NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2019

Art of the Double Concerto

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Weber: Overture to *Oberon*

Weber is the seminal figure in German romantic opera. His opera overtures show him at his symphonic best. From *Oberon*'s opening horn call, Weber uses orchestral color with brilliance, imagination and compelling narrative sweep.

Steven Mackey: *Four Iconoclastic Episodes*

Steven Mackey is himself an iconoclast, regularly deploying his own instrument—electric guitar—in unexpected classical context. Violin and electric guitar make surprisingly good duet partners in *Four Iconoclastic Episodes*, with salutes to John McLaughlin, African folk instruments, Radiohead and Chicago blue.

Bach: Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor

The "Bach Double," as musicians call it, is the perfect fusion of Italian concerto style with German contrapuntal technique. All three movements show Bach's prodigious gifts for melody and clear structure. Listen for the intricate interweaving of the two soloists' lines.

Beethoven: *Leonore* Overture No. 3

Leonore is the heroine's real name in Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*. The Overture's slow introduction uses the theme of the hero's big aria. The trumpet call at the climax signals that help is on the way. Beethoven's brilliant coda assures us that this drama will resolve happily.

WEBER: Overture to *Oberon*

CARL MARIA VON WEBER

Born: November 18 or 19, 1786, in Eutin, near Lübeck, Germany

Died: June 5, 1826, in London, England

Composed: Spring 1826. Weber completed the overture three days before the opera's premiere.

World Premiere: April 12, 1826, at London's Covent Garden Theatre

NJSO Premiere: 1953–54 season. Samuel Antek conducted.

Duration: 9 minutes

Carl Maria von Weber is one of the most underrated composers in all music. A brilliant pianist, he wrote splendid solo and concerted keyboard music, including the celebrated *Invitation to the Dance*, Op. 260 (1819). Among German romantic composers, no one had a greater impact on the development of an independent German style of opera. Above all, Weber was a master of the orchestra, composing with assurance, formal control and imagination. His orchestral music bubbles over with delightful themes.

Virtually all of Weber's opera overtures have become orchestral concert staples. *Oberon* (1826), his final operatic score, contains some of his finest music. Weber revised it extensively and repeatedly while rehearsals were in progress. Sadly, his first audiences did not appreciate his efforts. They compared the opera unfavorably with his earlier triumph, *Der Freischütz* (1821).

Posterity has been far more generous in reassessing *Oberon.* Weber's biographer John Warrack considers its overture to be Weber's orchestral masterpiece.

The movement is in sonata form with a slow introduction. Within that time-honored framework, Weber evokes the magic and exoticism of his tale, which borrows the characters Oberon, Titania and Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and transports them to Baghdad in search of a faithful mortal couple. If we consider the overture's introduction as an evocation of Oberon's enchanted domain, and

the balance as the adventure-packed plot (it includes the theme from the principal soprano aria), we have the entire opera in glorious microcosm.

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

MACKEY: *Four Iconoclastic Episodes*

STEVEN MACKEY

Born: February 14, 1956, in Frankfurt, Germany

Composed: 2009

World Premiere: October 29, 2009, in Limerick, Ireland, with Anthony Marwood, Steven Mackey and the Irish Chamber Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: Summer 2017. Eric Wyrick and Steven Mackey were the soloists; JoAnn Falletta conducted.

Duration: 21 minutes

It's not your average composer who writes a concerto for electric guitar and orchestra (*Tuck and Roll,* 2000). Nor one who did not discover classical music until his teens—a time when many young virtuosos are launching careers. Steven Mackey has taken an unusual route to his current status as one of America's foremost composers.

Mackey was born to American parents stationed in Germany. He grew up in Northern California playing guitar in rock bands, and acknowledges his roots in rock 'n' roll and blues. During his teenage years, his interests expanded to jazz, fusion and, eventually, classical. In college at UC-Davis, he studied guitar and lute, then took up formal study of composition at SUNY Stony Brook. He completed his education at Brandeis, where he earned a doctorate in 1985. That year, he was appointed to the Princeton faculty; in 1993, he became a professor.

Other American composers have adapted elements of rock into their music—Christopher Rouse and John Adams come to mind—but Mackey's perspective is unique. The bent pitches of electric guitar, for example, play a role in many of his works. "I am fascinated by the sensation of movement in composition," he has written. "Journey metaphors are often aptly applied to my music. I'm interested … in transformation, for a sense that something—the material, me, the listener—is changed by the journey. As a result, my music tends to be a one-way trip."

"My experience as an electric guitarist influences all my music, even those pieces that don't include guitar. On one level it's subconscious; I have a physical connection from cutting my teeth on Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin. I've tried to emulate the guitar in my orchestral works."

The double concerto that he and NJSO concertmaster Eric Wyrick play grew out of Mackey's collaboration with British violinist Anthony Marwood, whom he met in 2003. "Anthony responded to the sonic alchemy of electric guitar and violin," Mackey says. Over the next several years, his double concerto came to fruition. The movement titles reflect the explicit diversity of his influences in *Four Iconoclastic Episodes*.

He identifies "Like an Animal" as an homage to John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, a seminal jazz/rock/fusion group from the early 1970s. "Salad Days" was a response to hearing some African popular music on the car radio. "The sound of traditional African instruments—kora, which is plucked string; mbira, a thumb piano; and some kind of harp—lit a fire under me," he recalls. "I thought I could get my guitar to have some of that bright, joyous expression."

His third episode was a response to Radiohead's "Pyramid Song." "Their song begins with rhythmically disorienting chords that seem to be in random places," explains Mackey. "As the song evolves, without those chords changing, they now fit into a grid because of the surrounding context. The specifics of my 'Lost in Splendor' are different, but it plays with this idea of apparent rhythmic chaos or randomness, but providing a context that makes it seem quite sensible.

“I tried to infuse ‘Destiny’ with some of the elements of a slow Chicago blues in 12/8,” he continues. “I grew up with blues and rock music; that music is mother’s milk to me. Again, the specifics are different, but something about the rhythmic feel is indebted to Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf.” Although duet passages for violin and electric guitar occur in all four of the episodes, “Destiny” has the most extended unaccompanied duet, approximating a cadenza.

STEVEN MACKEY AND THE NJSO

The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra doesn’t often invite an electric guitarist to appear as soloist. But Steven Mackey is no ordinary electric guitarist. This polymath of a composer defies stereotypes—if there even *is* a stereotype of what today’s composer looks like, or says. We live in a world with multifarious cultures, each of which has its own musical traditions. Within a given culture, those traditions span the territory from sacred to secular, popular to traditional, sung and played (or both). Mackey was a pioneer in combining electric guitar with string quartet, orchestra and other ensembles associated with traditional classical music.

Mackey has written for all manner of musical ensembles, not only those that use his own instrument. And his history with the NJSO extends back nearly three decades, to when the orchestra performed his *Square Holes, Round Pegs* in its 1989–90 season. The next collaboration took place in 2003–04, when it played his *Lost and Found*. Pianist Orli Shaham was the soloist in the East Coast premiere of Mackey’s piano concerto, *Stumble to Grace*, in May 2013.

By then, the NJSO had embarked on its long collaboration with Princeton University, which established the NJSO Edward T. Cone Composition Institute for emerging composers. Mackey was appointed Institute Director. In that capacity, he oversaw and participated in performances of his *Urban Ocean* in 2015; *Turn the Key* in 2016, this weekend’s *Four Iconoclastic Episodes* at the 2017 Institute, and “Echoes” from *Mnemosyne’s Pool* in 2018.

This extensive history means that the Orchestra has both familiarity with Mackey’s music and a strong

rapport with him as a performing musician. That is a good recipe for successful collaboration. These performances promise to be exhilarating experiences for orchestra, soloists and audiences alike.

Instrumentation: strings, solo violin electric guitar.

BACH: Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor, BWV 1043

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Born: March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany

Died: July 28, 1750, in Leipzig, Germany

Composed: Probably between 1717 and 1723, but possibly as late as 1731.

World Premiere: Undocumented, but possibly in Cöthen circa 1720.

NJSO Premiere: 1923–24 season. Albert Stoessel and Julia Pickard Stoessel were the soloists; Philip James conducted.

Duration: 17 minutes

Between 1717 and 1723, Bach was employed by Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, a music-loving nobleman from an area northeast of Weimar in what used to be called East Germany. The position was rather similar to the one that Haydn was to hold with the Esterházy family later on in the century. When Bach was engaged as Kapellmeister, Leopold's court boasted one of the largest and finest orchestras in Europe. Bach composed a considerable amount of instrumental music for the Cöthen musicians, including most of his solo concertos.

Bach was very interested in the Italian style of concerto writing, particularly the works of Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741). He studied Vivaldi's music avidly, sometimes copying the scores to develop greater familiarity with the style. It is no surprise that the D-minor concerto for two violins reflects certain Italian Baroque characteristics.

The three movements adhere to the Vivaldian model of fast-slow-fast tempi. Bach makes extensive use

of sequences and contrast between full orchestra (ripieno) and his solo group (concertino, in this case the two violins). The presence of two soloists highlights the contrapuntal intricacy of Bach's texture. Their entrances are frequently canonic; he also makes use of invertible counterpoint, whereby the two voices exchange material, maintaining the integrity of each contrapuntal line.

The slow movement, an elegant F-major cantilena in gently rocking 12/8 meter, has particular melodic beauty. Once again, invertible counterpoint plays a significant role, but it is the suspended harmonies that enhance the operatic expressivity of this Largo.

A stormy, aggressive opening motive sets the tone for Bach's finale, which distances itself from the dance-like finales of his solo concertos. Indeed, the relationship between concertino and ripieno is practically reversed here. The orchestra shares in the densely overlapped principal statement, a close canon that functions as a ritornello. Twice in the course of the movement, both soloists play several measures repeated double-stops in steady eighth notes. Together, they form a chordal accompaniment to the sequential gestures the orchestra is tossing about. Bach's abundant melodic material attests to his power of imagination.

This double concerto was extremely popular throughout the 19th century, after the "Bach revival" spearheaded by Felix Mendelssohn took hold. It remains one of Bach's best-loved instrumental compositions.

Instrumentation: strings, continuo and two solo violins.

BEETHOVEN: *Leonore* Overture No. 3, Op. 72b

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1805–06

World Premiere: March 29, 1806, at the Theater-an-der-Wien, Vienna.

NJSO Premiere: 1943–44 season. Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 14 minutes

Beethoven regarded opera as something of a bully pulpit for high moral values. When he chose an opera libretto, his selection was eminently moral: a play about the triumph of good over evil, the power of love and marital fidelity.

His opera, *Fidelio*, was originally titled *Leonore, or the Triumph of Married Love*, after a French play by Jean-Nicolas de Bouilly. The plot concerns Florestan, who has been secretly imprisoned for political reasons. His wife Leonore suspects where he is being held. She disguises herself as a youth, Fidelio, so that she can take a job working for the chief jailer in that prison and possibly rescue him.

Fidelio occupied Beethoven intermittently for more than a decade, from 1803 to 1814. It caused him as much anguish as anything else he wrote. He overhauled its overture three times. Fortunately for us, the results were magnificent. Four splendid overtures exist for *Fidelio*, and all have remained in the repertoire. *Leonore* Overture No. 3 is widely regarded to be the best of the four, however, and one of Beethoven's most impressive symphonic movements.

Although it is a perfectly acceptable independent symphonic movement, the overture is intimately tied to the drama that inspired it, and it borrows some of the opera's melodies. For example, the slow introduction uses the hero Florestan's second-act aria. The main theme of the Allegro, however, is independent of the opera.

The climax of the overture is also borrowed from the stage action: an offstage trumpet call that signals the arrival of the Minister of State, just in time to prevent the evil Don Pizarro from stabbing Florestan. Never one to underestimate the power of effective drama, Beethoven repeats the trumpet call before resuming the forward motion of the overture.

Following a brief reference to a song of thanksgiving from the opera, Beethoven sweeps us along in a torrent with a breathtaking presto section that brings the movement to a triumphant close.