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March 2, 2020

Monterey Symphony
Program Notes
April 2020

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Concerto, op. 77 (composed 1878, premiered in Leipzig, New Years Day, 1879)

The two pieces on the April program were written by composers on holiday, away from the expectations of their busy working lives. Jean Sibelius began his second symphony in 1901 in an Italian mountain villa near Rapallo, far away from his native Finland, and Johannes Brahms began his violin concerto in the Austrian town of Pörschach, on the northern shore of lake Wörther in the summer of 1878, where he wrote in a letter to the famous music critic Eduard Hanslick that “the melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one.”

Brahms’s violin concerto was written for his dear friend, the violin virtuoso (and composer), Joseph Joachim. The two met in 1853, when Brahms was still a relative unknown and Joachim was already a celebrity. It was Joachim who introduced Brahms to the Schumanns, who would also become close friends and champions of the young composer. Joachim was no stranger to having concertos written for him, and premiered violin works by Brahms, Max Bruch, and Robert Schumann, among others. Brahms worked closely with Joachim (as well as Pablo de Sarasate and Émile Sauret in more limited capacities) on the concerto, asking for advice on certain passages and incorporating many of the suggestions. Joachim also wrote the cadenza that many violinists still use today. The friendship was a very important connection for Brahms. Despite a brief falling out between the two, many years later Brahms wrote the double concerto as a music olive branch for his friend, who readily accepted.

Brahms, who admired Beethoven, composed the violin concerto in D major, the same as Beethoven’s violin concerto. Joachim had convinced Brahms (who conducted the premiere concert) to program both concertos at the premiere in Leipzig on New Years Day 1879, despite Brahms’s reservations about doing so. After the composer rattled Joachim with his multiple last-minute changes, and a concerto that didn’t sound quite like a concerto to the audience in Leipzig, the piece was met with lukewarm applause. Thankfully, two weeks later, in Vienna, the audience was roused by the music, and the piece found itself on the way to becoming one of the standards of the repertoire.

It is worth noting that Brahms composed a concerto more symphonic in nature than the common virtuosic showpieces written by many of the earlier composer-performers. Of course, there are several very virtuosic passages with which the soloist must contend, but the first movement in particular follows a more serious compositional outline, with a double exposition in the orchestra and then violin, respectively. Brahms decided to cut out his original two middle movements in favor of making the concerto a three-movement work. Whereas many symphonic works (as well as Brahms’s soon-to-be-composed Second Piano Concerto) have four movements, three is the standard number for concertos. Brahms called his new middle movement “a poor *Adagio*,” but it contains some of the most beautiful lyricism within the work.

The second movement opens with an introduction in the winds, with a tender oboe solo soaring above the orchestra. In fact, the violin does not enter until nearly one third of the way through the movement, but the rest of the movement is devoted to the lyricism of the soloist. The

third movement is reminiscent of a *Tzigane*, or “gypsy music,” chosen perhaps as a nod to Joachim’s Hungarian heritage, and to Eduard Reményi, who had introduced Brahms and Joachim twenty-five years earlier. Whereas the first movement was serious Composition, the second heartfelt lyricism, this third movement is a virtuosic dance to the finish line, a celebration of the “gypsy” music that Brahms loved so well, for one of his closest friends and collaborators.

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) **Symphony No. 2 (1901-1902)**

The Famously Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius, has often been associated with Finnish nationalism in his music. Sibelius was indeed an ardent supporter of Finland’s desire for independence from Russia, which it finally achieved in 1917, after being under Russia’s rule since 1809. Sibelius, who grew up speaking Swedish in the home (Finland had been under Swedish control from the twelfth- to nineteenth-century) before devoting himself to learning and speaking in Finnish, eventually changed his name from the Swedish “Johan” to the French Jean to differentiate himself from the more prevalent Scandinavian influence.

Sibelius had shown natural abilities toward music as a child, but ended up enrolling in law school in 1885. However, like many other composers before and after him, Sibelius dropped out of law school after a year, and eventually moved to Berlin, where he would rub elbows with many famous musicians and hear the greatest works of the Western Art Music canon. Sibelius saw himself as a modernist, although some circles (such as the Second Viennese School, with Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern) saw him as more conservative because he chose to use diatonic melodies and tonal harmonies. His style made him popular in Finland, Britain, and the United States, but he was less popular on the continent. As much as he enjoyed the cultural delights of Berlin, the composer found himself drawn back to his native Finland, where he eventually settled in 1891. Four years later, Sibelius would compose *Four Legends from the Kalevala*, or the *Lemminkäinen Suite*, the work that launched him to fame and made him the most famous musical Finn of the twentieth century.

Sibelius began sketches for his second symphony near the small mountain town of Rapallo, Italy, in the Spring of 1901. Baron Axel Carpelan, who himself had very little money, raised the funds for Sibelius to travel there with his family. Sibelius recounted in his journal that he originally conceived as a tone poem about Don Juan. He wrote, “I was sitting in the dark in my castle when a stranger entered. I asked who he could be again and again—but there was no answer. I tried to make him laugh but he remained silent. At last the stranger began to sing—then Don Juan knew who it was. It was death.” After working on the sketches, Sibelius thought maybe the work would be about Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, but finally he realized that the sketches made the most sense as a symphony, and he completed the work in November of 1901. Shortly thereafter he revised the entire symphony extensively, finishing the work in January of 1902.

Sibelius conducted the premiere of his Second Symphony in Helsinki in 1902. The public was immediately taken by the piece. It struck a chord in the Finn’s national imagination, and even though Sibelius argued that the piece was not programmatic or related to the fight for independence, it is difficult to believe that it does not have at least the smallest hint of nationalism. The symphony sounds undeniably Finnish, with folk-like melodies, combining pastoral themes as well as a duality of calm and restlessness throughout the work. Sulho Ratna (1901-1960), a Finnish composer, asserted about Sibelius’s music that “There is something about this music—at least for us—that leads us to ecstasy; almost like a shaman with his musical drum.” Whether or not the symphony was about Finnish independence, the triumphant finale lifted up the listeners at the premiere, and continues to do so to this day.