

Valentine's Special with Itzhak Perlman

LAURA TURNER HALL
SCHERMERHORN SYMPHONY CENTER
February 14, 2009 at 8 p.m.
February 15, 2009 at 3 p.m.

Nashville Symphony
Itzhak Perlman, *conductor and violin*

BEETHOVEN Romance No. 1 in G major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 40

BEETHOVEN Romance No. 2 in F major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 50

BRAHMS Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn, Op. 56a

Chorale St. Antoni: Andante

Variation I: Poco più animato

Variation II: Più vivace

Variation III: Con moto

Variation IV: Andante con moto

Variation V: Vivace

Variation VI: Vivace

Variation VII: Grazioso

Variation VIII: Presto non troppo

Finale: Andante

intermission

TCHAIKOVSKY Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

Andante sostenuto

Andantino in modo di canzone

Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato

Finale: Allegro con fuoco

Mr. Perlman records for EMI/Angel, Sony Classical/Sony BMG Masterworks, Deutsche Grammophon, London/Decca, Erato/Elektra International Classics and Telarc.

Mr. Perlman appears by arrangement with IMG Artists.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(born in Bonn, 1770; died in Vienna, 1827)

Romance No. 1 in G major, Op. 40

Scored for flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns and strings

estimated length: 7 minutes

Romance No. 2 in F major, Op. 50

Scored for flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns and strings

estimated length: 9 minutes

Beethoven may have written his Romances for violin and orchestra as potential slow movements for an unfinished concerto, but in the end he published them as separate pieces. The F major Romance may date from as early as 1798, and the G major was probably written between 1801 and 1802. The G major Romance appeared in print first, in 1803, hence its earlier opus number; the F major Romance was published two years later.

In German, *Romanze* designates a songlike instrumental piece in *alla breve* meter, or “cut time”; the French *Romance* is a special subcategory that was used for violin concerto slow movements by composers such as Giovanni Battista Viotti, an Italian contemporary of Beethoven’s.

Beethoven’s sweetly “singing” Romances clearly show his familiarity with this French style. The G major opens with a hymn-like phrase played by the violin alone in double stops (in which two or more pitches are bowed simultaneously on a stringed instrument). The exposed nature of the passage makes it a challenging opening for the soloist, and may suggest one reason that this Romance is performed less often than the F major. Beethoven provides contrast to this recurring theme, and to a secondary lyrical idea, by introducing a more energetic minor-mode theme. The soloist plays the final return of the main theme in a higher register with richer orchestral accompaniment. Though the piece seems as if it will end quietly, Beethoven requests that the final chords be played fortissimo.

The F major Romance is structurally similar to the G major, though with a slightly different key scheme. Its high range and sweet melodic line make it slightly more rewarding for the solo violin to play. In both Romances, Beethoven interjects contrasting orchestral sections at the ends of thematic statements, characterizing them with majestic long-short rhythms. He creates a wonderful orchestral touch at the end of the F major Romance by echoing the last three notes of the solo violin in the winds, then in the strings and horns.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

(born in Hamburg, 1833; died in Vienna, 1897)

Variations on a Theme by J. Haydn, op. 56a

Scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, triangle and strings

estimated length: 19 minutes

In a loose-leaf folder called “Copies of Outstanding Masterpieces of the 16th-18th Centuries for Study Purposes,” Brahms kept musical transcripts he had been collecting since the 1850s. On one leaf Brahms had copied the Andante from Haydn’s Symphony No. 16 in B-flat major, and on the other side the so-called Chorale St. Antoni from Divertimento No. 1, attributed to Haydn. He had seen both compositions in the fall of 1870, while on a visit to his friend C.F. Pohl, who was at work on a biography of Haydn.

Brahms copied the Chorale St. Antoni almost exactly as he had seen it in the transcription by Pohl — two oboes, two horns, three bassoons and serpent (a curved bass horn, obsolete in the 19th century). When he used the chorale as the basis for his *Variations on a Theme by J. Haydn* in 1873, he kept the theme in the same key, tempo and meter. He even preserved most of the original scoring, only replacing the third bassoon and serpent with a contrabassoon, adding cello and bass pizzicato, and filling out the last phrase with flutes, clarinets and trumpets. As Brahms stated proudly, he even kept the parallel fifths — considered a compositional “mistake” since the Renaissance.

Modern scholars doubt whether Haydn composed the St. Antoni Chorale (or the entire Divertimento), but Brahms naturally took it for granted that the theme was Haydn’s. More relevant is the unusual phrase structure of the theme, which is divided into five-measure lengths. This structure must have immediately attracted Brahms, who preserved it in most of his eight ingeniously wrought character variations.

Throughout the first variation, one hears the bell-like repeated notes that end the statement of the theme; around them Brahms weaves flowing counterfigures in the three-against-two rhythms that he loved. For the lively second variation, he shifts to the minor mode and exploits the opening long-short rhythmic figure of the theme. Returning to the major, Variation 3 flows peacefully, with a lovely lifting sensation caused by regrouping the phrase structure into six-measure lengths, followed by four-measure lengths. Shifting again to minor, Variation 4 shows Brahms’ formidable contrapuntal skill while maintaining a wonderful, lyrical flow. The impetuous fifth variation, based on the start of the theme, imparts a scherzo-like character, and the lively sixth variation suggests the hunt with its horns and galloping rhythms. The lilting Siciliano rhythm of the exquisite seventh variation provides a great contrast. The eighth is a fleeting, whispered variation of mysterious character.

For his Finale, Brahms fashions a repeating bass pattern from the theme, which he then repeats 16 times with varied harmonies and figurations above it — like a Baroque passacaglia. The return of the Chorale theme in all its glory constitutes one of Brahms’ greatest moments; the artistry of this variation foreshadows the crowning formal achievement of the last movement of his Fourth Symphony.

Felix Otto Dessoff, Kapellmeister of the great Philharmonic (Court Opera Orchestra) in Vienna, begged Brahms for the premiere of the *Haydn Variations*, and invited him to conduct it at the opening subscription concert on November 2, 1873. This great occasion for Brahms, signaling his growing recognition in Vienna, represented not only a milestone in his own career, but in music history: the introduction of a new genre — the first set of independent variations for orchestra.

PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY

(born in Kamsko-Votkinsk, 1840; died in St. Petersburg, 1893)

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

Scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals and strings

estimated length: 44 minutes

Tchaikovsky wrote most of his Fourth Symphony in 1877, a time of personal crisis. In July that year he entered into a disastrous marriage with Antonina Milyukova. She had sent him several passionate letters beginning in April, and they finally met in May. Matters might have rested with his kind but firm assurance that he did not love her, but Tchaikovsky had come to feel that marriage might quell gossip about his sexual orientation. Furthermore, he began to think about Onegin's heartless spurning of Tatyana in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which he was considering as a possible opera subject. He instantly regretted the marriage, finding that Antonina not only "did not inspire friendship" in him, but was actually "hateful" to him. He escaped from the marriage by running away several times; by October he was in a complete state of mental collapse, whereupon his brother Anatoly arranged for a permanent separation.

The symphony had been completely sketched by June 8, but the scoring was interrupted by the Antonina upheaval and by *Eugene Onegin*. Tchaikovsky's manuscript, left behind in Moscow when he fled, was sent to him in Switzerland, where in mid-December he was able to resume work. By December 27 he had finished scoring the first three movements; he put the finishing touches on the finale on January 7, 1878.

By happy fate Madame Nadezhda von Meck entered his life the very same year. She became his patroness and confidante, although they never met. Tchaikovsky poured out his feelings in letters, and she offered financial support without making any personal claims on him. Tchaikovsky dedicated his Fourth Symphony "To my best Friend," but she was the only person in the audience at the first performance in Moscow on February 22, 1878, who knew that friend's identity.

After composing the symphony, Tchaikovsky came up with an explicit program, which he confided to Mme. von Meck. He later qualified his description, but it retains its informational value, provided one does not take it as a guide to successive musical events. "This work is patterned after Beethoven's Fifth," he wrote, "not as to musical content, but as to the basic idea. Don't you see a program in the 'Fifth'?" As in that great work, "inexorable Fate" is the main idea behind Tchaikovsky's Fourth.

The first movement, one of the composer's most formally innovative, begins with a commanding horn call — a familiar mannerism with Tchaikovsky — which he called "the kernel, the quintessence, the chief thought of the whole symphony. It is Fate, the fatal power which prevents one from attaining the goal of happiness.... There is nothing to be done but to submit to it and lament in vain." And indeed, Tchaikovsky never lets us forget this theme, recalling it at the end of the lengthy exposition, at the end of the development and again in the last movement. The first movement, in a highly unusual meter for symphonic use at that time (9/8), is also remarkable for the remote key area in which the second theme appears and for the extreme harmonic turbulence of the development section.

The ternary-form slow movement, Tchaikovsky said, "expresses another phase of suffering" — a feeling of melancholy at the bitter yet sweet recollections of youth. Yet it does offer respite from the weight of the first movement. Certain passages in both this movement and the Scherzo were criticized by composer and critic

Sergei Taneyev for suggesting ballet music, prompting Tchaikovsky to defend his use of dancelike tunes by citing the great Beethoven and to declare that there could be nothing censorious in the term “ballet music.”

In the justly famous Scherzo, wrote Tchaikovsky, “First the strings play by themselves entirely pizzicato; in the trio the woodwinds enter and also play by themselves; they are replaced by the brass section, again playing alone; at the end of the Scherzo all three groups answer one another in short phrases. I think this sound effect will be interesting.”

“Interesting” was quite an understatement. The movement created a sensation at its first performance and delights audiences to this day. “The third movement expresses no definite feelings,” he further divulged, “rather it is a succession of capricious arabesques, those intangible images that pass through the mind when one has drunk wine and feels the first touch of intoxication.”

Tchaikovsky based his Finale on the Russian folk song “In the fields there stood a birch,” although in the rhythmically altered form in which it appears in Balakirev’s *Overture on Three Russian Themes*. He sketched the movement only four days after he proposed to Antonina, which makes the choice of this song significant. The birch tree was the center of a gathering of unmarried women who wove wedding wreaths from its leafy twigs. After performing a round dance, they would throw their wreaths into a stream; those whose wreaths floated would marry. Much later he wrote: “If you truly find no joy within yourself, look for it in others. Go to the people. See — they know how to...give themselves up to pleasure! A peasant festival is depicted. No sooner do you forget yourself in this spectacle of others’ joy, than relentless Fate reminds you of its presence.” The shattering of the merriment by the Fate theme cannot be missed.

— *Program notes* ©Jane Vial Jaffe