subscription concert series means an advance commitment to designated afternoons or evenings during a concert season. Usually, such series are linked by common performers and the same venue.

Mozart appears to have been a pioneer in organizing such series during his first years in Vienna. The concerts were closer to what we would call salon performances. They took place between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, when normal operatic and theatrical activity was forbidden by the powerful Catholic Church. Such Lenten-season concerts included various pieces Mozart had composed, including vocal and instrumental music, both chamber and orchestral. The first concerted keyboard work to be presented on an early spring subscription was the Rondo-Variations in D Major, K. 382, for piano and orchestra. Mozart himself was the soloist. Of the 27 numbered piano concertos, those from No. 11 in F Major, K. 413, through No. 25 in C Major, K. 503, were composed for Lenten subscription series from 1783 to 1787.

Some of these concerts were in private homes belonging to Mozart’s wealthy students or aristocratic patrons. Others were in more public arenas such as Vienna’s Kärntnerthortheater and Burgtheater. In March 1785, the Viennese press announced a Burgtheater event:

On Thursday, 10th March 1785

Herr Kapellmeister *Mozart*

will have the honour of giving at the

I.&R. National Court Theatre

a Grand Musical Concert

for his benefit, at which not only a *new*, but just *finished Forte piano Concerto* will be played by him, but also an especially large *Forte piano pedale* will be used by him in *improvising*. The remaining pieces will be announced by the large poster on the day itself.

The concerto Mozart played for this event was the C-major work that Inon Barnatan plays this weekend; the rest of the program is unknown. As for the pedal instrument, Leopold Mozart mentions it in his letters, and it was listed in the inventory of Mozart's possessions when he died, but the apparatus has not survived.

SCHUMANN: Symphony No. 2 in C Major, Op. 61

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born: June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Saxony, Germany

Died: July 29, 1856, in Endenich, near Bonn, Germany

Composed: 1845–46

World Premiere: November 5, 1846, in Leipzig. Mendelssohn conducted the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

NJSO premiere: 1974–75 season; Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 34 minutes

The best of Schumann, by general consensus, is found in his solo piano music, which is largely concentrated among his very early works. As he aged, the mental illness that eventually took his life began to affect his work habits and concentration. Consequently, while there are some treasures among the works from the later 1840s and even the early 1850s, most of the poetic genius that we so

revere in his music is to be found among the youthful keyboard compositions.

Obviously Schumann's wife, the gifted pianist and composer Clara Wieck, wielded a powerful influence on her husband. But their marriage in 1840 seems to have somehow freed Schumann to explore other avenues of expression for his ideas. First in song, then in chamber music, and eventually in large orchestral compositions, he sought outlets for the unceasing stream of melody that swirled through his troubled brain.

Those who criticize Schumann's symphonies take issue with his lack of formal control and the inappropriateness of his intimate style for the more public medium of the orchestra. Partly because of these allegations, Schumann's symphonies are less frequently programmed than those of his contemporaries and friends Mendelssohn and Brahms. Over the years, the Second Symphony has fallen in and out of favor. Listening to it, one is hard-pressed to fathom why we do not hear it more often. It has nobility, a formal integrity rare in mature Schumann and brilliant touches sprinkled throughout, both in melodies and in scoring.

Although it is numbered second, the C-major symphony was actually the third that Schumann composed. The D-minor symphony, Op. 120, preceded it, but Schumann revised it 10 years later and published it long after the work we hear at these performances. (Op. 61 is actually contemporary with the energetic Overture, Scherzo and Finale, Op. 52.) The Second Symphony finds its primary models in Haydn, Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

The symphony opens with a mini-fanfare: a rising fifth in dotted rhythm, delivered by the trumpets to inaugurate a slow introduction. Simultaneously with this affirmative gesture—whose motive recurs throughout the symphony—the strings provide commentary and accompaniment with a questioning, uncertain and exploratory idea in singular contrast to the proud brass. Right away, in the opening measures, we hear the inherent conflict and duality that characterizes so much of Schumann's music, and in microcosm describes the panoply of moods he explores in his four movements.

Schumann's slow introduction leads to a lively Allegro ma non troppo dominated by dotted rhythm. His aggressive rhythmic profile proclaims the victory of the positive brass theme over the doleful intonations from the strings. The development section is fraught with warring elements, little dramas both public and private, as Schumann wrestles with the shadow play of dark and light implied in his opening bars. His recapitulation is fiercely affirmative, with a splendid, virile climax.

The Scherzo, placed second as in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, is a virtuoso *perpetuum mobile* for strings. Nervous and fleet, it communicates an undercurrent of driven energy more motor-like than elfin. He balances the frenetic stream of 16th notes by interpolating two contrasting trios instead of one.

Schumann's slow movement is a standout, calling forth the most soulful and melancholic side of his nature. In addition to a mournful bassoon solo, Schumann also casts special spotlights on oboe and clarinet, and provides a deliciously romantic moment for horn. The Adagio reaches its climax on a spine-tingling series of violin trills that have enormous effect.

Following the spectacular success of the two inner movements, the finale has strong echoes of the slow movement theme, plus an emphasis on dotted rhythms that harks back to the opening movement. English scholar Brian Schlotel has written of its unusual form:

The chief structural novelty of this movement is that the development and recapitulation are telescoped together. There may well be no precedent for what Schumann does here.

Development and recapitulation proceed by *alternation*; that is, Schumann moves back and forth, from one to the other, as if to unfold them as simultaneously as possible. There follows a huge coda of 300 bars, longer than all the rest of the movement.

The enormous coda—longer than everything that preceded it—is all positive affirmation, a valiant declaration of victory over any doubts or shadows cast earlier.

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