

# Winter Festival: Zukerman Performs Bach

## ONE-MINUTE NOTES

### **Bach: Violin Concerto No. 2**

Marvelous give and take between soloist and orchestra make this exuberant concerto soar. Bach was a virtuoso violinist as well as organist, and his mastery comes through in brilliant, melodic writing.

### **Schoenberg: *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night)**

No 12-tone music here! This is ravishing late romantic extravagance inspired by a poem. Love conquers all in this gorgeous, uplifting work.

### **Beethoven: Symphony No. 3, “Eroica”**

Concise motives are building blocks for the heroic first movement. The *Marcia funebre* is a somber affair, with the oboe as soloist. Beethoven limits himself to one theme in the scherzo, but puts it through its paces. Horns have a section solo in the “hunting call” trio. Beethoven used the famous finale theme for two other sets of variations.

## BACH: Violin Concerto No. 2 in E Major, BWV 1042

### JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

**Born:** March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany

**Died:** July 28, 1750, in Leipzig, Germany

**Composed:** before 1730; the exact date is uncertain

**World Premiere:** Undocumented, but probably in Leipzig in the 1720s

**NJSO Premiere:** 2000–01 season. Zdenek Macal conducted; Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg was the soloist.

**Duration:** 19 minutes

Bach's E-major Violin Concerto is a companion piece to the well-known A-minor Violin Concerto, BWV 1041. The chronology of both works is uncertain: possibly from 1717–23, the years during which Bach worked for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen; but perhaps a bit later: from his early years in Leipzig. Technical challenges in both concertos attest to Bach's own mastery of the violin.

E major is an extremely bright key for violin, a factor that Bach exploited fully in this concerto's jubilant outer movements. An assertive ascending triad anchors the opening Allegro, introducing 11 measures of material rich enough to provide the motivic basis for the entire movement. The structure parallels the *da capo* aria: a repeat of the opening section after a contrasting middle episode.

Melodically, the slow movement is the most elaborate. Bach anchors it by use of a repeated, chaconne-like figure in the lower strings. Rhythmic steadiness finds a foil in the capricious, ornate and expressive violin line. The simultaneous precision and grace of his writing takes one's breath away.

The finale is a concerto-grosso movement with a French accent, pointing to the later 18th-century *rondeau*. Solo violin dominates the episodes between the full orchestra ritornello passages. A lively 3/8 meter keeps our feet tapping, and the introduction of rapid triplets, 32nd notes and virtuosic passagework gives the soloist a final opportunity to shine.

*Instrumentation: strings, continuo and solo violin.*

## **SCHOENBERG: *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night), Op. 4**

### **ARNOLD SCHOENBERG**

**Born:** September 13, 1874, in Vienna, Austria

**Died:** July 13, 1951, in Los Angeles, California

**Composed:** Original for string sextet, September 1899. Orchestrated 1917; revised 1943.

**World Premiere:** March 18, 1902

**NJSO Premiere:** 1992–93 season; Pinchas Zukerman conducted.

**Duration:** 32 minutes

Schoenberg was only 25 when he composed *Verklärte Nacht*. Considering his astonishing influence on 20th-century music during the remaining 52 years of his life, *Verklärte Nacht* is a fascinating youthful work. Schoenberg abandoned tonality in 1908, and listeners correctly identify him with the invention of the 12-tone system. *Verklärte Nacht* is thus an aural surprise, for it is firmly entrenched in the 19th century. Its harmonic language is rich and lush—in many places unabashedly Wagnerian—and the thematic material highly expressive and impassioned.

The piece was inspired by a romantic poem of Richard Dehmel, which describes a conversation between a man and woman walking together in a moonlit forest. She confesses that she is carrying another man's child, having sought fulfillment in motherhood, if not happiness, prior to meeting her present lover. He responds with forgiveness, asserting that their love will transfigure the child, making it issue of their union.

Cast in a single extended movement, Schoenberg's music subdivides into five sections that are closely related to the poetic structure. The slow introduction, for example, depicts the somewhat foreboding natural beauty of the forest at night. The exquisite coda illustrates the ecstasy of love and forgiveness inspired by nature's radiance. In between, the woman's agitated confession, an animated transition

and the man's generous response give *Verklärte Nacht* its logic and formal continuity.

*Instrumentation: strings.*

#### **POETRY AND CHAMBER MUSIC: A NEW CONCEPT**

*Verklärte Nacht* was originally composed for string sextet (two violins, two violas and two cellos). Schoenberg arranged it for string orchestra in 1917. He returned to the piece in 1943, revising the string-orchestra version. The work is a direct descendant of the 19th-century large scale symphonic tone poems of Liszt and Richard Strauss. Schoenberg's inspiration was a poem by Richard Dehmel (1863–1920), a German lyric poet influenced by naturalism, expressionism and the philosophy of Nietzsche.

*Verklärte Nacht* established a new genre of program chamber music by virtue of its association with the Dehmel poem. Schoenberg was nevertheless a proponent of absolute music, and his careful attention to large-scale musical architecture, contrapuntal intricacy and integrity of form would assure *Verklärte Nacht* a prominent place in the musical literature without its provocative program.

A paraphrase of Dehmel's text follows:

Two mortals walk through a cold barren grove  
in a cloudless moonlit night.

The woman speaks:

She confesses that she is with child and that  
he is not its father.

She had lost belief in happiness and,  
longing for fulfillment in motherhood,  
had abandoned herself to a stranger.

But life has avenged itself on her  
now that she has met the man she loves.

She stumbles on, her dark face lighted  
by the moon which follows her.

The man speaks:

"Let the child be no burden to you.

See how the universe glistens.”  
Together they float on a cold sea,  
But a flame from each warms the other.  
It too will transfigure the child and  
she will bear the child to him  
For she has kindled the flame in him  
and made him too unto a child.  
He holds her fast, their breath kisses in the air.  
Two mortals walk through the high, bright night.  
– *Richard Dehmel*

## BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 (“Eroica”)

### LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

**Born:** December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

**Died:** March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

**Composed:** Summer 1802 to early 1804

**World Premiere:** probably privately in 1804, in Prince Lobkowitz’s palace. Beethoven conducted the first public performance on April 7, 1805, in the Theater an der Wien.

**NJSO Premiere:** 1928–29 season. Philip James conducted; Mischa Elman was the soloist.

**Duration:** 47 minutes

During the 18th and 19th centuries, certain keys were associated with specific ideas. Nobility of spirit—specifically the nobility of heroism—was a quality linked with the key of E flat. When Beethoven began his Third Symphony, Napoleon Bonaparte was First Consul of France and embarking upon the political expansion that was to place his name among the greatest military leaders in history. Beethoven idealized Napoleon, perceiving him as the hero of revolutionary France, and planned to dedicate the symphony to the French leader. The work’s original subtitle was “Bonaparte.”

When Napoleon declared himself Emperor in May 1804, Beethoven exploded in protest. According to his assistant Ferdinand Ries, he cried out: “Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man and indulge only his ambition. He will exalt himself above all others, become a tyrant.”

He then tore the title page of his new symphony in pieces. When he recopied it, he wrote “Sinfonia eroica.” Vienna’s Bureau des Arts et d’Industrie published it in 1806 with a dedication to Prince Lobkowitz and the subtitle “To celebrate the memory of a great man.”

“Eroica” means “heroic” in Italian, and the symphony is monumental in every sense. When Beethoven completed it in summer 1803, it was the longest symphony ever written. The “Eroica” was pivotal in Beethoven’s development not only as a symphonist but also as a composer. With this one work, he divested many 18th-century conventions and vaulted forward into uncharted territory.

Two *fortissimo* chords announce immediately that we are to sit up and take notice; this is *not* background music. More than two centuries later, their effect is still electrifying, setting the tone for the entire work. Several features distinguish the sonata form first movement from its predecessors. The development section is exceedingly long—the longest in Beethoven, in fact—and, directly after its climax, introduces an entirely new theme for flute and oboe, in the remote key of E minor. (Beethoven recalls that theme in the recapitulation, where it becomes the subject of a coda so extensive that it nearly matches the development in length.)

Just prior to the recapitulation, when we expect the restatement of the main theme, pianissimo violin tremolos make the very air pregnant with anticipation. Perhaps the most famous “wrong note” in all Beethoven then occurs: French horn states the opening triadic figure. Beethoven, however, has fooled us: the horn entrance is intentionally premature. Full orchestra drives home his cadence with two measures of decisive, fortissimo dominant-seventh chords before resolving to the home tonality of E-flat major. The horns’ false entrance, a sort of acoustic pre-echo, is clearly marked in Beethoven’s hand in the autograph. Yet many listeners assumed that it was an error. The more we hear this symphony, however, the more certain we are that Beethoven knew precisely what he was doing. Every note of this symphony is calculated for maximum effect.

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to the famous slow movement march as “a funeral

procession in deep purple.” It salutes the unnamed deceased hero of the title and contains one of the great oboe solos in the orchestral repertoire. Beethoven also provided rich material for bassoon and flute. In the quasi-military section in major mode, we can hear intimations of the Fifth Symphony, which would follow the “Eroica” by four years. Timpani is a powerful presence in this slow movement, functioning both as bass and even occasionally as a melodic instrument, rather than mere punctuation.

After a whirlwind scherzo that reduces three beats to one per measure (and features the entire horn section in its Trio), Beethoven ices his cake with variations. The theme, actually a double theme consisting of bass line and melody, was familiar to Viennese audiences from Beethoven’s ballet score, *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1800). Nobility of spirit, capricious humor, funeral march, fugue, poignant tenderness: all these and more find their way into Beethoven’s cosmic finale, his ultimate tribute to the unnamed hero.

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