

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

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Overture to La Cenerentola (Cinderella)

Gioacchino Rossini

born in Pesaro, near Bologna, Italy, in 1792;

died in Paris in 1868

premiere: Teatro Valle, Rome, January 25, 1817

instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone; timpani, percussion; strings

duration: 8 minutes

Rossini's "take" on the classic Charles Perrault fairy tale, *Cendrillon* (Cinderella) was composed in the winter of 1816-17 when he was 25 years old, immediately following the towering success of *The Barber of Seville*

Rossini had been commissioned by the Teatro Valle in Rome to write an opera for its pre-Christmas season in 1816. Alas, the result failed to pass the strict censorship of the Vatican, so a substitute had to be found--and quickly. The librettist, Jacopo Ferretti, suggested over a dozen subjects until, with the composer falling into a slumber across from him, he offered to set "Cinderella." Rossini awoke with a start and questioned if Ferretti had the "courage" to write a libretto on that classic fairy tale. So challenged Ferretti worked all night and produced a sketch, which 22 days later he had finished. Rossini, working right behind him, had his music done in 24. He was aided in the rush job by "borrowing" liberally from earlier successes, a not uncommon practice of the day. This was true of much of the Overture, which came from an opera, *La Gazzetta (The Newspaper)* that he had composed for Naples the previous August. It was unlikely that the Romans would have heard it yet!

The initial performances earned mixed reviews, to Rossini's dismay--for he had great confidence in the project--but subsequently the opera "took off," becoming preferred even to *The Barber* during the rest of the 19th century. Ferretti made significant changes to the Perrault tale: the Wicked Stepmother was replaced by a Wicked Stepfather, Don Magnifico;

the Fairy Godmother became Alidoro, a philosopher; and for some reason the glass slipper became a bracelet.

This is the first performance of the La Cenerentola Overture by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.

Symphony No. 1 in D Major

Franz Schubert

born in Vienna in 1797;

died there in 1828

premiere: not publicly performed in his lifetime.

instrumentation: flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns, 2 trumpets; timpani; strings

duration: 29 minutes

Franz Schubert was a most precocious young composer and wrote a lot of music in nearly all genres, but little of it was heard publicly during his lifetime. This is especially the case with his eight symphonies. Even private performances were rare and thus few musicians or composers considered Schubert to even be a symphonist. Yet they are among his most important works, so expressive are they of an exciting “new” talent on the scene.

Schubert came to know the great symphonic works of Mozart, Haydn, and the early symphonies of Beethoven while playing in the student orchestra of the Imperial and Royal Seminary in Vienna. While just into his teens he began to experiment with orchestral writing, including three overtures and some fragments. Finally he produced his First Symphony at the ripe old age of sixteen, finishing the score on October 28, 1813. It was given its first performance by the student orchestra but, like its sister symphonies, never received a public airing.

In this first effort he is already a confident symphonic composer, using the full Classical orchestra (with only one flute) with grace and distinction. The first movement opens with a stately introduction, resembling early Beethoven, and this feeling is enhanced by the second theme, which suggests perhaps the Finale of the “Eroica.” But Schubert’s

treatment of this subject is his own, as is his return to the opening stately theme. The Haydnesque *andante* second movement is even more in Schubert's emerging distinctive style, as can be learned from listening to his later symphonies. The melodic line is confident, underscored by expressive harmonies. The third movement, a *menuetto* in the usual $\frac{3}{4}$ time, brings to the fore the wind instruments; a contrasting *trio* center section calls to mind the Austrian *ländler* and waltzes that Schubert scatters so freely among his later compositions. The joyous melody of the finale is bold and bustling, before Schubert suggests a return to the opening movement, thus rounding off the symphony in an organic way.

This is the first performance of Schubert's First Symphony by the Richmond Symphony.

Concerto No. 3 for Piano & Orchestra In C Minor, Opus 37

Ludwig van Beethoven

born in Bonn, Germany, in 1770;

died in Vienna in 1827

premiere: Vienna, April 5, 1803

instrumentation: solo piano; 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns, 2 trumpets; timpani; strings

duration: 36 minutes

The late opus number for the Third Piano Concerto is deceptive. Although it was published shortly after its premiere in 1803, Beethoven had in fact composed it in the late spring of 1800, shortly after his First Symphony and the Opus 18 string quartets. It is, therefore, an early work written under the influence of the Viennese classicism of Haydn and Mozart. Nevertheless, this concerto heralds a major transition in Beethoven's development as a composer. While its indebtedness to Mozart is evident, Beethoven here draws upon one of Mozart's least typical concertos, No. 24, K. 491, also in C Minor, as a point of reference for some striking innovations.

Its premiere performance came in a concert of Beethoven's music at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, one of those gargantuan evenings of

great length, opening with his First Symphony and featuring, among some shorter works, the first performance of the Second Symphony, the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, and finally the Third Piano Concerto. As was often the case with such hastily arranged affairs, parts of the oratorio and the concerto were not finished until the last minute. Beethoven's pupil, Ferdinand Ries, found the master sitting up in bed at 5 a.m. the day of the concert, writing out trombone parts for the oratorio. The only rehearsal began at 8 a.m. and did not go well; by noon the players were frustrated and grumpy. Beethoven's patron for the evening, Count Lichnowsky, saved the day, however, by providing a bountiful luncheon, and the seven-hour rehearsal (no musicians' union in those days!) finally ground to a halt. And none too soon; the concert was set to start at 6 p.m. so as to assure that the long program would be over by midnight.

At the concert a young nobleman, Ritter von Seyfried, was to turn pages for Beethoven as soloist. Unfortunately the pages before him seemed almost bare of notes. The composer had only had time to jot down some short-hand reminders of what he was supposed to play. Seyfried moaned, "I saw almost nothing but empty leaves, at the most here and there a few Egyptian hieroglyphs...He played nearly all the solo part from memory...Whenever he reached an 'invisible' passage he gave me a secret nod. My evident anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly." Not surprisingly, the Concerto was indifferently received. Only with the second performance a year later, with young Ries at the piano playing from a finished score, and Beethoven on the podium, did the work receive an enthusiastic response.

The Concerto opens in the minor key as unison strings state the first very Beethovenian theme. It is followed by a Mozartean second subject played in a related key by the clarinets and first violins. As the extended orchestral *tutti* draws to a close, the solo piano enters with rising scales and restates the orchestral exposition. The second subject is expanded before the orchestra rejoins in a joyful version of the opening theme. After some piano embellishments both subjects are recapitulated in dramatic and radiant fashion. The solo cadenza that follows was composed by Beethoven in 1809 and shows a slightly different aesthetic. After the cadenza he departs from the usual practice of having the orchestra alone recap the opening; instead the piano dominates the coda, ending the movement with scales that recall the first solo entry.

Unlike in his later concertos, the slow movement does not flow into the finale without a break but stands alone, its independence announced

by the use of a key that is very distant from that of the first movement. The lyrical principal theme, a Chopinesque nocturne before Chopin, is fully developed. The unusual middle section features the flute and bassoon in a fragmentary conversation while the piano is relegated to providing shimmering background embellishments.

For the Finale Beethoven returns to the key of C Minor for a light and lively *rondo* that foreshadows his later genius. The brisk opening piano solo arises from the notes of the final chord of the middle movement. The second subject is a lovely tune sung by the clarinet. When the main theme returns it is presented as a little fugue. A recapitulation follows of both the main and second subjects. The coda is in 6/8 time, a rollicking episode of high spirits that ends the Concerto in a major key.

The RSO performed the Third Piano Concerto in 1971 with Manfred Blum conducting and Gary Towlen at the piano, and in 1992 with pianist Panayis Lyras as soloist and Thomas Elefant on the podium.

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