About the Music

by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77 (1878) **— Johannes Brahms**

Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg.
Died April 3, 1897 in Vienna.

"The healthy and ruddy colors of his skin indicated a love of nature and a habit of being in the open air in all kinds of weather; his thick straight hair of brownish color came nearly down to his shoulders. His clothes and boots were not of exactly the latest pattern, nor did they fit particularly well, but his linen was spotless.... [There was a] kindliness in his eyes ... with now and then a roguish twinkle in them that corresponded to a quality in his nature which would perhaps be best described as good-natured sarcasm." So wrote Sir George Henschel, the singer and conductor who became the first Music Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, of his friend Johannes Brahms at the time of the composition of his Violin Concerto. Brahms at 45 was coming into the full efflorescence of his talent and fame. The twenty-year gestation of the First Symphony had finally ended in 1876, and the Second Symphony came easily only a year later. He was occupied with many songs and important chamber works during the years of the mid-1870s, and the two greatest of his concertos, the B-flat for piano and the D major for violin, were both conceived in 1878. Both works were ignited by the delicious experience of his first trip to Italy in April of that year, though the Piano Concerto was soon laid aside when the Violin Concerto became his main focus during the following summer. After the Italian trip, he returned to the idyllic Austrian village of Pörtschach (site of the composition of the Second Symphony the previous year), where, he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, "the air so bristles with melodies that one has to be careful not to tread on them."

The Violin Concerto was written at Pörtschach for Brahms' old friend and musical ally, Joseph Joachim. In August, when the sketches for the new work were almost completed, Brahms sent a draft of the solo part to Joachim for his advice on the technical aspects of the violin writing with the following note: "I wanted you to correct it — and I didn't want you to have any excuse of any kind: either that the music is too good [to be changed] or that the whole score isn't worth the trouble. But I shall be satisfied if you just write me a word or two, and perhaps write a word here and there in the music, like 'difficult,' 'awkward,' 'impossible,' etc." Joachim took great pains in examining the score (his notated copy is still in the State Library in Berlin), and passed his advice on to Brahms who, rather obstinately, ignored most of it. Brahms, whose instrument was the piano rather than the violin, made a few changes in the musical aspects of the score, but left the sometimes ambiguous string notation largely untouched, a circumstance that has caused considerable interpretative difficulties for other violinists.

Brahms originally envisioned the Violin Concerto as a four-movement work. He composed a scherzo and a slow movement for it, but decided to jettison them

for reasons he never revealed. "The middle movements have gone, and of course they were the best!" he wrote. He was probably being facetious about the quality of the discarded music because he continued, "But I have written a poor *Adagio* for it instead," referring to one of the most beautiful slow movements in the orchestral literature. The fate of the unused movements has never been exactly determined. The scherzo may have ended up as material for the Second Piano Concerto; the *Adagio* may have been the basis of the present one in the Violin Concerto; or both movements may have been lost amid the aborted plans for a second violin concerto. (Brahms systematically destroyed sketches he did not want others to see.) His revisions proved effective, and after the Concerto was launched, he wrote to his publisher, Simrock, "It is well to be doubted whether I could write a better concerto."

English musicologist Hubert Foss wrote of the style of the Violin Concerto, "Of all Brahms' major works, this is the one that shows in the highest degree of perfection the reconciling of the two opposites of his creative mind — the lyrical and the constructive: Brahms the song writer and Brahms the symphonist." The first movement is constructed on the lines of Classical concerto form, with an extended orchestral introduction presenting much of the movement's main thematic material before the entry of the soloist. The group of themes comprises several ideas that are knitted to each other by the rich contrapuntal flow. They are stately in rhythm and dignified in character, and allow for considerable elaboration when they are treated on their return by the soloist. The last theme, a dramatic strain in stern dotted rhythms, ushers in the soloist, who plays an extended passage as transition to the second exposition of the themes. This initial solo entry is unsettled and anxious in mood and serves to heighten the serene majesty of the main theme when it is sung by the violin upon its reappearance. A melody not heard in the orchestral introduction, limpid and almost a waltz, is given out by the soloist to serve as the second theme. The vigorous dotted-rhythm figure returns to close the exposition, with the development continuing the agitated aura of this closing theme. The recapitulation begins on a heroic wave of sound spread throughout the entire orchestra. After the return of the themes, the bridge to the coda is made by the soloist's cadenza. (Curiously, Brahms did not write his own cadenza for this movement but allowed the soloist to devise one. Joachim provided a cadenza, as have more than a dozen others — including Kreisler, Heifetz, Busoni and Tovey — and it is his that is most often heard in performance.) With another traversal of the main theme and a series of dignified cadential figures, this grand movement comes to an end.

The rapturous second movement is based on a theme that the composer Max Bruch said was derived from a Bohemian folk song. The melody, intoned by the oboe, is initially presented in the colorful sonorities of wind choir without strings. After the violin's entry, the soloist is seldom confined to the exact notes of the theme, but rather weaves a rich embroidery around their melodic shape. The central section of the movement is cast in darker hues, and employs the full range of the violin in its sweet arpeggios. The opening melody returns in the plangent tones of the oboe accompanied by the continuing widely spaced chords of the violinist.

The finale is an invigorating dance whose Gypsy character pays tribute to two Hungarian-born violinists who played such important roles in Brahms' life: Eduard Reményi, who discovered the talented Brahms playing piano in the bars of Hamburg and first presented him to the European musical community; and Joseph Joachim. The movement is cast in rondo form, with a scintillating tune in double stops as the recurring theme. This finale forms a memorable capstone to one of the greatest concerted pieces of the 19th century.

Symphony No. 1 in D major (1883-1888, revised 1892-1893) — Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860 in Kalischt, Bohemia.
Died May 18, 1911 in Vienna.

"To write a symphony means, to me, to construct a world with all the tools of the available technique," wrote Gustav Mahler. *The World in a Symphony* — the experiences, qualities and meaning of life enfolded in tone. Mahler, the most ardent of the Romantics in his belief in the bond between human existence and music, spent his career pursuing this lofty aim. He once said, "My whole life is contained in them [i.e., the first two symphonies]: I have set down in them my experience and my suffering.... To anyone who knows how to listen, my whole life will become clear, for my creative works and my existence are so closely interwoven that, if my life flowed as peacefully as a stream through a meadow, I believe I would no longer be able to compose anything." Mahler certainly had a full share of rocks and rapids in the stream of his life: deaths of loved ones, including a child, only weeks apart; a critical heart condition that precipitated his premature death at the age of fifty; severe bouts of depression that led him to seek the counsel of Sigmund Freud; and great difficulties in finding acceptance for his works. Though those experiences were still in the future when he wrote the First Symphony, Mahler nevertheless embodied profound thoughts and emotions in this early work. Written during his tenure as conducting assistant to the great Arthur Nikisch at Leipzig, the D major Symphony reflects Mahler's concerns with romantic love, with establishing himself as a creative artist, and with finding a musical language proper to expressing his inner turmoil.

Though he did not marry until 1902, Mahler had a healthy interest in the opposite sex, and at least three love affairs touch upon the First Symphony. In 1880, he conceived a short-lived but ferocious passion for Josephine Poisl, the daughter of the postmaster in his boyhood home of Iglau, and she inspired from him three songs and a cantata after Grimm (*Das klagende Lied*) that contributed thematic fragments to the Symphony. The second affair, which came early in 1884, was the spark that actually ignited the composition of the work. Johanne Richter possessed a numbing musical mediocrity alleviated by a pretty face, and it was because of an infatuation with this singer at the Kassel Opera, where Mahler was then conducting, that not only the First Symphony but also the *Songs of the Wayfarer* sprang to life. The third liaison, in 1887, came as the Symphony was nearing completion. Mahler revived and reworked an opera by Carl Maria von Weber called *Die drei Pintos* ("*The Three Pintos*," two being impostors of the title character), and was aided in the venture by the grandson of that composer, also named Carl. During the almost daily contact

with the Weber family necessitated by the preparation of the work, Mahler fell in love with Carl's wife, Marion. Mahler was serious enough to propose that he and Marion run away together, but at the last minute she had a change of heart and left Mahler standing, quite literally, at the train station. The emotional turbulence of all these encounters found its way into the First Symphony, especially the finale, but, looking back in 1896, Mahler put these experiences into a better perspective: "The Symphony begins where the love affair [with Johanne Richter] ends; it is based on the affair which preceded the Symphony in the emotional life of the composer. But the extrinsic experience became the occasion, not the message of the work."

The Symphony begins with an evocation of a verdant springtime filled with the natural call of the cuckoo (solo clarinet) and the man-made calls of the hunt (clarinets, then trumpets). The main theme, which enters softly in the cellos after the wonderfully descriptive introduction, is based on the second of the *Songs of a Wayfarer*, *Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld* ("*I Crossed the Meadow this Morn*"). This engaging, folk-like melody, with its characteristic interval of a descending fourth, runs through much of the Symphony to provide an aural link among its movements. The first movement is given over to this theme combined with the spring sounds of the introduction in a cheerful display of ebullient spirits into which creeps an occasional shudder of doubt.

The second movement, in sturdy triple meter, is a dressed-up version of the Austrian peasant dance known as the *Ländler*, a type and style that finds its way into most of Mahler's symphonies. The simple tonic-dominant accompaniment of the basses recalls the falling fourth of the opening movement, while the tune in the woodwinds resembles the *Wayfarer* song. The gentle trio makes use of the string glissandos that were so integral a part of Mahler's orchestral technique.

The third movement begins and ends with a lugubrious, minor-mode transformation of the European folk song known most widely by its French title, *Frére Jacques*. It is heard initially in an eerie solo for muted string bass in its highest register, played above the tread of the timpani intoning the falling-fourth motive from the preceding movements. The middle of the movement contains a melody marked "*Mit Parodie*" (played "*col legno*" by the strings, i.e., tapping with the wood rather than the hair of the bow) and a simple, tender theme based on another melody from the *Wayfarer* songs, *Die zwei blauen Augen* ("*The Two Blue Eyes*"). The mock funeral march of this movement was inspired by a woodcut of Moritz von Schwind titled *How the Animals Bury the Hunter* from his *Munich Picture Book for Children*.

The finale, according to Bruno Walter, protégé and friend of the composer and himself a master conductor, is filled with "raging vehemence." The stormy character of the beginning is maintained for much of the movement. Throughout, themes from earlier movements are heard again, with the hunting calls of the opening introduction given special prominence. The tempest is finally blown away by a great blast from the horns ("Bells in the air!" entreats Mahler) to usher in the triumphant ending of the work, a grand affirmation of joyous celebration.

HARRISBURG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday, October 7, 2017 at 8:00 p.m.
Sunday, October 8, 2017 at 3:00 p.m.

STUART MALINA, Conducting
RACHEL BARTON PINE, Violin

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77 — Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro non troppo
Adagio
Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace

— INTERMISSION—

Symphony No. 1 in D major — Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Langsam, schleppend — Sehr gemächlich ("Slowly, dragging — Very leisurely")
Kräftig bewegt ("Vigorously animated")
Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen ("Solemnly and measured, without dragging")
Stürmisch bewegt ("Tempestuously animated")