

Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*, K. 492 • Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart's incomparable musical gifts enabled him to compose at the highest level of artistic brilliance in almost every musical genre. We are privileged to experience his legacy in symphonies, chamber music, wind serenades, choral music, keyboard music—the list goes on and on. But unquestionably, his greatest contributions to musical art are his operas. No one—not even Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, or Richard Strauss excelled the perfection of Mozart's mature operas. The reason, of course, is clear: his unparalleled musical gift is served and informed by a nuanced insight into human psychology that is simply stunning. His characters represented real men and women on the stage who moved dramatically and who had distinctive personalities. While Mozart composed both comic operas and serious operas, in both German and Italian, his major body of work lies in his *opera buffa*--Italian comic operas.

Mozart's first opera was performed when he was eleven years of age, and he composed fairly steadily in the genre thereafter, writing well over a dozen before the four of his immortal Italian operas of the late 1780s. In the first of these, *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), Mozart's librettist, Da Ponte, based the story upon the second episode of Beaumarchais's famous trilogy of plays. You may recall that the first is the basis of Rossini's *Barber of Seville*.

Generally, in his late operas, Mozart incorporated some thematic references to the opera proper in the overtures. Not so here! This sizzling curtain raiser *nonpareil* is unique and unequalled in setting the mood and preparing the audience for almost four hours of intrigue, betrayal, and skulduggery in general. Almost unassumingly the unison strings plunge into the beginning—the *pianissimo* dynamic coupled with the breathtaking tempo giving ample warning of the intrigue and pace that lies ahead in the drama. And it doesn't relent in its driving tempo, right to the end. There are loud parts and there are soft parts, inimitable themes—but the drive is relentless. When it finally ends, no audience is as ready for an evening with a masterpiece of opera as those attending *The Marriage of Figaro*; the overture's genius serves it equally well as a stand-alone composition of the highest order.

Symphony No. 5, op. 82 in E-flat Major • Jean Sibelius

The compositions of Jean Sibelius constitute a case study in the capriciousness of musical taste and the power of the artistic *avant-garde*. Pigeonholed by many as primarily a Finnish nationalist, whose dark, remote music was a shallow representative of Romanticism's last gasp, Sibelius was nevertheless deemed a champion by American and British conservative musical tastes between the world wars. Typical was Olin Downes, music critic of the *Times*, whose relentless public support of Sibelius bordered on sycophancy. Likewise, Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, programmed a cycle of Sibelius's symphonies and dogged the composer to finish the eighth—which he never did. But, those who favored the avant-garde of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and company—and that included most of continental Europe and American intellectuals—were scathing in their contempt. One respected and well-known critic entitled an essay about Sibelius, "The Worst Composer in the World." These

controversies and Sibelius's life-long struggle with alcoholism and depression, no doubt played a signal part in his composing nothing of significance from the nineteen thirties until his death in 1957 at the age of 91. But tastes change, and the current crop of composers and scholars now take a more balanced view of Sibelius's compositions, and his seven symphonies enjoy renewed respect.

The fifth symphony was composed at a particularly crucial time in his creative life; his previous symphony had in his mind pushed the limits of modernity, and its dark and somewhat abstruse nature are evidence of his intent to create a progressive style of increased dissonance, innovative structure, and dense motivic textures. It was a failure at the time. The long and the short of it was, the important audiences and critics of Germany and France found it severely lacking in comparison with the far-reaching new compositions of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Richard Strauss, among others. He had thought of himself as a leader in continuing to push traditional mainstream European composition gradually into the future, only to find out that complete revolution in style was far more popular and intellectually respectable.

So, his fifth symphony represents somewhat of a deep breath and a resolve to find his own way which, of course, he did. Finished in 1915 for the concerts given in celebration of his fiftieth birthday, it was immediately revised the next year and even more so in 1919 (the latter version now being more or less standard). It has four movements, but the first two are literally composed into each other, so they are heard as one. Too much (largely inconclusive) musicological ink has been spilt trying to analyze the form of these one/two movements, so don't try. Rather, hear it as one long continuous movement that evolves gradually in a weft of ideas (don't listen for too many "singable" themes) derived from the initial horn calls and others in the rippling woodwinds. One can hear some folk-like elements as we go along, but the big thing is to listen for the masterly way that Sibelius manages a long and almost seamless (and difficult to pull off) transition into the second half (second movement?) scherzo-like conclusion. You can spot the beginning of this final section by the trumpet solo that marks it. Again, the novelty is the sneaky way that Sibelius challenges us to figure out whether this movement is two things run together, or one thing in a complex, innovative form.

The second movement is traditional in that after the faster, dance-like section, there follows the expected slow contrast, but as occasionally with Brahms, Sibelius doesn't make it too slow, so it's rather a kind of intermezzo. Here it takes the form of a set of variations— don't expect to be able to discern each variation easily, but Sibelius does weave a texture that is always based upon the little five-note figure first heard tweeting in the flutes.

In the best Sibelian tradition, the last movement provides welcome clarity and uplift. Those who appreciate his ever-popular second symphony, wherein one waits for the "big" glorious tune to finally appear in the last movement, will experience the same here. Sibelius, if nothing, was a sensitive enthusiast of the flora and fauna of his beloved Finnish landscape— particularly the native waterfowl. Tales about them, and his musical depiction of them, are a common element in his work. In this last movement we hear the famous "swan" theme. It splendidly evokes the migrating swans that appeared over his rural home, "Ainola," deep in the Finnish woods. After an initial flurry in the strings, the majestic swan theme rises out of the horn section. Another ingratiating theme appears,

and after some development, the movement and the symphony close on a rising tide of happy sound, the swans to the fore. Six dynamic exclamatory chords end the work.

Violin Concerto, op. 77 in D Majorô Johannes Brahms

The music of Johannes Brahms has come to stand at the center of the best of Western art music; that it is so is owing to the composer's firm grounding in the traditions of musical style and forms that lead directly back to the Viennese masters of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven. Seriousness of purpose, respect for tradition, and a formidable technical mastery led to a musical style practically unexcelled in artistic integrity. At a time when much of musical Europe was pushing out into new forms, harmonic boldness and freedom, and an emotional content untrammelled by any restraints, Brahms trod the more conservative and traditional path and was seen by many as the inheritor of the mantle of Beethoven. It would be a mistake to imagine Brahms as waging artistic war against the likes of Wagner and Liszt and their followersô rather he admired much of their work. But he was his own man and while not universally hailed for many years after his death, he is now firmly ensconced in the pantheon of the great composers.

The shadow of Beethoven loomed over the young Brahms as he developed and matured as a composer, his gradual and lengthy growth evidenced in the long years he spent working on his first symphonyô he finally finished it in 1876 when he was 43 years of age. Its relationship in a multiplicity of ways to Beethoven's last symphony was understood from the first. The second symphony followed the next year, and the logjam was broken. In 1878, Brahms went on to write his violin concerto, one of four concertos in his oeuvreô the others: two for piano and one for violin and cello. His violin concerto has come to take a place at the center of the most respected works for solo violin, and its roots may be traced to several important factors in his early life.

Brahms was a fine pianist and made his way in the world early on as a performer on that instrument. In 1848, the year of revolution in Europe, many Hungarians made their way to Hamburg for purposes of emigration to America, and Brahmsô always engaged with various levels of societyô fell under the sway of the Hungarian and gypsy musical style. About that time, he encountered the Hungarian violinist, Ede Reményi, and undoubtedly adopted many of the characteristic rhythmic and metric traits of the latter's national style that later became so integral to his own voice. Reményi returned from America some five years later and the two went on a concert tour together. It was also during this tour in Göttingen that Brahms met the great violin virtuoso, Joseph Joachim, beginning a deep friendship and professional relationship that lasted a lifetime. They went on to concertize together for years. Brahms had already heard Joachim in 1848 in a performance of Beethoven's violin concerto, and the work made a deep and lasting impression on the young Brahms.

So, taken altogether, this inevitably led to the Brahms's violin concerto of 1878, written for, and dedicated to, Joachim, his best friend and one of the most respected violinists in the world. Certainly, one of the attributes of Joachim that Brahms deeply respected was not only his virtuosity, but also his intelligence, seriousness of purpose, and trustworthy critical acumen. So, not only did Joachim provide the first-movement cadenza that has stood the test of time, he was a constant counsel on technical matters in

the composition of the solo part. In point of fact, they continued to exchange correspondence well after the première regarding changes to fine points in the work.

Although cast in the familiar three movements of the typical concerto form, Brahms had originally conceived the work in four movements— a hint of his conception of the piece as a major and weighty contribution to the solo violin literature (and there was Beethoven's monumental concerto looming over his shoulder, we must remember.) That fell through— Brahms abandoned the work on the two middle movements, but they may well have surfaced in his other works. Instead, he substituted a single adagio that he rather deprecated, but a happy substitution it was. There are many parallels between Brahms' work and the model of Beethoven's before him, but they need not detain us here.

The first movement is the meat of the composition— it goes on for well over twenty minutes—and, let's be frank, it is a case in point of what is often characterized as Brahms' severity of style. It is said that the first movement "puzzled" the first audience, and it can be challenging for many, even today. It begins in a deceptively low-keyed mood, but with elements that suggest these ideas will take a while to work out. The orchestra is given a substantial shot at the material before the entrance of the soloist, and there unfolds an exploration of Brahms' ideas in a thorough and lengthy process. "Big tunes" don't really jump out at one, but rather there evolves a dense sifting out of musical possibilities and implications that is Brahms' intellectuality writ large. The movement is rather complex from a formal standpoint, and after a long development, the famous cadenza appears—and a piece of work it is. Joachim's contribution is a daunting exploration of Brahms' ideas, couched in technical challenges that, while virtuosic in nature, never seem empty and inappropriately flashy. The first audience was motivated to applaud at its conclusion, but I imagine no one will be tempted to interrupt the soft but tense and hushed atmosphere leading to the serene conclusion of the movement.

The slow movement is a study in variations on a simple but pregnant theme that is introduced by the solo oboe, accompanied by the horns and woodwinds. The tune is reminiscent— but far more tranquil— of the famous horn call in the finale of his first symphony, composed only a few years earlier. A contrasting theme is heard in the middle of this perfect example of Brahms' signature "elegiac" style, and it ends quietly.

One will recall the composer's early encounter with the fire and rhythmic kick of the Hungarian style— it is one of his stylistic markers. The last movement is a delightful romp in this tradition, and even if you don't easily remember melodic themes from the other movements, the main one here played in double stops by the soloist, may jog your memory. The main tune— and it is a "tune"— alternates with other material, tossed back and forth between the soloist and the orchestra in the best tradition of the concerto. The challenging "severity" of the first movement is all forgotten, and it's easy to see why this marvelous work stands among the best at the top of great violin literature.

--William E. Runyan