

## NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

March 13, 2010

Tonight marks the first performance by the Richmond Symphony  
Orchestra  
of each of the works on the program.

*Overture to "La Clemenza di Tito," K. 621*  
*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*

*born in Salzburg, Austria, in 1756;*

*died in Vienna, 1791*

*First Performance: Prague, September 6, 1791*

*Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns, 2 trumpets; timpani; strings*

*Duration: 5 minutes*

Mozart was interrupted in the composition of his last opera, *The Magic Flute*, by two urgent commissions. The first, from a mysterious stranger, was a generous offer to compose a *Requiem* mass. The second, less lucrative but far more prestigious, was to write an opera for the coronation of Emperor Leopold II as King of Bohemia. Actually Mozart's rival, Antonio Salieri, was the first choice for this task but declined. A second option, the Neapolitan Domenico Cimarosa, was also unavailable, leaving Mozart as the fall-back candidate. He wrote the opera in six hectic weeks in the summer of 1791, traveling to Prague (frantically composing until the opening night) for the premiere in September. Within three months he was dead.

The subject matter of *La Clemenza di Tito* (*The Clemency of Titus*), was drawn from a libretto by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian poet, Pietro Metastasio. The work was widely known---no less than thirteen composers had set it to music since its creation in 1734---and its simple story was deemed highly appropriate for the launching of a new reign. It concerns a Roman emperor, Titus, beloved by his people but conspired against by two young patricians. The plot is uncovered and the Senate condemns them to death. But the benevolent monarch pardons his would-be assassins and all ends happily.

*La Clemenza di Tito* has suffered for generations in the shadow of *The Magic Flute*, one reason being that the principal role of "Sextus" was written for a *castrato*, a kind of singing that (mercifully) vanished from the stage shortly after the opera was written. While the opera is a significant departure from Mozart's other late operas, it contains some of his most wonderful music, including the masterful Overture.

*Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90*  
*Johannes Brahms*

in Hamburg, Germany in 1833;

born

died in Vienna,

Austria, in 1897

First Performance: Vienna, December 2, 1883

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons,  
contrabassoon; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones;  
timpani; strings

Duration: 34 minutes

Brahms was into middle age before he composed his first symphony in 1876. The standard explanation for this delay is that as a young composer he was intimidated by the symphonic genius of his great predecessor, Beethoven. This view is not without substance. Brahms chafed under the burden of being the expected heir to the Master, and complained of the difficulty of composing "with such a giant breathing down my neck." This explanation, however, ignores other pressures upon Brahms as an orchestral composer. Romantic though he was, he desired to rein in the emotional exuberance of Romanticism. He wished to create music that was lucid and uncluttered so as to hear the inner parts and to highlight the polyphony that he often employed. These aims ran counter to the so-called "progressive" composers of his day, notably the New German school of Wagner and Liszt. Instead of employing their dense and massive orchestral resources, Brahms preferred the smaller Classical orchestra and the standard forms. Thus the tensions between warring camps reinforced the tentativeness of his emergence as a symphonic composer.

Nevertheless, once the dam was breached and his First Symphony appeared his inhibitions seemed to flow away. He completed his D Major Second Symphony within a year of the First, and immediately began work on his great Second Piano Concerto. With its completion in 1881 Brahms conceived his F Major Third Symphony, beginning it in 1882 and completing it by the following summer. Brahms was 50 at the time and already complaining that his best days were behind him, that he was too old---and old-fashioned---and should contemplate retirement. Though his Third Symphony reveals Brahms at his most consistent and confident, he nevertheless wrote of it disparagingly to a friend: "Wrap it daily in a cloth moist with the best Rhine wine---and do whatever else one does for such dry products."

Dry it is not. As Louis Biancolli wrote, "Its dominant mood is heroic." Some critics even labeled it "Eroica," a move that could not have pleased the Beethoven-shy Brahms. Notwithstanding the fact that Brahms chose a different key and omitted a "funeral march" movement, the two works do strike a similar mood, especially in the first and last movements. Others, closer to Brahms, described the work as a "forest idyll" (Clara Schumann) or a Greek love poem (Joseph Joachim) or even as a belated tribute to---of all people---Wagner, who died while Brahms was completing the Symphony.

Brahms suggested no programmatic content for his Third Symphony. But of all the guesses as to subject matter, the love poem idea is perhaps closest to the mark. In 1883 a close friend described him as "in the grip of...a strong and wholesome midsummer passion." That summer Brahms broke with his usual custom of taking his holidays in the Austrian Alps, instead spending it in Wiesbaden, which happened to be the home of a 26-year old contralto named Hermine Spiess. She was not only one of the finest singers of her day but a woman who confessed to

having a "Johannes Passion." Perhaps Johannes responded with his own "Hermine Passion" as he polished the score for his Third Symphony.

The Symphony is cyclical in nature, in that the Motto theme that opens the work reappears in the finale. The Motto consists of three notes, F/A-flat/F, which stand for Brahms's own personal slogan, *frei aber froh* ("free but happy"). These three notes introduce the grand (dare one say "heroic"?) opening theme. The purported tribute to Wagner---a reference to the "Venusberg" scene from *Tannhäuser*--- occurs in the transition to the second theme, a repeated pastoral phrase in the clarinet and bassoon that is developed. The three-note Motto returns in the warm notes of the French horn, leading to a restatement of the opening theme.

Departing from the dramatics of the first and last movements, the middle movements reveal Brahms at his warmest and most lyrical. The "andante" second movement opens with the clarinets and bassoon offering a graceful, hymn-like, faintly Mozartian theme that is subjected to a series of variations. The third movement, "poco allegretto," is Brahms at his most relaxed and delicate, a romance that replaces the usual hectic scherzo, centering on a gentle melody in the cellos.

The Symphony concludes with a return to the drama of the opening movement, only with an even greater intensity and passion. It begins quietly, rising to an agitated pathos, even melancholy, that struggles with an alternately lyrical theme in the cellos, then intoned by the horn. The melancholy is dissipated. The Motto theme from the first movement returns, but with a sunny rather than heroic disposition. Tremolo strings bring back the main theme of the first movement, but this time in spectral fashion, as the Symphony ends *pianissimo*.

The acolytes of the dead Wagner gathered at the Vienna premiere of Brahms's Third Symphony, attempting to sabotage it by hissing at the conclusion of each movement. These efforts were drowned out, however, by the larger audience that recognized in the work the culmination of Brahms's crowning genius as a symphonist.

*April: Meditation for Orchestra*  
*Elliott Miles McKinley*

*born in New*

*Haven, Connecticut in 1969*

*First Performance: Prague, November 21, 1994*

*Instrumentation: 3 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon;*

*4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, percussion; strings*

*Duration: 9 minutes*

Elliott Miles McKinley joined the faculty of Indiana University East in 2008 as assistant professor and Director of Music Studies. Born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1969, McKinley earned a Bachelor's degree in Jazz Studies from the New England Conservatory in 1992, a Master of Music degree from the University of Michigan in 1994, and the Ph.D. in composition from the University of Minnesota in 2007. Among his teachers are John McNeil, Michael Daugherty, and William Bolcom. McKinley has over forty compositions to his credit, among them six string quartets, a chamber sinfonietta, and works for full orchestra. Recently the Minnesota Orchestra, under Osmo Vänskä, premiered his new orchestral work, *Four Moments for Grand Orchestra*. His latest works

include a chamber concerto composed for the Duquesne University New Music Ensemble, a Suite for Violin and Marimba commissioned by the new Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, and most recently his sixth string quartet which received its premiere earlier this year in Prague by the Martinu Quartet. McKinley has received a number of awards, including a BMI Student Composer Award, a fellowship at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, two grants from the American Composers Forum, several Meet The Composer grants, and most recently a grant from Indiana University New Frontiers in the Arts and Humanities to assist in the composition of a percussion concerto.

*April: Meditation for Orchestra* was written in 1994 as McKinley's thesis in composition for the Master of Music Degree at the University of Michigan. Faced with the task of writing a piece for full orchestra, McKinley wanted to resist a temptation common to compositional students: to use the full array of instruments in as "impressive" a way as possible. During a walk one evening in April (hence the title), he asked a simple but penetrating question: "Why did I need to use all these instruments---loud and bombastic?" Improvising that evening at the piano he came up with the first chord progression of what was to become *April*---based on a simple triad. "The piece," as he remarked, "almost wrote itself" during that one all-night session.

*April* is in the nature of a brief orchestral tone poem, dominated throughout by a pulsating *ostinato* (literally "obstinate") "motto" motif that is elegiac, almost sinister in character. Its repetition avoids monotony by a series of subtly shifting tone colors and harmonies, creating an eerie mood of anticipation. There is imaginative use of the harp to mark transitional moments. The steady, relentless tread is interrupted midway in the piece, the pulse quickening as the upper strings introduce a somber but lyrical melody over the motto motif. A crescendo adds to the tension before the music relapses into an even deeper melancholy in the lower strings, supporting a sustained, almost keening, single note in the flute. The *Meditation* ends in unsettled ambiguity.

This evening's performance marks the American premiere of *April: Meditation for Orchestra*. The work received its first performance (later recorded) in 1994 in Prague by the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra under Vladimir Valek.

*Concerto No. 5 for Piano & Orchestra in F Major,  
Camille Saint-Saëns*

*Op. 103, "Egyptian"*  
*born in Paris in 1835;*

*died in Algiers in 1921*

*First Performance: Salle Pleyel, Paris, May 6, 1896*

*Instrumentation: solo piano; piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones;*

*timpani, percussion; strings*

*Duration: 28 minutes*

Saint-Saëns enjoyed a long life in music, from his first little piano piece at the age of 3 to just before his death over 80 years later. His parents were of humble origin (his father, who died when

Camille was only a month old, was a government clerk, his mother a carpenter's daughter). Yet despite financial constraints the young Saint-Saëns was raised in an atmosphere of intellectual and artistic encouragement. He started piano lessons at 2, organ at 7, and by his tenth year had made his first public performance, playing Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto and works by Bach and Mozart---as an encore he offered to play from memory any of the 32 Beethoven piano sonatas! His intellectual interests were catholic, embracing not only music and the other arts, but philosophy, classics, mathematics, astronomy, and geology. His precocious talents and winning charm won him many useful friends, admirers, and patrons, among them Liszt, Rossini, and Berlioz, who once wittily remarked that Saint-Saëns "knows everything but lacks inexperience."

Saint-Saëns became a renowned keyboard performer (Liszt called him the greatest organist in the world), and in his youth was a champion of "new" music, notably that of Schumann and Wagner. He composed with great ease---some would say too much ease---and could orchestrate for 12 hours at a sitting while conversing amiably all the while with companions. The 1870s-1880s were perhaps his golden age, witnessing the composition of his most highly regarded works---his opera *Samson and Delilah*, the Third or "Organ" Symphony, the Third Violin Concerto, the Fourth Piano Concerto, *The Carnival of the Animals*, and his finest chamber works.

By the 1890s Saint-Saëns's life changed directions as his music took a conservative turn. He had married a girl less than half his age; she bore him two children, but the marriage did not last. With the benefit of his royalties and a sizeable inheritance from a friend, Saint-Saëns spent more and more of his time away from France. He was particularly drawn to North Africa, spending many of his winters in Algeria and Egypt (all the while amassing a superb collection of native art which he later donated to the French nation).

It was on a visit to the pyramidal city of Luxor on the Nile in 1896 that he composed his Fifth Piano Concerto. It had been twenty years since his Fourth concerto appeared, and the Fifth reflects a series of changing influences on his music over that span of time, most notably a range of exoticisms, from Javanese gamelan music to the sounds of North Africa and the Middle East. Not surprisingly he attached to it the subtitle, "Egyptian," when he played it at the premiere in Paris, a concert celebrating the golden jubilee of his first solo appearance at the famed Salle Pleyel.

The Fifth Concerto is in the usual three movements---fast-slow-fast. The opening movement, "allegro animato," features two contrasting themes for the piano, the first a warm, chorale-like subject that reappears in a series of increasingly agitated variations. The lyric second melody is a melancholy threnody recalling Saint-Saëns's haunting "Delilah" melody from his great opera.

The middle movement, "andante," embraces the Orientalism that Saint-Saëns had become so entranced with. In a letter to a friend he described its central melody as a "sort of journey in the East," embodying a Nubian love song "which I had heard sung by the boatmen on the Nile when I went down the stream..."

The finale, "molto allegro," is a fast-paced rondo. Here the piano is at its most virtuosic, with glistening displays of color, introducing the first theme. A second melody appears first in the woodwinds and strings, and the two alternate and intermingle, bringing this last of the Saint-Saëns piano concertos to a sparkling conclusion.

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