NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2017

Schubert's "Great" Symphony

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Mozart: Overture to *Così fan tutte*. Don't be fooled by the slow introduction. Mischief and flirtation are the buzzwords for this sparkling curtain raiser.

Sibelius: Violin Concerto. Celebrated for its brooding Nordic character, this concerto focuses on the soloist rather than the orchestra. An expanded first movement cadenza takes the place of a development section. The finale blazes with brilliant syncopations and violin fireworks.

Schubert: Symphony No. 9. This symphony inspired Schumann's famous phrase "heavenly length." Schubert sought to emulate the size and scope of Beethoven's largest symphonies. The trombones play in every movement, contributing grandeur and gravitas.

MOZART: Overture to *Così fan tutte*, K. 588

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: September 1789 to January 1790

World Premiere: January 26, 1790, at the Vienna Burgtheater.

NJSO Premiere: Summer 1968; Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 5 minutes

Così fan tutte is the least known of Mozart's "big five" operas: *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Magic Flute*, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *Così.* Part of its mystery and mystique undoubtedly lie in its untranslatable title, which means something to the effect of "thus do they all," with "they" alluding to the female population. The opera deals with the fickleness of women shifting their romantic interest from one suitor to another with startling rapidity.

Mozart's overture adheres to 18th-century convention by opening with a slow introduction and proceeding to a zesty Allegro in sonata form that encapsulates the flirtatious chatter of the opera. While the slow introduction links this overture formally with *Don Giovanni*, the sparkling syncopated themes that follow are spiritually far closer to those of *Figaro*. Mozart allots a surprisingly prominent role to flute, an instrument of which he was not particularly fond but for which he wrote magnificently. His energetic syncopations lend the overture a jaunty forward momentum that fairly bursts with energy.

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

SIBELIUS: Concerto in D Minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 47

JEAN SIBELIUS

Born: December 8, 1865, in Hämeenlinna (Tavastehus), Finland

Died: September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää, Finland

Composed: September 1902–January 1904; revised 1905

World Premiere: February 8, 1904, at Helsingfors (Helsinki), Finland. Victor Nováček was the soloist; the composer conducted the Helsingfors Philharmonic. The revised version was first performed in Berlin on October 19, 1905. Karl Halir was the soloist; Richard Strauss conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1954–55 season. Samuel Antek conducted; John Corigliano Sr. was the soloist.

Duration: 31 minutes

Nationalist beacon: the legacy of Sibelius

The name of Jean Sibelius is inextricably linked with his homeland. Through his seven symphonies and numerous symphonic poems, notably *The Swan of Tuonela* (Op. 22), *Finlandia* (Op. 26), *Pohjola's Daughter* (Op. 49) and the rarely heard *Tapiola* (Op. 112), he established a school of Finnish music that remains among the most important modern manifestations of musical nationalism. His impact and influence on others has been equally far-ranging, particularly among Scandinavian and British composers, and his formal ideas must be counted among the most innovative of the 20th century. Nearly a decade into the 21st century, he remains Finland's most celebrated composer and arguably most famous figure.

In light of these impressive achievements, Sibelius' Violin Concerto is something of an anomaly. We do not remember him for his concerted works, but rather for his symphonic legacy; the concerto is his only work for a solo instrument plus orchestra that has entered the repertory (though the six *Humoresques* for violin and orchestra, Opp. 87b and 89, are unjustly neglected). How do we account for the existence of this popular work, which is so unlike anything else written by its composer?

Sibelius' obvious aptitude for the violin manifested itself clearly when he was a child. Although he undertook violin lessons too late to consider a performance career, his natural gift for the instrument found a happy outlet in the rarely heard *Humoresques* and this popular violin concerto.

Conundrum: virtuoso vehicle vs. coherent symphonic composition

The piece was originally intended for the eminent German violinist Willy Burmester, but once Sibelius completed it in 1903, he chose not to wait for Burmester's next tour to Finland in order to introduce the new composition. Victor Novacek played the first performance in Helsinki in February 1904, under the composer's baton. A critical review from the powerful Finnish critic Flodin caused Sibelius to withdraw the concerto for extensive revisions. The following year, in a revised version, the concerto received its debut in the German musical capital, Berlin. This time the soloist was Karl Halir, violinist of the Joachim Quartet, and the conductor was the celebrated German composer Richard Strauss. Sibelius wrote:

> In October 1905 my violin concerto, in its revised and final form, stood its baptism of fire in Germany at a concert in the Singakademie in Berlin. The solo part was conducted by none other than Richard Strauss. As an instance of Strauss' extraordinary conscientiousness in performing the works of other contemporary composers, it should be mentioned that he had three rehearsals with the orchestra for practicing the accompaniment. But the violin concerto requires it.

The challenge Sibelius faced was to create a virtuoso vehicle that would meet his own high standards and adhere, at least generally, to the formal guidelines expected of a major symphonic composition. In fulfilling this challenge, Sibelius avoided the daring formal experimentation associated so strongly with his orchestral works; the form of the concerto is fairly conventional, excepting the rhapsodic nature of the first movement.

Affinity for the fiddle

The orchestra is allotted a rather subordinate role, readily ceding the spotlight to the soloist. Sibelius wrote gratefully for violin; he understood the instrument from the inside out through his own extensive study. Equally important, he understood the technique of his intended first soloist, whose formidable command of the instrument is presumably reflected in the lengthy cadenza.

Sibelius is little known as a composer of songs, probably because of language difficulties outside his native Finland. His vocal gift finds an instrumental outlet in the intense and emotionally evocative Adagio that constitutes the concerto's slow movement. (The English writer Donald Francis Tovey thought Sibelius' music suggested "a Bruckner gifted with an easy mastery and the spirit of a Polar explorer.") The finale—a pulsing hybrid of polonaise and rondo with some Gypsy flavor thrown in for additional color—is a thriller: rhythmically vibrant and brilliantly virtuosic without being acrobatic.

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

SCHUBERT: Symphony No. 9 in C, D. 944 ("The Great")

FRANZ PETER SCHUBERT

Born: January 31, 1797, in Liechtenthal, Vienna, Austria

Died: November 19, 1828, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: probably summer 1825 to early 1826

World Premiere: March 21, 1839, in Leipzig; Mendelssohn conducted the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

NJSO Premiere: 1936–37 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 48 minutes

From the standpoint of orchestration, rich thematic material and sheer majesty, the "Great" Symphony in C Major is the undisputed pinnacle of Schubert's symphonic maturity. In *The New Grove*, Maurice J. E. Brown calls it "his greatest masterpiece." British composer and writer Harold Truscott considers the symphony "a summing up of Schubert's instrumental thinking from 1811 onwards." Schubert himself thought the work represented his striving for the highest art.

Ironically, he never heard the symphony performed. He began work on it in 1825, finding time to compose despite travels to Steyr, Linz, Salzburg and Gastein. After he presented the manuscript to Vienna's Society of the Friends of Music in 1826, he was rewarded by a stipend "in recognition of his achievements and for further encouragement." In 1827, Schubert had the manuscript copied for the society, still vainly seeking a performance. The Vienna Philharmonic rejected the work, deeming it overly long and too demanding for the players. Even after Schubert's death in 1828, his brother Ferdinand was unsuccessful in his attempts to sell the score to a publisher.

That changed when Robert Schumann called on Ferdinand Schubert during the winter of 1838–39. Schumann examined the score and was awed by its genius. The discovery prompted his famous letter to Felix Mendelssohn that has given musical posterity the phrase "heavenly length." (Schumann was describing Schubert's inexpressibly lovely Andante.) The Leipzig premiere created a sensation despite extensive cuts. Publication followed in 1840, and the "Great" Symphony has been standard symphonic

repertoire ever since.

HAYDN AND MOZART? OR BEETHOVEN? SCHUBERT'S ROLE MODELS

We do not know for certain whether Schubert ever heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. He may have been present at its historic premiere in May 1824. Beethoven's final symphony was certainly a model for the younger Viennese composer. Indeed, Beethoven had wrought a powerful influence on Schubert as early as his Fourth Symphony ("Tragic," D. 417), composed in 1816.

In his earliest symphonies, Schubert relied more heavily on Haydn and Mozart for his inspiration and formal guidelines. After the Fourth, he evidenced a freer approach to the symphony, exercising more personal discretion in areas like modulations, formal structure and proportion, all of which we have come to associate with the Romantic (as opposed to Classical) symphony. These factors reach their pinnacle in Schubert's Ninth. It is the strongest symphonic link in the continuum from Beethoven to Brahms, Bruckner and Mahler.

About the music

Schubert was clearly emulating Beethoven's enormous scale. Though he would not have placed such labels as "classic" or "romantic" on his own music, the duality between the two styles is one of the symphony's most compelling fascinations. Scoring details such as the use of trombones in all four movements make it unusual. Formal departures from the norm—for example, the full sonata form of the scherzo movement—break from tradition and confirm the individuality of the symphony.

Even the slow introduction, brought to such perfection in the late Haydn symphonies, takes on new character in Schubert's asymmetrical, heroic opening horn theme. Its second-measure dotted rhythm provides the impetus for the entire Allegro to follow; his re-integration of that theme into the development section and the coda is one of many felicitous touches in this work so suffused by genius.

The balance of the symphony adheres to classical models. Principal oboe has the main theme in the Andante con moto, which balances march-like elements and brief string outbursts with wistful

woodwind writing. In climactic moments, the brass play with surprising force. Schubert's writing almost foreshadows Mahler.

Vigorous rhythms drive the Allegro vivace portion of Schubert's Scherzo. He balances the rambunctious opening gesture with a gentler Austrian Ländler (a slow waltz). The central Trio transports us to the world of folk song and rural village dancing. Schubert's sudden key changes and gentle use of the brass add interest throughout.

The grand finale is like a force of nature: as if Schubert had gathered up all world energy and invested it in his orchestra. The glory of Alpine Austria and the great outdoors pulses through this Allegro vivace, bringing Schubert's magnificent symphony to an exuberant close.

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

Learn more about the works on the program at www.njsymphony.org/notesMay11-14.