NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2018

Augustin Hadelich Returns

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Strauss: *Don Juan*

This work balances heroism and swashbuckle with two ravishing love scenes. Listen for violin and oboe solos, glorious horn writing and a surprise ending.

Britten: Violin Concerto

Composed in America during the war, this concerto is played without pause. His experience writing for voice is evident—sometimes searingly so—in the violin line. Notice the timpani's rhythmic pattern in the first movement and the *passacaglia* that concludes the concerto.

Schumann: Symphony No. 3, "Rhenish"

The "Rhenish" Symphony is Schumann's only symphony without a slow introduction. Schumann plunges in with a buoyant, vigorous first movement. His scherzo is a bucolic scene on the Rhine, complete with German folk melodies. Cologne's magnificent cathedral inspired the reverent fourth movement, leading to an optimistic finale.

STRAUSS: *Don Juan*, Op. 20

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Composed: 1888

World Premiere: November 11, 1888, in Weimar. The composer conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1945–46 season. Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 17 minutes

Between 1886 and 1915, Richard Strauss composed 10 large tone poems that have become cornerstones of symphonic literature. All are relatively youthful pieces. Though not the first of them, *Don Juan* is a work of genius, and it was recognized as such immediately. Effectively, this piece launched Strauss on his long and meteoric career.

Nicolaus Lenau's poetic drama focuses on the libertine hero's psychological state, rather than his amorous adventures. Three passages from Lenau head Strauss' score, setting forth Don Juan's philosophy: a quest for life's supreme moment, without regard for the consequences. At the end, in the midst of a duel, he discards his sword intentionally, rendering himself vulnerable to the inevitable death thrust. Life has become meaningless to him.

Two love scenes, a carnival and a battle are easily discernible in *Don Juan*, but Strauss' music rises above mere musical storytelling. Strauss was probably identifying with Lenau's hero. He was courting Pauline de Ahna, the soprano he eventually married. Their romance inspired some of his finest love music in *Don Juan.* The structure of the tone poem is clearly related to sonata form, with the addition of the two love episodes.

Strauss' hero is represented by the horns' principal theme. He is noble and dashing, hardly the reprehensible villain of da Ponte and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Strauss was fascinated by Lenau's more

idealistic presentation of the incurable lover, constantly searching for female perfection. His Don Juan is ardent and tender, given to sensuality and passion with women and spirited combat in the more public world.

Brilliantly orchestrated, *Don Juan* is particularly demanding for the French horns, whose principal theme represents the hero. There is more to *Don Juan* than big brass sound. however. Strauss' evocations of Don Juan's interaction with women leave an equally strong musical impression. Lenau's poem introduces five of the Don's mistresses, of whom Strauss presents two. Both are personified through orchestral episodes that feature solos, respectively for concertmaster and principal oboe. As heartfelt and sensual as the violin passage is, the oboe's melody lifts the ecstasy to a higher plane.

At the conclusion of the love music, Strauss asserts the strength of the Don's personality by introducing an entirely new theme, again on horns. It is his most heroic motive, and it works in concert with the opening theme through the development and recapitulation that ensue. The astonishing brilliance and skill of Strauss' orchestration and his handling of the large symphonic form combine with the implications of Lenau's poetic drama in this exciting masterpiece.

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, harp, timpani, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel and strings.

BRITTEN: Violin Concerto, Op. 15

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born: November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, Suffolk

Died: December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh

Composed: 1939

World Premiere: March 28, 1940, at Carnegie Hall. Antonio Brosa was the soloist; Sir John Barbirolli conducted the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York (now the New York Philharmonic).

NJSO Premiere: 2005–06 season. Janine Jansen was the soloist; Neeme Järvi conducted.

Duration: 31 minutes

During the Vietnam War, many young American men sought conscientious objector status to exempt them from the military draft. Benjamin Britten chose a similar course at age 26 as the prospect of war threatened Europe. With the tenor Peter Pears, he left England in late April 1939, traveling first to Canada, then to Michigan and New York, where he attended the American premiere of his orchestral Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge. He would remain in the United States for almost three years.

Britten's anti-war sentiments were not his only reason for the American trip. He was frustrated by England's failure to acknowledge his gift as a composer and thought he would find a warmer reception in the New World. Also, his friend and colleague W.H. Auden had left Europe for America in January 1939. Auden exerted a powerful influence over Britten at this point, and Britten was eager to join him.

This background is significant for Britten's Violin Concerto not only because the piece dates from the composer's American period but also because its reception in England was colored strongly by resentment against the expatriate composer.

By the time London audiences heard the new concerto in April 1941, England had been at war for more than a year and a half, and the Battle of Britain was underway. In some quarters, Britten was viewed as unpatriotic. A considerable brouhaha arose in the press. Was the absent composer disloyal and

cowardly, or nurturing his muse in a safe haven? Ernest Newman of *The Times* of London dubbed the controversy "the battle of Britten." Another factor affecting the work's reception was William Walton's Violin Concerto, also completed in 1939 and premiered in New York by the celebrated Jascha Heifetz. Britten's concerto has taken a back seat to Walton's ever since.

This violin concerto is not often played in the United States, making these performances by Augustin Hadelich especially welcome. It is one of Britten's most substantial and daring early works, unusual in form and emotional content. Its movements vary from the traditional arrangement and are played without pause. Britten's basic structure is slow-fast-slow, with a cadenza forming the bridge between the second movement and the finale.

He opens with timpani, introducing a rhythmic motive that dominates much of the thematic material. The emphasis is on violin tone and songfulness. Britten seems intent on exploring the instrument's rhapsodic side, alternating between lyrical and urgent passages.

The perpetual motion of the Scherzo requires extraordinary technique. The solo part abounds in harmonics, glissandi, scales in thirds, sixths, octaves and 10ths (10ths!), demanding great virtuosity. Britten's cadenza refers to music in both the first two movements.

Among traditional forms, Britten's favorite was the passacaglia—the Baroque series of sequential variations on a bass line. The finale to the Violin Concerto was his first essay in this form that was to prove so significant for him, most notably in the opera *Peter Grimes*. The discipline imposed by the passacaglia seemed to inspire his lyrical impulses, yet Britten's music leaves us feeling uncertain and searching. He ends with a question mark—or perhaps an ellipsis—rather than an exclamation point. He leaves to our imagination what, exactly, he was questioning.

Instrumentation: three flutes (two doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, side drum, tenor drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel, harp, strings and solo violin.

SCHUMANN: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 97 ("Rhenish")

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born: June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Saxony, Germany

Died: July 29, 1856, in Endenich, near Bonn, Germany

Composed: November–December 1850

World Premiere: February 6, 1851, in Düsseldorf. The composer conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1939–40 season. Frieder Weissmann conducted.

Duration: 32 minutes

As Robert Schumann's mental illness progressed, it took a debilitating toll on his personal life and musical creativity. Still, occasional periods of lucidity eased his torment. Such times invariably followed a move or change of scenery. In late summer 1850, Robert and Clara Schumann moved to Düsseldorf, capital of the Rhineland and frequent site of the important Lower Rhenish Festival. Robert had a promising new appointment: Ferdinand Hiller had recommended that Schumann succeed him as conductor of the excellent Düsseldorf orchestra. Matters began promisingly: both community and orchestra welcomed the Schumann family, and the composer was pleased with the high caliber of the orchestra and chorus he was to lead.

New surroundings and the change of venue also rekindled his enthusiasm for writing. In practically no time, Robert had written a cello concerto (published in 1854 as Op. 129) and undertaken a new symphony in E-flat major.

To be sure, Robert was still unwell after the move, always subject to the stress of his two-pronged career as both conductor and composer. Clara's journal entries from that fall describe his "highly nervous, irritable, excited mood." She blamed his condition on street noise; he wanted to change their domicile to a quieter neighborhood.

They did take a river excursion on the Rhine that September, during which they observed the

installation ceremonies for Archbishop von Geissel as Cardinal at Cologne's magnificent cathedral. The ceremony had an enormous impact on Schumann, who incorporated an extra slow movement to the symphony in direct response to the Cologne experience.

The symphony recaptures the immediacy that imbues Schumann's brilliant piano works from the 1830s: *Carnaval*, *Noveletten, Davidsbündlertänze*, *Kreisleriana* and many others. He completed it, including the orchestration, in barely over a month, swept along on a surge of enthusiasm that produced his highest-quality music in such a short period in many years. Writing to his friend the conductor Josef von Wasielewski (who became his first biographer), he observed: "I cannot see that there is anything remarkable about composing a symphony in a month. Handel wrote a complete oratorio in that time. If one is capable of doing anything at all, one must be capable of doing it quickly—the quicker the better, in fact. The flow of one's thoughts and ideas is more natural and more authentic than in lengthy deliberation."

Perhaps he knew how good the music he had written was. The "Rhenish" Symphony is an exuberant work, filled with rich melodies and a formal mastery that eluded Schumann too often in his later years. Certainly, that was not the case here. So strong is his opening theme in the first movement that he dispensed with slow introduction—the only time he did so in any of his symphonies—and also chose to forego a repeat of the exposition. Schumann's biographer Joan Chissell has described the youthful energy of the opening theme as "the most subtle of all his rhythmic experiments … a tug-of-war between triple and duple time ... [that] gives the movement an extraordinary rhythmic virility."

Schumann's second movement is folk-like and innocent, at a relaxed pace that belies its title of Scherzo. Originally titled "Morning on the Rhine," it epitomizes the joyous simplicity of German peasant song and the magic of Rhenish legend that was later to inspire Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle. The ensuing Andante functions as a traditional slow movement: poetic and restrained in its mood.

With the fourth movement, Schumann broke with tradition. Although five-movement symphonies had precedent in both Beethoven and Mendelssohn, four movements was still the norm. Schumann's extra

is a slow movement originally subtitled “In the style of an accompaniment to a solemn ceremony.” It was clearly precipitated by his trip to Cologne earlier that autumn; the introduction of trombones into the orchestration for the first time in the symphony and the overall ecclesiastical atmosphere of this imposing movement lend it a spiritual quality that has earned the sobriquet “Cathedral Scene,” in spite of the fact that Schumann withdrew subtitles for this and for the Scherzo prior to publication.

Schumann returns to his finest symphonic form in the finale. References to themes from earlier in the symphony make the movement cyclic, and a fitting conclusion to this vivacious and joyous work.

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.