

COLORADO COLLEGE



Summer
Music
festival

Program Notes
by
Michael Grace

FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA CONCERT

June 14, 2022

7:30 PM

Celeste Theatre

Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90

Allegro con brio

Andante

Poco allegretto

Allegro

Johannes Brahms
(1833-1897)

Brahms completed the Third Symphony in 1883 when he was 50 years old. He was a mature composer and his confidence with the full-blown symphony, a genre of music he had put off until he was in his early 40s, was now complete. At this stage in his life he had complete control of large forms, always creating a sense of musical order but simultaneously exhibiting a rich variety of musical ideas and melodic ebullience.

This symphony had its first performance by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on December 2, 1883. Now, it should be understood that Brahms was not universally admired in his time. His supporters held up his music as a manifestation of rectitude, thereby incurring the wrath of the supporters of the more overtly romantic works of Wagner and Bruckner. These Wagnerians were at that December 2 performance and organized a hissing demonstration during Brahms' symphony. So, even though he had attempted to stay above the fray of musical invective, his music was to suffer. Well, perhaps not exactly, because the demonstration was stilled by the largely enthusiastic audience and led to an even greater appreciation of the symphony in the following weeks and months. In fact, the work became so popular and successful, to the composer's irritation it overshadowed all his other compositions.

The immediate appeal of this symphony is easy to understand. It is fairly concise (the shortest of Brahms' four) and contains a wide variety of musical characters, including the heroic, the pensive, the lyrical and the nearly child-like. The first movement, *Allegro con brio*, opens with a bold progression of chords that present a motive on the notes F-Aflat-F. This was, for Brahms, a musical cipher which represented the words *Frei aber froh* (Free but happy). The three-note motive really serves as an introduction to the first rhapsodic and heroic theme which begins with the last note of the motive. The second theme, given first to the solo clarinet, is far more lyrical, as second themes were traditionally meant to be. As one might expect with Brahms, there is serious development of these themes, but on a much smaller scale than his other symphonies.

The second movement is an *Andante* in a folk-like style. Brahms loved the folk music of his

country and not only set well-known songs for chorus but also incorporated them in his more serious instrumental compositions. While this *Andante* was not based on an actual folk tune it resembles one. The third movement, *Poco allegretto*, is one of the most intimate of all Brahms' orchestral movements even though it is set in a minor key. Its principal melody, a virtual "romanze" has become quite familiar to concertgoers.

The Finale, *Allegro*, ends the calm of the third movement and is generally considered the most substantive movement of the symphony. It feels like it is made up of many abrupt thematic ideas, like a mosaic of radically different colored tiles. With a rich variety of orchestral colors, melodic styles, dynamic levels, and rhythms, the music seems to move from one episode to another. However, many of the apparently separate themes are organically related to one another and, in fact, to the motto theme (F-Aflat-F) of the first movement. The final sense of the entire movement is one of unity and purpose. The serene closing in the key of F Major is a denouement of refinement and relief. As one romantic commentator put it, "the close has all the feeling of a beautiful, radiant sunset after a stormy day."

Double Concerto for clarinet and viola in E minor, Op. 88

Max Bruch
(1838-1920)

Andante moto

Allegro moderato

Allegro molto

Max Bruch (1838-1920) was born in Cologne, Germany and, except for a brief period as music director of the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, spent most of his life in German cities. He had a long career as a teacher, conductor and, most importantly, composer. He wound up in Berlin, where he died. He is undoubtedly best known for his Violin Concerto in G minor, which is part of the standard repertoire, and for a piece for cello and orchestra titled *Kol Nidrei*, based on ancient Hebrew melodies. Curiously, this work led many to believe that he was of Jewish ancestry, which he was not; but because of this mere suspicion, his work fell out of favor in Germany during the first half of the 20th century.

The Concerto for clarinet and viola is an interesting work to start with because it is the only concerto by a major composer written for these instruments. Their pairing is really quite natural, however, and was pioneered by Mozart in his "Kegelstadt" Trio (K. 498) for clarinet, viola and piano and continued by Schumann in his *Märchenerzählungen* (Fairy Tales) for the same instruments. Mozart undoubtedly sensed that the two instruments share a similar range (the clarinet being a bit higher) but very distinctive tone colors; the viola is known for its warm and often dark color, while the clarinet, of all the woodwinds, most resembles the heady and rich quality of the human voice (I have always thought this is why Mozart developed such a predilection for the instrument in his later years). Like Mozart, Bruch liked the clarinet and wrote numerous works for the instrument. In addition, his son was an outstanding clarinetist.

This marvelous work was composed for Bruch's son in 1911, when most serious audiences were listening to the newer sounds of Debussy and Stravinsky. It is, in a way, anachronistic, for it is unabashedly lush and romantic. And the warm sounds of the solo instruments are well suited to this 19th-century aesthetic ideal.

The opening movement, *Andante moto*, is lyrical and flowing. The two instruments often alternate solo passages and often play together. There is one notable passage in the middle of the movement where one plays fast broken chords while the other provides a slower

flowing melody; as this section progresses, the two soloists trade parts. The movement ends with slow chords in the strings and solo viola while the clarinet gently ascends through a rising broken chord to a serene high G.

The second movement, a faster *Allegro moderato*, is mostly a dialogue between the two instruments in which they pass little melodic motives back and forth from one to another. Occasionally one instrument gets a longer solo passage, but it is inevitably answered by the other with the same melody. In the last movement, *Allegro molto*, for the first time the tempo picks up and becomes more animated. Still the principal dialogue between the two solo instruments continues and they trade ideas back and forth. As usual, occasionally one is more active for a few measures until they again trade melodic lines.

This work is rarely performed, and it is indeed a shame since its carefully crafted balance between the mellow timbres of both instruments creates a beautiful aura. The orchestra is not relegated to the background, but instead animates moments of drama and expression. Still, the emphasis is on the soloists, and there are moments when each has a kind of solitary contemplation that alternates with moments of unabashed exuberance. Hearing this work is a rare treat.

L'Oiseau de feu (Firebird): Suite (1919 version)

Igor Stravinsky
(1882-1971)

Introduction

The Firebird and her Dance

Variations of the Firebird

Round Dances of the Princesses

Infernal Dance of Kastchei

Berceuse

Finale

When Sergei Diaghilev, director of the Ballet Russe in Paris, decided to commission the young, 27-year-old Russian composer Igor Stravinsky to write a ballet, he could not have divined the outcome of the decision. The day of the first performance, July 25, 1910, Stravinsky was a little known Russian composer; on July 26, he was a famous man and the talk of Paris. This ballet was a huge success and it led to numerous other collaborations between Stravinsky and Diaghilev, most notably *The Rite of Spring* three years later.

In order to understand the music, we must know something about the story. Here is a version from Eric Walter White's standard study of Stravinsky:

"A young Prince, Ivan Tsarevich, wanders into Kastchei's magic garden at night in pursuit of the Firebird, whom he finds fluttering round a tree bearing golden apples. He captures it and extracts a feather as forfeit before agreeing to let it go. He then meets a group of thirteen maidens and falls in love with one of them, only to find that she and the other twelve maidens are princesses under the spell of Kastchei. When dawn comes and the princesses have to return to Kastchei's palace, he breaks open the gates to follow them inside. But he is captured by Kastchei's guardian monsters and is about to suffer the usual penalty of petrification, when he remembers the magic feather. He waves it, and at his summons the Firebird reappears and reveals to him the secret of Kastchei's immortality - his soul, in the form of an egg, is preserved in a casket. Opening the casket, Ivan smashes the vital egg, and the ogre immediately expires. His enchantments dissolve, all the captives are freed, and Ivan and his Tsarevna are betrothed with due solemnity and grandeur."

Stravinsky supervised the creation of three different suites, collections of single dances, from the original full ballet score. This performance is based on the one created in 1919. One of the most notable characteristics of Stravinsky's original ballet score is his use of orchestral color. His teacher, Russian Rimsky Korsakov, was famous for his, and the student learned well. He had a huge orchestra at hand for this work, including three flutes and two piccolos; three oboes and English horn; three clarinets, clarinet in E-flat and bass clarinet; three bassoons and two contrabassoons; four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba; timpani, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, bells, xylophone, celesta, piano, two harps; and strings! And he uses these instruments to create unforgettable colors.

Here is a synopsis of the movements:

- The "Introduction" opens in the lowest instruments of the orchestra which are soon joined by higher brass and winds. The tempo is slow.
- The "Firebird and her Dance" follows directly and is opened by a fluttering sound and other effects which build up and eventually give way to a shimmering faster dance. There are variations on the basic themes.
- The "Rondo of the Princess" is introduced by harp and a lovely English horn solo. Called a Khorovod (round dance), the piece is both solemn and charming and one of the most memorable melodies in the ballet. It is based on a real Russian folk song.
- The famous "Infernal Dance of King Kastchei" is next. It is started by a big loud chord, a timpani roll, and the emergence of a syncopated motive that arises from the lower registers (bassoons, horn and tuba) and is gradually taken over by the entire orchestra. All sorts of astounding colorful effects occur. The strong rhythms and the ferocious orchestral blasts give this dance a particularly demonic quality, an appropriate description for the evil Kastchei.
- Next, the "Berceuse," a French lullaby, is written for a solo bassoon accompanied by a delicate pattern in the harp and orchestral strings.
- The "Finale" is introduced by the French horn playing another famous Russian folk tune. Eventually the movement builds up to a great climax that brings the remarkable suite to a suitable close. The audience might note that this final dance has more than one meter going on at a time, a practice that was to become nearly a Stravinsky trademark in some of his later works. The effect is nothing short of spectacular.

UPCOMING SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVAL EVENTS

coloradocollege.edu/musicfestival

Music at Midday

12:15 p.m. Wednesday, June 15, Packard Hall, free

Children's Orchestra Concert

9 and 11 a.m. Thursday, June 16, Celeste Theatre
Free ticketed event

Festival Artists Pre-Concert Recital

6:15 p.m. Thursday, June 16, Packard Hall, free

Festival Artists Concert

7:30 p.m. Thursday, June 16, Packard Hall
Ticketed event



Summer
Music
festival