

**PROGRAM NOTES FOR NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
**2022-2023 Classical Subscription Concert 04: Hugh Wolff/Beethoven & Mozart**  
**BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2022**  
**FIRST NORTH AMERICAN SERIAL RIGHTS ONLY**

**Beethoven's Overture to *Egmont*, Op. 84**, is a powerful musico-dramatic statement inspired by one of Goethe's great plays. Beethoven composed it as part of incidental music for an 1810 production of the drama. He identified strongly with *Egmont*'s themes: the perils of political intrigue, nascent nationalism, and liberation from tyranny. This dramatic overture is a splendid example of Beethoven's 'heroic' style. The opening chords symbolize fate; the flowing string melody of the *Allegro* surges with forward momentum. A bright coda in F major represents victory over political oppression.

**Mozart's Piano Concerto No.25** dates from the mid-1780s, when he was at the height of his success in Vienna. The concerto crowns several years when piano concertos dominated his output – more than symphony, more than chamber music, even more than opera. In the space of barely three years, he produced twelve masterpieces for piano and orchestra, every one of which remains in the repertoire. Some have called K.503 Mozart's "Emperor" concerto, but it is even more aptly compared to his "Jupiter" Symphony: in the same key of C major, and with a melodic sweetness married to Olympian power. He establishes heroic character in the march-like opening. Listen for trumpets and drums; this is bright, assertive music. The pianist's first entrance is almost a mini-cadenza. Mozart shows us a softer side in the pastoral Andante, which has wide melodic leaps that are almost operatic. A symphonic approach returns for the finale, where Mozart dazzles us with muscle and agility. It is a joyous ride.

Maestro Wolff led the world premiere of **Aaron Jay Kernis's Symphony No. 2** in 1992, right here in Newark. At the time, Kernis was deeply affected by the Persian Gulf War and the escalating political situation in Bosnia. The opening "Alarm" is a high-energy paean that expresses his simultaneous fascination and horror with the technology of modern warfare. "Air/Ground" is both a quasi-military reference and a bow to the Baroque era, when composers wrote airs [melodies] above *ostinato* ground bass lines. This is the emotional core of the symphony. The finale, 'Barricade,' combines the intense emotion of the slow movement with the surging undercurrent of the first. Prominent brass and percussion emphasize the connection with warfare and the suffering it imposes.

The genesis of **Ravel's *La Valse*** is complex, beginning in 1906 when he first considered a symphonic poem called *Wien* [Vienna]. When Serge Diaghilev commissioned a ballet from Ravel in 1919, he dusted off the sketches and started serious work. The project derailed, precipitating a permanent breach between Ravel and Diaghilev. Ravel secured an orchestral performance in 1920, but had to wait until 1929 for a ballet production – when a different troupe staged it. Ravel customarily composed at the piano. Many of his compositions exist in versions for solo piano as well as orchestra, including *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, and *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. Two prior versions of *La Valse* preceded the orchestral score: one for solo piano, the other for two pianos. Ravel's orchestral *La Valse* (1920) has become a concert hall staple and is a brilliant showpiece. The ballet has attracted many celebrated choreographers, including George Balanchine and Frederick Ashton. No surprise there, for Ravel's music is the essence of dance.

## **Overture to *Egmont*, Op.84**

**Ludwig van Beethoven**

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

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

*Approximate duration: 9 minutes*

Composed from October 1809 to June 1810

First performance 15 June 1810 in Vienna

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

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was the most important figure in German literary romanticism. He was also Beethoven's favorite writer. Thus in 1809, when the director of Vienna's Burgtheater decided to stage revivals of Goethe's *Egmont* and Friedrich Schiller's *William Tell* with new incidental music for both plays, Beethoven was keen to secure the commission.

Beethoven identified strongly with both plays' themes: the perils of political intrigue, nascent nationalism, and liberation from tyranny. But his Viennese colleague Adalbert Gyrowetz was assigned the *Tell* music (which preceded Rossini's opera by two decades). Thus it fell to Beethoven to compose nearly 40 minutes of music for *Egmont*, a drama that was deemed unsuitable for music. Beethoven, of course, proved that opinion wrong.

## **Historical resonance**

*Egmont* takes place during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Counter-Reformation, when the Low Countries were under Spanish Habsburg rule. The hero, Count Egmont, perceives that the Netherlands will revolt and eventually free itself from Spanish domination, but his own courageous stand costs him his life. He is executed by the Habsburg Duke of Alva. His spirit endures to help his people to overthrow the despotic ruler. *Egmont's* message was fully in keeping with Beethoven's aversion to the Napoleonic juggernaut.

### **Destiny and drama in nine minutes**

The Overture to *Egmont* is a superb example of Beethoven's "heroic" style, along with the Fifth Symphony and the "Emperor" Concerto. In essence, the overture is a microcosm of Goethe's drama. Formally, it comprises a slow introduction to a sonata-allegro movement; however, Beethoven adjusts sonata form to accommodate aspects of the underlying story.

Beethoven's dark, dramatic music is fraught with the destiny of its hero. The opening chords symbolize fate; the flowing string theme of the *Allegro* has a surging forward momentum that carries us with the drama. The bright coda in F major represents victory over the political oppressors, and so on. Such emphasis on programmatic content was fairly new in 1809 and is particularly unusual in Beethoven. In that sense, it demonstrates a heady romantic streak in Beethoven that comes as a surprise so early in the century.

### **Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major, K. 503**

**Wolfgang Amadè Mozart**

**Born 27 January, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria**

**Died 5 December, 1791 in Vienna, Austria**

*Approximate duration: 30 minutes*

Composed November and December 1786

First performance December 1786 in Vienna

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo piano, and strings.

Seventeen eighty-six, the year of *The Marriage of Figaro*, was exceptionally productive for Mozart. In addition to the opera, he was able to complete a number of splendid chamber works and several piano concerti. Arthur Hutchings has observed that the C major concerto, K. 503, "marks the end of Mozart's period of 'stardom' as Vienna's performer/composer." While he produced two additional keyboard concerti before his death, the circumstances of those that followed (K. 537 in D, "Coronation," and K. 595 in B-flat) are so different from those that preceded them that Hutchings's observation is apt. In many ways, K. 503 crowns the entire magnificent cycle of Mozart's piano concerti.

Hutchings calls this piece "Mozart's 'Emperor' Concerto; so does Cuthbert Girdlestone, author of another venerable volume devoted exclusively to discussion of Mozart's keyboard concerti. The piece is an enormous achievement, with a spaciousness, breadth and power all expressed with a heroism that does indeed look forward to Beethoven. Majestic seems to be the best description. Mozart employed his largest concerto orchestra to support the piano in K.503, excepting only No. 24 in C minor, K. 491, which calls for clarinets as well as oboes. But the first

movement of K. 503 is the lengthiest movement that Mozart ever composed.

A bold, assertive C major opening built on arpeggiated tonic chords set a forthright military tone characteristic of many of Mozart's first movements. A secondary fanfare theme that foreshadows the opening phrase of the "Marseillaise" serves as an important developmental building block. Such Beethovenian gestures are liberally interspersed with delightful little melodies of Mozartian simplicity and appeal. Pianist and author Charles Rosen has observed:

In K.503, the renunciation of harmonic color is already a marked characteristic: almost all the shadings arise from a simple alternation of major and minor. . . . [This] alternation is the dominant color of K. 503, and a prime element of the structure as well.

Using Rosen's observation as a listening guideline reveals startling parallels among the three movements, and illustrates with what elemental and economical means Mozart constructs the most elaborate and imposing of his musical structures. In the playful rondo that closes the concerto, his lighter tone never compromises the grandeur and dignity of the whole.

No cadenza by Mozart survives for this concerto, because he composed it for himself and his custom in concert was to improvise. (Written-out cadenzas survive for other concertos, usually those he wrote for his gifted students.) Mr. Goode performs his own original cadenza.

## **Symphony No. 2 (1991)**

**Aaron Jay Kernis**

**Born 15 January, 1960 in Bensalem Township, PA**

Approximate duration 26 minutes

Composed in 1991

First performance 15 January 1992 in Newark, NJ. Maestro Wolff conducted the New Jersey Symphony.

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets (one in B-flat, one in A), bass clarinet, three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns in F, four trumpets in C, four trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (requiring four players; the battery includes snare drum, piccolo & high snare drum, tenor drum, small and large bass drum, medium log drum, brake drum, bongos, congas, wood blocks, reco reco, lead pipe, mounted handbells, cow bells, thunder sheet, crotales, cabasa, small and high triangles, China boy cymbal, small, medium and large cymbals, small and medium crash cymbals, ride cymbal, vibraphone, xylophone, glockenspiel, marimba, chimes, medium and large tam tams, and tom toms), harp, piano, and strings.

Aaron Jay Kernis was an up-and-coming American composer long before he snared the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in music for his Second String Quartet, or the 2002 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition. In the two decades since then, he has consolidated his position as one of America's leading composers. Kernis's education and stylistic mentors were widespread and eclectic, including study with John Adams at the San Francisco Conservatory, Charles Wuorinen and Elias Tanenbaum at Manhattan School of Music, and Morton Subotnick and Jacob Druckman at Yale. Kernis's music is equally eclectic, ranging from the profound and spiritual works to those with gleeful abandon. His First String Quartet, composed when he was thirty, is a large-scale, traditional multi-movement work that shows both respect for and command of

traditional form. At the same time, its slow movement, which Kernis arranged for string orchestra, brings to mind the music of such contemporary mystics as the Estonian Arvo Pärt and the Polish Henryk Mikolaj Górecki. By contrast, *Le quattro stagioni dalla cucina futurismo* ["The Four Seasons of Futurist Cuisine"] is a howlingly funny romp for narrator and piano trio. These diverse compositions reflect a composer with a broad emotional span.

Kernis's Second Symphony shows him to be a composer with a political conscience. When he composed it in 1991, he was deeply affected by world events, particularly the Persian Gulf War and the escalating situation in Bosnia. He has since written:

My Second Symphony was written in 1991, begun just after the Persian Gulf War took place. The absurdity and cruelty of this war, in particular the "surgical" nature of its reliance on gleaming new technological warfare used at a safe distance made an enormous and lasting impression on me. It awoke me to the brutality and hollow moralizing of which nations are all too easily capable and led me to examine the culture of war and genocide in our time. The Gulf War was the first war in which, as an adult, I "witnessed" (through the media) my country's participation. In addition, the Symphony was fueled by a time of great personal change, and signifies both a loss of innocence and an important shift of tone in my music. However, this Symphony is not programmatic: it describes no progression of images or engagements, though its movement titles are direct. The development of the work's musical motives is compact and abstract, yet highly linear.

One image from the war that did influence the last movement came from news reports of a civilian apartment building (mistakenly thought to be a military installation) that was flattened by American bombs just before the end of the war - its 500 civilian inhabitants were killed instantly. The Second Symphony began a series of works touched by world conflict and human suffering which include my *New Era Dance* for orchestra, my *cor anglais* concerto *Colored Field* (1993), piano quartet *Still Movement with Hymn* (1994) and concerto for violin and strings *Lament and Prayer* (1995). The Symphony was commissioned by Carillon Importers, Ltd. on behalf of Absolut Vodka for one of the series of concerts they presented at Lincoln Center in New York City during the early 90's. (Coincidentally the war began on my birthday in 1991 (15/1) and the Symphony was premiered on that same date a year later following the war's end). It was premiered by Hugh Wolff and the New Jersey Symphony in 1992 and was later



recorded by Wolff and the City of Birmingham Symphony for Decca/Argo.

More than three decades have elapsed since Kernis composed this symphony. Our world has indeed experienced more violence, more unspeakable horror, more injustice. Music like Kernis's Second Symphony provides an outlet for our strong feelings. Poetry, literature, and film all have a tradition of works commenting on the senselessness of war. So does music, including such masterpieces as the Shostakovich Eighth and Tenth Symphonies and Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Like those compositions, Kernis's Second Symphony communicates with power because its message resonates within us all.

The Kernis symphony consists of three movements arranged fast-slow-fast. The opening "Alarm" is a high-energy paean that expresses the composer's simultaneous fascination and horror with the technology of modern warfare.

The title of the slow movement, "Air/Ground," seems to be another quasi-military metaphor. Both terms have specific meaning in music as well, however. Air means a melody, or song, or simple aria. Ground refers to a repeated *ostinato* pattern in the bass line. In the Baroque era, composers wrote airs on ground basses, combining the two. Kernis has adapted that ancient technique for this movement, which is the emotional core of his symphony. Here we hear the romantic side of Kernis that has both enchanted and gripped his audiences: beautiful melodies (the clarinet and violin solos are especially poignant) and delicate orchestration, with a dramatic climax that reminds us of the chaos in which this Air/Ground is unfolding.

The finale, “Barricade,” combines the intense, draining emotion of the slow movement with the surging undercurrent of the symphony’s opening. His tempo remains moderate, but the instructions to the players are “*appassionato, intenso*.” An extended brass soliloquy adds drama to an already stark atmosphere. Brass and percussion play important roles in this finale, emphasizing a connection with warfare and military images that recalls Shostakovich’s Eighth and Tenth Symphonies. As is the case with those powerful pieces, the Kernis Symphony speaks to a broader audience about the suffering that comes from needless violence.

### ***La Valse***

#### **Maurice Ravel**

Approximate duration 12 minutes

Composed December 1919 - March 1920

First performance 12 December 1920 in Paris. Camille Chevillard conducted the Lamoureux Orchestra

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, Basque tambourine, cymbals, bass drum, castanets, tam-tam, tambourine, crotales, two harps and strings

*La Valse* began life as a ballet score for the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev, who approached Ravel in 1919 about a new work. Seven years previously, Ravel had collaborated

quite successfully with Diaghilev on *Daphnis et Chloé*, which is often called his greatest composition. This time, the composer had greater latitude in his choice of subject, and took advantage of the opportunity to return to an idea that had captured his fancy as early as 1906. That year he had written to his friend, critic Jean Marnold:

It is not subtle -- what I am undertaking at the moment. It is a Grande Valse, a sort of *hommage* to the memory of the Great Strauss, not Richard, the other -- Johann. You know my intense sympathy for this admirable rhythm and that I hold *la joie de vivre* as expressed by the dance in far higher esteem than as by the Franckist puritanism.

He called the new work *Wien* [Vienna], and never progressed beyond sketches. The project lay dormant until it was rejuvenated by Diaghilev's formal commission in 1920.

Ironically, Diaghilev rejected the score when he received Ravel's manuscript, citing prohibitive production expense. The incident caused a rift between the two men that was never mended; they only met again once before Diaghilev's death in 1929. Ravel was able to secure an orchestral premiere in December 1920, and the work has enjoyed great popularity since as an instrumental piece.

Several of Ravel's earlier compositions reflect his fascination with waltzes. Among the more intriguing ones are a piano piece from 1913 entitled "*A la manière de Borodin*" that mixes Russian style with the Viennese dance, and the ever popular, more Schubertian *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1912; versions for piano solo and for orchestra).

Subtitled "choreographic poem," *La Valse* consists of twelve minutes of whirling rhythms and dynamics viewed through a kaleidoscope of orchestral colors. A note in the score describes the scenario:

Clouds whirl about. Occasionally they part to allow a glimpse of waltzing couples. As they gradually lift, one can discern a gigantic hall, filled by a crowd of dancers in motion. The stage gradually brightens. The glow of the chandeliers breaks out fortissimo.

Essentially an elongated giant crescendo, *La Valse* is dynamically related to *Boléro*, though its tension builds in an altogether different fashion. Ravel thought of it as a "fatefully inescapable whirlpool," an essentially tragic work whose frenetic mania is cut off by death.