

Xian Zhang Conducts Brahms

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Dorothy Chang: *Northern Star*

Dorothy Chang composed *Northern Star* for the Calgary Philharmonic, which commissioned the piece in 2017 as the fourth segment of the *True North: Symphonic Ballet* project, a collaboration in honor of Canada's sesquicentennial. An Illinois native, Chang splits her time between Indiana and Vancouver, British Columbia, serving on two university faculties. *Northern Star* follows a basic trajectory from darkness to light, from an atmosphere of psychological darkness to one of optimism. The magic of her orchestration captivates the ear. With subtle and skillful reliance on harp, piano and orchestral percussion, she spins a weightless, shimmering atmosphere of sound to open the work. As the rest of orchestra weaves its way into the texture, one senses a kinship to the large orchestral scores of Ravel and Debussy, yet Chang's musical narrative is completely personal.

Richard Strauss: *Burleske in D Minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 11*

Strauss' *Burleske* was composed in the 1880s and had its first performance in 1890. Not quite yet the turn of the century, this was the heyday of late romanticism: decadent romanticism, if you will. The *Burleske* is an example of romanticism's emphasis on the individual, celebrating virtuosity for its own sake. Strauss imbues his score with sly winks, making just a little bit of fun of that very tradition. A burlesque is, by definition, playful in character; comical and sometimes satirical. Burlesques have distinct associations with low-brow entertainment, flirting with—but not descending to—questionable taste. Even this early in his career, Strauss had grace, sophistication and enough humor to laugh at himself and his own culture. In the process, he bequeathed a delightful work that is an engaging alternative to the war horses of the piano concerto literature.

Johannes Brahms: *Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98*

Rounding out this meaty program is Johannes Brahms' final symphony: the *Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op.*

98. At once darkly tragic and profoundly human, this is a work one returns to with the thrill of rediscovery, so rich and layered are its messages. Brahms is often cited as the late 19th-century epitome of absolute music: music for its own sake, music absent of any programmatic association. Yet this Fourth Symphony breathes with passion, regret, nostalgia, determination and a myriad of other emotions and sensations. The gentle second movement starts in the ancient Phrygian mode, then restates the same theme in major mode. Try keeping track of the variations in the finale. There are 30 of them—but each one passes fairly quickly. Their quixotic moods remind us that this man Johannes Brahms was not only a great composer, but also a person with joys and sorrows like the rest of us.

Dorothy Chang: *Northern Star*

Dorothy Chang

Born: November 12, 1970, in Winfield, Illinois

Composed: 2017

World Premiere: 27 October 2017 in Calgary, Alberta. Gary Kulesha conducted the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances are the New Jersey Symphony premiere.

Duration: 7 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (wooden chimes, mark tree, two suspended cymbals, glockenspiel, crotales, chimes, triangle, tam tam, bass drum, chime, vibraphone), harp, piano, celeste and strings.

Dorothy Chang was drawn to music early, starting piano lessons at age six. She began composing when she was 14 and has never looked back. She majored in music composition at the University of Michigan, earning both her bachelor's and master's degrees there. She completed her education with a doctorate at Indiana University's prestigious Jacobs School of Music. Currently she serves on the faculties of Indiana State University and, since 2003, at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Chang has garnered awards including a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, ASCAP, the International Alliance for Women in Music, Meet the Composer and the Aspen Music Festival, among others. She has been widely commissioned by orchestras in the United States and Canada, including the inaugural commission from the Women's Philharmonic Commissioning Project of Meet the Composer. Her catalog now comprises more than 70 works for solo instruments, chamber ensembles and orchestra. She is keenly interested in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary projects and has contributed to theater, dance and video projects.

Northern Star falls into this interdisciplinary category. Commissioned by the Calgary Philharmonic in 2017, the piece was intended as the fourth segment of the *True North: Symphonic Ballet* project, a large-scale

collaboration in honor of Canada's sesquicentennial celebration. Its Calgary premiere took place with dancers on stage with the orchestra; however, the piece functions well as an independent orchestral work. Chang has written:

Northern Star begins in a place of darkness in the aftermath of war and destruction. The piece centers on the North Star as the shining light that gradually emerges and brightens, illuminating the way from brokenness back to humanity. The essence of *Northern Star* is the original narrative created by choreographer Yukichi Hattori; his beautifully poetic description inspired the writing of this piece. An excerpt from his notes reads: "[The movement] will start with the mourning of the fallen. Blood red leaves in the Autumn and their demise . . . sense of loss, complete darkness. Then the north star shining bright to guide our way, [and] we see all the beauty that lives among us. Shimmering stars, fireflies that are believed to be the souls of the deceased, dew drops on the trees reflecting the faint light source, and the dark night sky that swallows everything . . . This movement is meant to emphasize reflection on the inner self. True enlightenment comes from within."

Chang's music richly delivers this evocative scenario. While *Northern Star* follows a basic trajectory from darkness to light, from a place of psychological darkness to one of optimism, it is the magic of her orchestration that captivates the ear. With subtle and skillful reliance on harp, piano and orchestral percussion, she spins a weightless, shimmering atmosphere of sound to open the work. As the rest of orchestra weaves its way into the texture, one senses a kinship to the large orchestral scores of Ravel and Debussy, yet Chang's musical narrative is completely personal. Even at forte moments, the orchestra still sounds delicate in her hands. This is music that reveals more of its mystery and enchantment with repeated hearings.

Richard Strauss: *Burleske in D Minor for Piano & Orchestra, Op. 11*

Richard Strauss

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch, Germany

Composed: 1885–86

World Premiere: June 21, 1890, in Eisenach, Germany. Eugene d'Albert was the soloist.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1977–78 season. Claudio Arrau was the soloist; Oleg Kovalenko conducted.

Duration: 17 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs with one flute doubling piccolo plus contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones timpani, triangle and strings.

French horn vs. piano

If any instrument is linked with the name of Richard Strauss, it is French horn. Strauss' father was a virtuoso horn player, and horn figures prominently in the composer's *oeuvre*. He composed two horn concertos; solo horn is an obbligato soloist in *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, and the horn section plays a significant role in *Don Juan, Ein Heldenleben* and many other works.

If there is an instrument *not* customarily linked to Strauss, it is piano. Yet he composed dozens of piano compositions and left a rich legacy of lieder for voice and piano. Strauss studied piano and violin as a child, and he became quite skilled on both. He was still playing piano in public in his late teens, and his earliest compositions often include keyboard.

An important early ally—and a misfired gift

Strauss never faced financial worry, because his family was independently wealthy. His mother was a member of Germany's Pschorr brewing family. His talent was recognized early on. The pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow hailed young Strauss as a successor to both Brahms and Wagner.

Strauss composed his *Burleske* for von Bülow after he became the older man's conducting assistant at Meiningen in 1885. Von Bülow rejected the piece, declaring it unplayable. He reportedly exclaimed: "Every bar a different position of the hand; do you think I'm going to sit down for a month to study so refractory a piece?" Strauss shelved it shortly afterward, having decided that it was "pure nonsense." Four years later, another great composer/pianist, Eugène d'Albert, encouraged Strauss to dust off the old score. D'Albert—the eventual dedicatee—played the first performance in Eisenach (the city of Bach's birth) in 1890. Despite success there, Strauss postponed publication until 1894. He continued to distance himself from *Burleske* until his very last years. He then agreed that it be included in his last concert in London, in 1947.

Harbinger of a brilliant future

He needn't have been so concerned about its worth. Biographer Michael Kennedy calls the *Burleske* "Strauss's first masterpiece." Listeners may detect the influence of Brahms and Schumann, yet Straussian flickers are everywhere. We hear pre-echoes of Till Eulenspiegel's mischief and Don Juan's seductive panache. Strauss' brilliant gift for orchestration is amply demonstrated in touches such as the opening flourish for timpani, which presents important thematic material.

Burleske is very early, predating all Strauss's tone poems, and all the operas on which his reputation principally lies. In letters to his mother, he referred to it as his piano concerto. Essentially, it plays that role among Strauss' compositions: a free sonata form, cut in the Lisztian concerto mold. *Burleske* derives its appeal from its unflagging energy and exuberant mood.

Johannes Brahms: Symphony No.4 in E Minor, Op. 98

Johannes Brahms

Born: May 7, 1833, in Hamburg, Germany

Died: April 3, 1897, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1884–85

World Premiere: October 25, 1885, in Meiningen, Germany. The composer conducted.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1940–41 season. Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 39 minutes

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

Brahms once remarked that his Fourth Symphony had been written in Mürzzuschlag, in the Styrian alps, a place, he drily pointed out, “where the cherries do not become ripe and sweet.” His oblique observation tells us as much about the composer as it does the work he chose to describe by metaphor. A lifelong believer that music required no literary or descriptive association to make its statement, Brahms also recognized that his compositions demanded more concentration and effort from listeners. In his Fourth Symphony, the most unrelievedly tragic of Brahms’ orchestral compositions, that effort is amply rewarded. It is a disciplined, controlled work, sometimes severe, but always profoundly human.

Brahms began work on his E-Minor symphony during the summer of 1884. It was his custom in later years to spend the summer months in a restful, idyllic location where the beauty of nature would serve as inspiration for composing. Though Mürzzuschlag—today, a Viennese suburb—was hardly far removed from the buzzing activity of the Austrian capital, it served the purpose that the other summer holiday destinations had, and Brahms was able to concentrate on drafting the first two movements of the E-Minor Symphony. He returned to Mürzzuschlag in summer 1885 to complete it.

That September, having arranged the work for two pianos, he assembled a group of his friends in Vienna to hear a readthrough. For the most part they were hesitant; Elisabeth von Herzogenberg went so far as to suggest that he withhold the work until extensive revisions were made. Eduard Hanslick, the notable critic who championed Brahms over the Wagnerites, is said to have remarked after hearing the two-piano version, “You know, I had the feeling that two enormously clever people were cudgeling one another.”

Wrestling with a chaconne

It was the finale, consisting of 30 sequential variations on a repeated bass line, that caused the bewilderment and hesitation. Brahms had considered such an idea for almost a decade. Referring to Bach’s Cantata No. 150, which includes a chaconne, he wrote to Clara Schumann in 1877: “The chaconne is, in my opinion, one of the most wonderful and most incomprehensible pieces of music. . . If I could picture myself writing, or even conceiving such a piece, I am certain that the extreme excitement and emotional tension would have driven me mad.”

In fact he spent time with two chaconnes of major significance. The first was a transcription of the chaconne from Bach’s D-minor partita for solo violin, which he arranged for piano left hand in 1879 for Clara. (She had developed arthritis in her right hand and required a break during concert performances.) The second instance, of course, was the finale of the Fourth Symphony, in which he altered Bach’s original chaconne melody to make it slightly more chromatic.

We know that Brahms had also looked at passacaglias—a closely related continuous variation form—by Georg Muffat (1653–1704) and François Couperin (1668–1733) before composing the Fourth Symphony. These sources are significant, for they show us that he drew his inspiration not so much from Beethoven and Schumann, but rather from Baroque models. An austere musical character and extensive modal harmonies, particularly in the slow movement and the finale, frequently evoke the earlier era.

Unusual tonality

E Minor is an exceptional key for a symphony. Only one major precedent, Haydn's 1772 *Trauersymphonie*, exists for Brahms's Fourth. *Trauer* means mourning, grief, sorrow; the key associations of E Minor are clear enough. Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, also in E Minor, followed Brahms' by only three years; his piece too has that dark, autumnal, tragic character.

Relieving the uncompromising darkness of the outer movements are the E Major Andante and the C-Major scherzo, *Allegro giocoso*. Despite their apparent release of tension, each is shadowed by constant intimations of something ominous on the horizon. Brahms achieves this by using modal harmonies to imply minor keys. He thereby underscores the faint Baroque flavor that permeates the entire symphony, culminating in his magnificent final variation set. Brahms delighted in the variations form throughout his career. In the eloquent, powerful finale, he gave us his ultimate set of variations, and a world of philosophy upon which to reflect.

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