Program Notes

A Grand Romance

October 21, 2023

Belleville Philharmonic Orchestra
Joseph Choi, Conductor
May Phang, Guest Artist

Overture to Ruslan and Lyudmila
Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857)

Before there was Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and even Mussorgsky, there was Glinka. The latter is the precursor of all the great Russian composers so familiar to today's concertgoer, but ironically, in this country, he is known to audiences for only one composition: the sparkling overture to his opera, *Ruslan and Lyudmila.* Composer of many songs, chamber works, and other compositions, his major contributions to musical history are both that opera (1842) and his earlier opera, *A Life for the Tsar* (1836). Both works are infused with Russian elements--musical and narrative—and are ample evidence of his position as the father of the Russian nationalist school.

Scion of a distinguished and wealthy family, Glinka received a musical education along with a thorough general education that was intended to lead him, like so many of his ilk, into the Russian governmental bureaucracy. A good job in the Board of Communication ultimately was pushed into the background by ever-increasing musical activities, culminating in a three-year trip to Italy (ostensibly for reasons of health) where the blandishments of Donizetti and Bellini, among others, dominated his attention. He moved on to Vienna and Berlin, and the die was cast for his career in music as a composer rooted firmly in the Western European tradition.

Back in Russia by 1834, he came under the literary influence of Russian nationalism, and his opera, *A Life for the Tsar*, was the perfect vehicle for the official state dogma exalting the tsar, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Russian ethnicity. Glinka's talents shone brightly in the work—especially his gift for scintillating orchestration. The latter, of course, went on to characterize almost all of our favorite Russian composers.

A Life for the Tsar was a great success, and paved the way for his treatment of Pushkin's *Ruslan and Lyudmila.* Pushkin was not able to collaborate with the composer, owing to the poet's death in an ill-advised duel, but, Glinka worked with others, and the fantastic tale of magic, sorcerers, and the supernatural became his second opera. And it must be said, that in it a tradition that leads right through Rimsky-Korsakov and on to Stravinsky was born: innovative harmonies and scales, supernatural tales, brilliant orchestration—all in the service of dramatic music. Unfortunately, the opera was not a great success, its structural weaknesses, complicated plot, and the rising popularity of Italian opera in Russia led to its relative obscurity. The overture did survive, however, and it became a worthy chestnut of the orchestral literature.

Cast in the familiar sonata form, it opens with a driving frenzy in the strings serving as the first theme, with the usual broad, lyrical contrasting theme following shortly in the lower strings. Snatches of the tune are developed in an atmosphere that clearly evokes a bit of the mysterious, magical elements of the opera, followed by a recap that spurs the cheerful ferocity even further. A loud, descending (and quite progressive, for the times) whole tone scale in the low brass evokes the opera's evil sorcerer, as this brilliant curtain raiser careens to a rousing conclusion.

Preludio Sinfonico

Emmanuel Sikora (1992-)

Emmanuel Sikora is a Peruvian-American composer and pianist.

The Washington Post has described his music as "an appealing melding of the romantic and the contemporary, unselfconscious and unpretentious." His work has been played by internationally known soloists including concert pianist David Rubinstein and mezzo-soprano Jacqueline Horner-Kwiatek, and ensembles including the L'viv Philharmonic, Syracuse University Orchestra, and Ukrainian Festival Orchestra.

Following high school, when his music won young composers' competitions on the national level (NAfME), he went to Queens College (CUNY) to study composition with Bruce Saylor and Bernstein-protégé Maurice Peress. Later at the Frie Universität Berlin he was a pupil of Samuel Adler.

Sikora's Lyric Symphony was the catalyst for a collaboration between Syracuse University and the Tully Arts Council, with the intent of strengthening relations between the arts in Onondaga County. The symphony's premiere with the SU Orchestra, conducted by James Tapia, was a milestone in raising local awareness of the composer and orchestra. His community involvement also includes regular commissions from the Brockport Symphony Orchestra and Society for New Music (Syracuse), and he recently collaborated with Vince Ambrosetti on the composition and publication of two hymns through ILP.

His opera Astra was recorded by the L'viv Philharmonic and Galician Chamber Choir in Ukraine, starring Iren Zhovtolyst in the title role, and LeonVoci Baritone Andriy Stetskyy as Hades. It was the L'viv Philharmonic's first studio recording of an opera. On two occasions Astra has been broadcast on WCNY's new music program Fresh Ink.

Sikora has attained local fame in Arequipa (Peru) as a pianist, after giving two recitals at the Teatro Municipal, where his programs consisted of original works and improvised fantasies on Peruvian folk music. He is active as a singer and conductor with community ensembles and is contracted to conduct the concert premiere of his opera Fanuel with the Ukrainian Festival Orchestra and Chorus in 2022.

A Musical Love Triangle

Brahms and the Schumanns

On February 27, 1854, Robert Schumann attempted suicide by jumping from a bridge into the river Rhine. Some fishermen soon rescued him, but his sanity was gone. For years he had struggled with mental illness: he heard voices; the note "A" droned on in his head for hours; strange music played in his mind; visions of angels turned into hellish nightmares. When he emerged from the river, he was taken by his own request to an asylum, where he would spend the remaining two years of his life. Despite lucid periods, the great composer would never recover.

As soon as news of the catastrophe reached him, Johannes Brahms raced to Düsseldorf to assist Robert's wife Clara, who was also a composer and accomplished pianist. Clara was pregnant with her seventh child. Brahms had arrived at the Schumanns' home five months before as a young, unknown, aspiring composer. After hearing Brahms play some of his own music, Robert and Clara had instantly recognized him as a genius. They welcomed him into their household, and Robert declared Brahms the true heir of Beethoven in a widely read musical publication, making him famous overnight.

For Johannes, the Schumanns were generous mentors and friends, and he was eager to help them in their time of need. He took up lodgings in Düsseldorf and began to help Clara sort through Robert's affairs and look after her children as she prepared for childbirth and the resumption of her career as one of Europe's leading pianists.

As Johannes and Clara spent more time together, their feelings for each other deepened into something beyond friendship. Brahms wrote to a friend, "I believe that I do not have more concern for and admiration for her than I love her and find love in her. I often have to restrain myself forcibly from just quietly putting my arms around her and even—: I don't know, it seems to me so natural that she could not misunderstand."

Clara confided to her diary, "There is the most complete accord between us… It is not his youth that attracts me: not, perhaps, my flattered vanity. No, it is the fresh mind, the gloriously gifted nature, the noble heart, that I love in him."

Such feelings were unspeakable and treacherous so long as Robert remained alive. After Robert's death, Clara and Johannes went to Switzerland accompanied by family. No one will ever know all that passed between them, but after the sojourn in Switzerland, the two parted ways. Brahms never married, and Clara would never remarry; they would remain steadfast friends for the rest of their lives.

Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 7
Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896)

According to Clara Wieck Schumann, "I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose—there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?" She must have written these dark words in a moment of despair, for she was, without a doubt, a gifted composer whose works are now highly respected, and for that matter, never really marginalized during her lifetime. The difficulty was that she was revered as one of the great pianists of the nineteenth century—the equal of anyone—and a trailblazer who established norms for performance, repertoire, and general artistic integrity that we now customarily expect from virtuoso pianists. Those who stand at the apex of performing excellence have always struggled to be accepted also as composers. Of course, she was married to one of the significant composers of the century. She championed and performed his works with devotion, and was his artistic partner and collaborator in every laudable way. If that were not enough, she bore eight children, raised them and her grandchildren, managed the household, earned the money, paid the bills, and travelled regularly to perform to Europe's accolades.

Her father, Friedrich Wieck, sold and repaired pianos, as well as teaching the instrument. Her unusual talent surfaced early, and he more or less made her development his life's work. Sadly, he was an unpleasant, lifelong tyrant in every regard. While her general education was neglected, her musical education was excellent, and exceptionally thorough. From a very early age, she was expected to practice for hours daily on piano, violin, and voice, and received rigorous training in music theory, counterpoint, harmony, and composition. By the time she was eleven years old, she was already a touring concert pianist—and had known her future husband for two years.

Clara and Robert fell in love early, and fought bitterly with her father for years—including legal wrangles before they married when she was twenty-one. Their marriage was one of deep devotion and mutual artistic respect. When they wed in 1840, he was relatively unknown, and she was an international celebrity. However, they had already been collaborating artistically for some time. Robert encouraged her to compose and most of her works were published—they did not languish in obscurity. In some ways, the two were the arts' first "power couple." The first decade of marriage was blissful and burgeoned with musical success, but by the 1850s, Robert's physical and mental health had declined precipitously. In 1854, in desperation, he attempted suicide by flinging himself into the Rhine River. After rescue, he demanded to be institutionalized in a progressive asylum. There, he spent the next two years in dementia before his death in 1856. Clara was never allowed to see him during that time, and visited with him only once, two days before his demise.

Indefatigable, Clara soldiered on for another forty years, active as mother, grandmother, concert pianist, composer, and teacher—not to mention her championship of Johannes Brahms. Her last surviving child, Eugenie, died in 1938. Clara was a remarkable woman in every way.

Schumann's concerto for piano was completed, published, and given its first performance in 1836 when she was sixteen years old. However, its actual history is a bit more complicated. She had begun it three years earlier, composing the last movement first, with more than a bit of Robert's help; he orchestrated it, as well. She had conceived it as a stand-alone work, but then went on to turn it into a concerto by composing the first and second movements—she orchestrated those. The concerto displays all of the characteristics that one might predict in one so young and so consummately talented as a performer. The virtuoso figurations are facile, challenging, and mature; her harmonies are advanced and colorful; her artistic imagination is rather unfettered; and, notably, her sense and command of musical form is adventuresome, and displays more than a little willingness for the unconventional. We must remember, that, true to her times and generation, at that age she performed much of the somewhat trivial, bombastic, but extremely difficult repertoire of composers for solo piano of the time—the best of which was Franz Liszt. It must be said that much of her concerto is redolent of the young Frйdйric Chopin—not that that is any crime.

The first movement begins with a bold statement of the first theme, followed by a flourish in the solo piano. Soon, the soloist gives the full main theme, unsupported by the orchestra—and it does really smack of Chopin—in all the good ways. Florid passagework worthy of Liszt leads to the second theme, but here, conventionality breaks down. Is this sonata form? Is this an unusual approach to theme and variation technique? The jury decidedly is still out, for the form is unusual and ill-defined. The second theme seems to start out in the conventional key, but soon goes astray, never to return. A kind of development section ensues in which we do hear allusions to the themes, and harmonic diversions in

Ab, F minor and E major. However, there's no recapitulation, for the mood quiets, the tempo slows, and we quit the movement. A slow ascending arpeggio leads us directly to the winsome Romanze in Ab (remember, this is a concerto in A minor—a "distant" key from Ab). What could be more Romantic? After an ingratiating harmonic diversion, we return to the main key with a cello solo accompanied by piano figurations that is nothing less than sublime. Perhaps it is somewhat of a reach to think of the heart-rending cello solo in Brahms' second piano concerto, but there it is. The cello leads us to the end and the transition via soft timpani to the energetic last movement is introduced by the trumpets.

After the more modest proportions and mood of the first two movements, the last movement is clearly the most substantial of the three, which more or less turns the order of magnitude around from the usual procedure. It is largely conventional for concertos, as well as for much of the repertoire, to craft first movements with more gravitas, and last ones that break the tension, closing with a somewhat lighter or more sparkling ambience. Not so here. It is easy to see why Clara originally conceived the last movement as a stand-alone, virtuoso *tour de force* for piano and orchestra, without the need to say more. Most folks see the rhythm and energy of the movement as a typical *Grand Polonaise,* certainly in the tradition of Chopin—and there is much say for that. The form is similar to a traditional rondo. But, in keeping with the composer's rather free observance of established form in the first movement, she similarly crafts a very loose version of the clear contrasting sections characteristic of a rondo. But, of course, it all doesn't really matter. This dynamic movement is exciting, entertaining evidence of the remarkable executant skills of this very young woman. By this time in her life, Clara Schumann was an experienced, admired performer in the cutthroat world of acclaimed piano virtuosos—and this formidable, imaginative closing movement is dazzling testimony thereof.

Symphony #2 in D Major, Op. 73
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Simply put, the composers of the nineteenth century after Beethoven tended to divide themselves into two groups. The progressives were true "Romantics," and were greatly influenced by the extra-musical ideas that were the subjects of contemporary literature, poetry, and painting, among others. They devised new genres, such as the tone poems of Smetana and Liszt, the music dramas of Wagner, and the characteristic piano pieces of Chopin. This music, to use a phrase still common among seekers of meaning in music, was about "something"--meaning something familiar to human existence

Others, Brahms most significantly, still adhered strongly to the musical philosophy that great music was simply about "itself," and required no extra-musical references for complete and satisfying meaning. So, he and his ilk continued to write "pure" or "abstract" music, like sonatas and symphonies (a so-called symphony is just a sonata for orchestra). The example of Beethoven's music (in this tradition) loomed almost as overwhelming for Brahms, and he waited for decades after reaching musical maturity to essay his first symphony, completing it in 1876, when he was forty-three years old. It garnered sufficient success to be deemed the "Tenth," referencing Beethoven's nine in that genre, although it bears more comparison with Beethoven's fifth symphony.

Well, it didn't take Brahms nearly so long to write his second symphony as it did the first, and the mood of the work is a strong contrast to that of the mighty seriousness of the first. That is not to say that the second is not without a *gravitas* that is an essential part of the composer's musical (and his own, for that matter) personality. But, if anything, one could characterize this important work as "sunny." It's common to call it his "pastoral" symphony. That being said, it's still Brahms, and therefore infused with melancholy—not tragedy, not sadness, just deep reflection upon the human condition. It was composed during the summer of 1877, while Brahms was vacationing in a particularly beautiful part of southern Austria, surrounded inspiring mountains and tranquil lakes. He certainly understood the work's general cheerfulness, but playfully teased his publisher about the nature of the symphony by claiming that it was such a dark and gloomy work that the score should be edged in black. We know better, of course.

The first movement opens with a simple little four-note motive in the low strings that absolutely forms the core of the piece. Only a consummate craftsman like Brahms could do so much with such a simple idea. The motive pervades the movement, and it's a cheerful and rewarding process to spot as many variants of it as the music unfolds. As soon as we hear that motive, romantic horns—evoking the bucolic setting—play another essential motive. We'll hear a lot of each. The warmth and optimism of the opening has no sooner started, than unexpectedly there is a soft, menacing timpani roll and quiet, sinister passage in the trombones. Brahms explained, though he had intended to do

without the trombones in the first movement, he couldn't resist depicting the "black wings" constantly flapping above us all. Soon thereafter, the alert listener will spot Brahms' famous "Cradle Song" melody appearing as a major melodic element in the movement. The middle of the movement is a vigorous working out of all that we have heard, including some startling real nastiness in the trombones, that remind us that all is not happiness and light. A varied review of all the familiar wraps up the movement, and we end calmly and securely in a soft chord of affirmation.

The second movement is one of Brahms' loveliest creations, beginning with the cello section spinning out a long-breathed, elegant line. The lyricism continues with other equally attractive tunes, and after a short development, the movement ends as tranquilly and softly as does the first. The third movement is a graceful evocation of a lighthearted walk and scamper through the out of doors, to my mind. There are two contrasting sections that alternate: the first a gentle stroll—but almost slowly waltzing, and the second a rough, rather Beethoven-like scurry.   Yet, for all the motion, this movement, too, like the first two, ends quietly.

After all of this placidity, the time has come to "let'er rip," and the last movement opens in the strings with the quiet intensity of summer lighting on the horizon. We just know that this is going to be a romp, and it is. A few simple, memorable themes carry this thing along, and while it is tempting to track them as Brahms works them around and about—it's not really about that process at all. It's about his uncanny ability to build and release tension, to kick you about with unexpected accents, to cross and re-cross the meters as he builds a tight, and remarkable architecture that drives in a fury to the end. The so-called second theme becomes the primary element that relentlessly carries us to the final magnificent statement in the trumpets, and a blaze of a D major chord in the now optimistic trombones brings it all to a conclusion. There are few moments in all of music so glorious.

Program notes by William E. Runyan and Ethan Edwards