

Randall Goosby Returns

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Jean Sibelius: *Finlandia*, Op. 26

Following the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, Russia's Czar Alexander annexed Finland under the terms of the Vienna Congress. By 1900, after nearly a century of Russian rule, Finnish resentment of Russian overlords and culture was strong, and nationalism had become a strong force. Russia's forced conscription of Finnish youth into its military and censorship of the Finnish press made for a bitter populace. Today, Finland refers to this period as the "years of passive resistance."

In this politically charged environment, Sibelius composed *Finlandia* as one of six *Scènes historiques* ("Historic Scenes" or "Tableaux from the Past"). They were performed at a festival/concert in support of newspapers censored by the Russian authorities. The piece bore several titles before the inflammatory name *Finlandia* became permanent.

Decisive musical gestures contribute to *Finlandia*'s dramatic impact. From the threatening low brass chords that open, through the rich hymn introduced by woodwinds and taken up by the strings, to the triumphant finale, *Finlandia* grabs both heart and gut, compelling the listener with its crisp fanfares and convincing musical rhetoric. Sibelius' gift for orchestration is evident in this early work, which accords significant roles to timpani, bass drum, triangle, and cymbals.

Samuel Barber: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14

An unabashed romantic in an era of dizzying musical change and experimentation, Samuel Barber acknowledged modernism without ever turning his back on the rich tonal tradition that gave rise to so many other "isms" of 20th-century music. Nowhere is his gift more evident or immediately accessible than in his Violin Concerto. This Janus-faced piece embraces the old guard of diatonicism and ventures forth into less well-charted rhythmic and atonal waters. Its oddly duplicitous musical personality is more arresting because Barber began it as war loomed. He composed the first two movements in Europe, completing the concerto back in the US.

Long, expressive melodies celebrate the violin's lyrical character in the first two movements. They stand in marked contrast to the nervous, aggressive excitement of the finale. While we are never in doubt that the violinist is the boss in this piece, Barber makes imaginative use of his orchestra. He incorporates piano—an unusual component of a violin concerto's accompanying fabric—with such understated skill that the keyboard

is never conspicuous. Similarly, he includes effective orchestral solos, most prominently for clarinet in the first movement, for oboe in the *Andante sostenuto*, and briefly, for timpani, establishing the galvanized rhythm of the brilliant finale.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 17 (“Ukrainian”)

The Second Symphony is the closest Tchaikovsky came to embracing the ideas and techniques of his Russian nationalist contemporaries and their leader, Mily Balakirev. The subtitle “Little Russian” was bestowed by a Moscow critic because Tchaikovsky incorporated three Ukrainian folk tunes. (Ukraine was called “Little Russia.”) The symphony’s premiere in February 1873 was one of the sweetest triumphs Tchaikovsky was to know.

A key aspect of Tchaikovsky’s Second Symphony is the repetition of a relatively simple tune with a shifting background. Tchaikovsky turns this technique into a sophisticated variation method, challenging the listener to focus attention beyond the foreground theme. He does this with the folk melodies, prominently showcased among its movements. His approach is particularly evident in the first movement and the finale.

The inner two movements hint at what Tchaikovsky would achieve in his later symphonies. The third movement, a lively scherzo based on a single rhythmic idea, is indebted both to Alexander Borodin and Hector Berlioz. Tchaikovsky imbues it with his own personality by means of ingenious metrical shifts that help to maintain the interest level, and with irregular phrase lengths of three and six bars.

Jean Sibelius: *Finlandia*, Op. 26

Jean Sibelius

Born: December 8, 1865 in Tavastehus, Finland

Died: September 20, 1957 in Järvenpää, Finland

Composed: 1899; revised in 1900

World Premiere: July 2, 1900 in Helsinki, Finland

Duration: 8 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings

Is there any expression of nationalist pride more beloved than *Finlandia*? This turn-of-the-century tone poem compressed centuries of Finnish folklore and fiercely independent spirit into eight minutes of music. *Finlandia* is as Finnish as Musorgssky's Prelude to *Khovanshchina* is Russian, Ravel's *Menuet antique* is French, and Copland's *Rodeo* is American. None of them, however, is as famous as *Finlandia*, nor so closely entwined with the composer's homeland. This work could easily have deteriorated into something bombastic like Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Instead, Sibelius produced an exciting symphonic showpiece that provides superb opportunities to all four of the orchestra's instrumental groups.

A bit of historical background is in order. Following the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, the Russian Czar Alexander annexed Finland as a grand duchy under the terms of the Vienna Congress. By about 1900, after nearly a century of Russian rule, nationalism had become a strong force in Finland. Finnish resentment of Russian overlords and culture was strong. The combination of Russia's forced conscription of Finnish youth into its military and censorship of the Finnish press made for a bitter populace. Today, Finland refers to this period in its history as the "years of passive resistance."

In this politically charged environment, Sibelius composed *Finlandia* in 1899 as one of six *Scènes historiques* ("Historic Scenes" or "Tableaux from the Past"). They were performed at a festival/concert in support of newspapers censored by the Russian authorities. The piece bore several titles, including *Finland Awakes*, *Impromptu*, and *Suomi* [Finland], before the inflammatory name *Finlandia* became permanent.

Nothing subtle compromises the raw emotionalism of this music. Sibelius's decisive musical gestures contribute greatly to *Finlandia*'s dramatic impact. From the threatening low brass chords that open, through the rich hymn introduced by woodwinds and taken up by the strings, to the triumphant finale, *Finlandia* grabs both heart and gut, compelling the listener with its crisp fanfares and convincing musical rhetoric. Sibelius was still young in 1899, only 34. He went on to write seven splendid symphonies. His gifts as an orchestrator are already evident in this early work, which accords significant roles to timpani, bass drum, triangle, and cymbals.

Samuel Barber: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14

Samuel Barber

Born: March 9, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died: January 23, 1981 in New York City

Composed: Summer 1939 to July 1940; revised 1948

World Premiere: February 7, 1941 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Albert Spalding was the soloist and Eugene Ormandy conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Duration: 25 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani, piano, solo violin, and strings; the third movement adds military drum

During the first half of the 20th century, violin soloists appearing with orchestras favored a relatively small repertoire of concerti. The four 19th century German titans, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Brahms, accounted for a disproportionate number of violin concerto performances. Tchaikovsky, Wieniawski and Saint-Saëns were close runners-up, and the Lalo *Symphonie espagnole* had a number of champions attracted by its sparkle and Latin panache. In the second half of the 20th century, tastes expanded and shifted. Mozart's relatively early violin concerti became mainstream and Bach's concerti found their way into the concert hall with some regularity. Contemporary composers whose music was cutting-edge before the Second World War—Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Bartók, even Sibelius—were less threatening to audiences that had become more acclimated to their musical language. With the exception of Sibelius, their violin concerti have

not become audience favorites, but these works receive occasional performances and are accepted as important contributions to the literature.

If we consider that background, the astonishing success of Samuel Barber's violin concerto is all the more remarkable. To begin with, Barber was American. The United States was an upstart country and its classical composers were slow to gain acceptance here or abroad.

Barber's early successes were legion. By the time he completed the Violin Concerto in 1939, he had already established a solid reputation with his Overture to *The School for Scandal* (1931), *Dover Beach* (1931) Sonata for Cello and Piano (1932), *Music for a Scene from Shelley* (1933), the ubiquitous *Adagio for Strings* (1936; originally part of his String Quartet), his First Symphony (in one movement, 1936) and the *First Essay for Orchestra* (1937). The legendary Arturo Toscanini, who was not known for his interest in new music, let alone American music, became a proponent of Barber's work. For a young man in his mid-20's, these were impressive achievements.

Barber went on to fulfill his early promise. Among other works, he completed several important operas, most notably *Vanessa* (1956) and *Antony and Cleopatra*, with which the new Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center opened in 1966. But nothing in his *oeuvre* other than the *Adagio* has captured the popular imagination like the Violin Concerto. And no American violin concerto in this century has so entranced great violinists. What is it about this work that draws us back to it again and again?

To better understand his Violin Concerto, we must consider Barber himself. Born into a stable upper middle class family, he pursued his formal musical education at the newly-formed Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Barber was a renaissance man with a keen intellect. In addition to music, he cultivated interests in art and literature. He spoke French, German, Italian and Spanish with ease, and read voraciously in all his languages. With respect to music, his persona was influenced substantially by his aunt and uncle, Louise and Sidney Homer. Louise was an important contralto; Sidney a respected composer of art songs. Barber was one of the few modern composers to receive formal training as a singer, and his sensitivity to vocal line is a defining aspect of his music, even the instrumental works.

He certainly brought this gift to the Violin Concerto. Its first two movements combine Brahmsian eloquence with Mendelssohnian melody; its perpetual motion finale is a dazzlingly difficult *tour de force* for the soloist. The concerto was Barber's first major commission. He undertook the work at the behest of Samuel Fels, a member of the Curtis Institute board and the owner of the Fels Naphtal soap fortune. Fels intended the concerto for his adopted son, Iso Briselli, a gifted young violinist. Barber spent the summer of 1939 in Sils-Maria, Switzerland, completing the first two movements. With war imminent, American citizens were advised to leave Europe. Barber completed the concerto the following summer in Pocono Lake Preserve, Pennsylvania. When he presented Briselli with the finale, the violinist was dissatisfied. According to Barber's biographer Barbara Heyman:

Many years later, Briselli offered [an] explanation in which he professes that although he believed the first two movements of the concerto were beautiful and eagerly awaited the finale, he was disappointed with the third movement as 'too lightweight' compared to the rest of the concerto. He suggested that the middle section be expanded to develop the movement into a sonata-rondo form, but Barber would not consider it.

Barber's commission, the proceeds of which he had already spent in Europe, was briefly in question. Eventually, he and Fels negotiated a compromise whereby Barber would retain his fee and Briselli would forego his right to premiere the work. That honor went to Albert Spalding in February 1941. The composer wrote the following description of the work for the first performances.

It is lyric and rather intimate in character and a moderate-sized orchestra is used . . . The first movement—Allegro molto moderato—begins with a lyrical first subject announced at once by the solo violin, without any orchestral introduction. This movement as a whole has perhaps more the character of a sonata than concerto form. The second movement—Andante sostenuto—is introduced by an extended oboe solo. The violin enters with a contrasting and rhapsodic theme, after which it repeats the oboe melody of the beginning. The last movement, a perpetual motion, exploits the more brilliant and virtuoso characteristics of the violin.

What he does not say is that his clear tonal language and unerring sense of drama make the Violin Concerto extraordinarily effective in performance. These are the factors that cause us to welcome its regular return to the concert hall.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 17 ("Ukranian")

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Viatka District, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Composed: 1872; revised in 1880

World Premiere: February 7, 1873 in Moscow, Russia; Nikolai Rubinstein conducting. The revised version was premiered in St. Petersburg on 12 February 1881; Karl Zike conducted.

Duration: 32 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, and strings

Tchaikovsky is generally regarded as a Russian exponent of Western musical tradition, adopting conventional forms such as symphony, concerto, and string quartet. During the late 1860s, he actually flirted with both nationalism and the so-called "Mighty Handful." For a while, he was close to Mily Balakirev, the leader of the new group of composers. The Second Symphony, is the closest Tchaikovsky came to embracing the ideas and techniques of his Russian contemporaries. Compared to his own later, highly charged symphonic essays, it is almost cloudless.

The subtitle “Little Russian” is not the composer's, but was bestowed by the Moscow critic Nikolai Dmitrievich Kashkin because Tchaikovsky incorporated three Ukrainian folk tunes into its fabric. (Ukraine was called “Little Russia.”) That is doubtless why the Second Symphony was greeted warmly not only by Balakirev and his group, but also by the Russian public. The very successful Moscow premiere in February 1873 was one of the sweetest triumphs Tchaikovsky was to know.

In 1879 and 1880, Tchaikovsky overhauled the symphony, rewriting nearly the entire first movement, and shortening the work significantly. Listeners familiar with Tchaikovsky’s later works may be surprised that such a large work as the “Little Russian” is free of the tortured self-questioning that so dominates the last three symphonies. In the Second Symphony, the composer shows us less torment and more charm.

A key aspect of Tchaikovsky’s Second Symphony is the repetition of a relatively simple tune with a shifting background. Tchaikovsky turns this technique into a sophisticated variation method, challenging the listener to focus attention beyond the foreground theme. He does this with three different folk melodies, prominently showcased among its movements. His approach is particularly evident in the first movement and the finale.

The inner two movements reveal the fledgling Tchaikovsky hinting at what he was to achieve in the later symphonies. Hans Keller calls it “quoting from the future.”

It seems significant that whereas the First [Symphony] quotes from the past, the Second quotes, as it were, from the future: the basic thought of the second movement, *Andantino marziale, quasi moderato*, was to grow, more than 20 years later, into the (not so called) march of the Sixth Symphony's third movement.

This third movement, a lively scherzo based on a single rhythmic idea, is indebted both to the scherzo of Alexander Borodin's First Symphony and to the *Queen Mab* scherzo from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. Tchaikovsky imbues it with his own personality by means of ingenious metrical shifts that help to maintain the interest level, and with irregular phrase lengths of three and six bars.

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