*On the Beautiful, Blue Danube*, op. 314ô Johann Strauss, Jr.

Johann Strauss the elder and Joseph Lanner are responsible for turning the modest waltzô of humble Austrian, rural originsô into the celebrated Viennese Waltz. For over a century and half the Viennese Waltz has attained a status as the acme of sophistication, beauty, and elegance. What would New Yearøs Eve be without visions of swirling dancers in gowns and tailcoats accompanied by the Vienna Philharmonic? The tradition is founded upon the incredibly active musical entertainment scene in Viennaøs cafes, gardens, salons, palaces, and annual carnival. Early on there was money to be made in popular dance music, and in the second quarter of the nineteenth century Lanner and Strauss the senior brought their considerable talent and entrepreneurship to that scene and dominated it. Strauss went on to build a career around frequent and peripatetic touring with his 28-man ensemble and became the toast of Europe from Budapest to Glasgow, all built upon a foundation of high musicianship as conductor and composer, and a remarkably astute business sense.

And all of this may largely be said of his son, Johann the younger. Whatever his father did, the son took inspiration and did more. Our favorite Viennese waltzes today are predominately those of the son, and his gift for melodic invention, harmonic grace, and rhythmic verve was recognized early on by the worldøs great composers. He garnered the sincere praise of men known for more õsophisticatedö careers. There is a special gift given to certain artists who excel in the modest genres, and that is as true of Strauss in the waltz as it is of Sousa in the march. Some write *War and Peace*, and some write *haiku.* Brahms supposedly once wrote of the õBlue Danube,ö õ. . . unfortunately, not by Brahms.ö

Strauss composed not only the waltzes that have come practically to define the genre for the world, but was also a highly successful composer of polkas, marches, gallops, quadrilles, and other works, including the beloved operettas, *Die Fledermaus, Die Zigeunerbaron,* and *A Night in Venice*ô hundreds of works, in all.

A typical Strauss waltz is not just one õtune,ö although the public tends to remember them by the opening melodies. Rather it is a series of waltzesô commonly five or six--chained together in a succession in which unity is achieved by subtle connections of stylistic elements. It all seems to roll along in a developing wholeness that makes each new waltz in the chain the apparent logical successor to the previous. There is often a little prelude or introduction, and a coda to wrap the whole thing up into a composition that is almost symphonic.

All of this may be said for perhaps his most famous waltz, õThe Blue Danube,ö written in 1867 for the Vienna Menøs Choral Association. It began life, therefore, as a choral work, only later to gain popularity as a purely instrumental work. Opening with the now-famous tremolo strings and languid horns intoning the main theme, this õsunrise on the riverö soon gives way to the inimitable succession of great waltzes, complete with recap and coda at the endô an aural delight that really has few equals in dance music. The real Danube may be dirty brown, but in our musical imagination, Straussø version will always be the fantasy vision.

### Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major, K. 467 õElvira Madiganöô Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart is largely responsible for the creation of the modern piano concerto, composing them primarily for himself to support his career as a performer. His spending habits consistently placed him in financial difficulties, and since he usually desperately needed to concertize, concertos were a natural solution. He composed some twenty-three of them, starting about 1767. Although his operas exceed his piano concertos in musical genius and historical significance, no other genre of his is so consistently high in quality and maturity.

While the concertoô employing a variety of solo instruments, or groups of solo instrumentsô had been a staple of concerts for over a hundred years by Mozartøs time, it was the advent of the piano by the late eighteenth century that enabled the genre to reach its highest expressive possibilities. Only the sonority and tonal weight of the piano really provides for an equal partner to the orchestra, and thus a foundation for the dramatic interplay between solo and accompaniment that is basic to the genre. Mozartøs contribution, other than his consummate musical genius, of course, was to õbeef upö the rôle of the orchestra from one of simple accompaniment to that of co-protagonist in the musical drama. He also established a clear succession of sections in the form of the first movement.

So, Mozartøs piano concertos have long been basic to our concert life, but the popularity of a Swedish art film in 1967 brought the timeless beauty of one of these works to a worldwide audience that, no doubt, had never paid much, if any, attention to them. *Elvira Madigan* was the true story of a lovely Danish tightrope dancer and her lover, a married Swedish army officer. In 1889 he renounced his career, commenced a hopeless love affair with the younger woman, and after an idyllic month together and penniless, they packed a picnic lunch. Journeying to an impossibly beautiful island (still a pilgrimage site for lovers and romanticists) off the coast of Denmark, they consumed the lunch and a bottle of wine, and then committed suicide. A cinematic overload of impressionistic sylvan colors, romantic clothing, and long, sad gazes, the beautiful tragedy was immeasurably enhanced by a soundtrack that featured the sensitive performance of the slow movement of Mozartøs concerto by the Hungarian pianist, Géza Anda (d. 1976)ô and the concerto forevermore is thought of as the õElvira Madigan Concerto.ö But, thatøs OKô Mozart has suffered more grievously at the hands of film directors than this.

The first movement opens with what sounds like a little march, but to me sounds more like the wry Rossiniøs *opera buffa* shenanigans. Much of the movement is based upon this idea, but two more fine ones soon appear, forming more or less a group of themes. When the piano finally appears, after a little flourish it takes off in the totally unexpected key of G minor, but G major soon appears in an especially ingratiating simple descending scalar passage. Mozart surprises us again with yet another brand-new theme in the development in E minorô youøre not supposed to do this according to the text books, but thatøs genius for you. After a development that admirably shows off both the orchestra and piano in a variety of contrasting ways that always feature the lyrical themes that we have heard, the recap rounds off the movement with a cadenza at the end, usually written by the soloist, since Mozartøs cadenza is lost.

The famous slow movement ensues, with gently throbbing triplets in the strings providing a marvelous rhythmic contrast to the duplets in the piano. Especially charming is Mozartøs employment of great leaps (but gentle ones) from the high register to the low register in the solo piano. Harmonicô some would say romantic as wellô interest is generated near the end of the movement by a temporary sojourn in the rather distant key of $A^b$ major before this most beautiful *andante* concludes. The last movement is one that features a jolly theme that returns frequently after being interspersed with contrasting onesô thereøs a bit of development in the middle. The soloist has lots of opportunity to display digital virtuosity (but always tasteful) as the characteristic interplay with the orchestra eventually leads to the cadenza and one more shot at the main theme in a zestful end to it all.

Symphony No. 7, Op. 92 in A Majorô Beethoven

This work is simply a gem, and while certainly well known, deserves to be even better appreciated by concert audiences. Beethoven, himself, famously said that it was one of his best works. And, unlike so many works of genius that initially were pearls cast before swine, everybody knew on the spot that this work was great. It is commonplace, of course, for scholars to think of Beethovenøs musical life in three great periodsô the last being the time of compositions that õchallengeö comprehension and appreciation. The fecund middle period, roughly the first decade of the nineteenth century, is the time of dozens of the magnificent works that came to define the composer and establish his eternal reputation. His seventh symphony stands pretty much near the end of that time.

Written mostly during 1811 and finished by early 1812, it is a without doubt a complete reflection of the happy times and optimistic personal attitude of the composer at that time in his lifeô both professionally and personally. We are all familiar with the struggles and depressive moments in his emotionally up and down life, but times were good about then. The beloved õPastoralö symphony was finished in 1808, and he then busied himself with important works, among them, the õEmperorö piano concerto and the music for *Egmont.* Sketches for both the seventh and the eighth symphonies were all part of his activity during this time.

He had already suffered health problems by early 1811 and traveled to the spa in the Bohemian town of Teplice, where work on the symphonies went on during that summer. Both symphonies were finished the next year, and together they more or less demark the end of an era. From that time on, until the end of his life in 1827, Beethoven the man and his musical works underwent significant changes. His health underwent further deterioration, with debilitating family squabbles and failures in personal relationships all contributing to the change. While there were great works still to be written, the flow of inspiration was lessened, his social isolation increased, and the style of his composition took on a new, abstract quality.

So, the uplifting joy and vigor of Symphony No. 7 is a turning point. Beethoven, himself, conducted the premièreô contemporary accounts entertainingly describe his energetic and exaggerated gesticulations on the podium. And in the orchestra were some of the luminaries of the musical scene. It must have been an inspiring concert, indeed. The audience is on record for its enthusiastic response to this vivacious composition. No wonder, for there are few works by Beethoven so spurred by rhythmic inspiration and

drive. Wagner has been endlessly excoriated for the banal comment that the work is õan apotheosis of the dance.ö While it may have been a ham-fisted commentô neither Beethoven, nor few others have alluded to any dances in the workô there is more than a grain of truth in the comment.

After a few dynamic chords, the first movement opens with a long, slow introduction that is a perfect example of Beethovenøs skill at artfully creating an atmosphere of expectation out of nothing much more than a few scales, sustained chords, and some melodic fragments. As it ends, it seems to fragment into just a few repeated notes peeking out from octave to octave. And then there coyly appears a murmur of the simple rhythmic figure around which the first movement, proper, is built. A multiplicity of themes inhabit this driving, happy affairô all built in typical Beethoven fashion out of that little dotted rhythm.

The second movement is a special oneô even for Beethoven. The first audience immediately recognized its inherent appeal and forced its encore, right then. It consists of a õthemeö that undergoes a series of variationsô or rather more strictly, it is repeated with new and attractive elements added with each repetition, while retaining all that which was added. And itøs not really a theme in the melodic sense at all, rather just a basic chord progression in a constantly repeated simple rhythm. Here again, is ample evidence of Beethovenøs consummate skill at conjuring up magic out of the simplest of elements. There is a new tune in the middle, in the major modeô still with the simple rhythm of the beginning. The material of the opening returns, with some development added, and it all ends as it began.

A driving and dynamic scherzo can be expected next, and the composer certainly delivers one, quite a long one at that, in an extended form that Beethoven liked. This movement possesses all of the impetus and rhythmic verve of the first movement and again reaffirms the composerøs optimism. The last movement, if it is possible, trumps everything so far. It jumps right in with an intensity and jubilant ferocity rare even in Beethoven. Thumping, swinging, hammeringô it relentlessly drives ahead, spurred by the timpani and the horns. If ever there was one movement from Beethovenøs nine symphonies that reminds us of his epochal innovation of rhythm as a fundamental element in musical composition, this is it. It doesnøt take long, dashing to a headlong conclusion that is nothing less than breathtaking. Hold on!

--William E. Runyan

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