

Concert 2

October 29, 2016

Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 61—Ludwig van Beethoven

By 1806 Beethoven had surmounted a series of significant distractions that had seriously affected his creative life. The difficulties that he had with writing his only opera, *Fidelio*, are well documented. Other factors were the misery of his ardent, but unsuccessful, personal relationship with the young widow, Josephine von Brunsvik, and, of course, dealing with the reality of his deafness. But, by 1806 he entered into a new period of inspiration and productivity. Significant compositions that are now central to his legacy stemmed from his sense of renewal in that year: the “Rasumovsky” string quartets, the “Appassionata” piano sonata, the Fourth Symphony, and the Violin Concerto.

The concerto was written for the young Franz Clement, whom Beethoven had known for over ten years, having met him not too long after the composer had moved to Vienna. While Clement is almost totally unknown to concert audiences today, in his time he enjoyed a reputation for formidable musical talent and skill. A child prodigy on the violin, he was known for an incredible musical memory, as well as a penchant for public displays of what today would be deemed cheap, carnival tricks on his instrument. Nevertheless, Beethoven had great respect for him and valued his friendship. Clement had returned the favor with consultative advice on *Fidelio*, and helped in other ways, as well. As in the case of so many other famous compositions in music history, the concerto was finished so late that legend has it that Clement practically sight-read the première performance in December of 1806. If one can imagine it, apparently, Clement also entertained the audience between movements of this now sacred composition by playing some impromptu variations with his fiddle held upside down. Times have changed.

Beethoven’s Violin Concerto has, of course, come to hold a central place in the repertoire of concert violinists. It was not always so, however, and it only slowly came to be appreciated for its genius. While a work of great difficulty, it is not at all a showy vehicle for technical prowess and virtuosity—a characteristic of not a few of our favorite violin concertos of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the challenges are certainly there, and recent scholarly research has shown that there is more than a little of Clement’s signature passagework for violin that Beethoven adapted for use in his work. Beethoven obviously did not treat its composition lightly; the first movement was the longest that he had composed up to that time. Moreover, the whole work is one of lyricism, dignity, and seriousness of purpose. Its attractive melodies and leisurely tempos have stimulated more than one commentator to speak of its “Olympian nature,” “nobility,” and “dignity.” All of that it is.

The work begins unusually with five little taps in the timpani (they go on to appear again at important places and played by others, as well), followed immediately by the woodwind section playing the main theme in rich, full harmony. When we’re ready for the second main idea, rising scales soon herald our friends, the woodwinds, again, who introduce this theme, as well. The solo violin finally enters with a brief flourish, and then begins to explore the two ideas. Beethoven takes the time, and in such a context, it’s welcomed, to thoroughly examine the possibilities of his material, the violin regaling us with an ingratiating variety of figurations. The soft drum taps of the beginning herald the recapitulation, a noble and grand affair. Now time for the cadenza—usually a substantial one—and since Beethoven did not originally provide them, many have been written by numerous famous violinists. After the display, accompanied by soft, low string *pizzicatos*, the solo violin leads us quietly home with the second theme.

The second movement technically is a series of variations, but not one in the normal sense of clear figurations that gradually accumulate in activity. It's rather a simple affair—not even a change of key—that sounds almost choral in nature. Beethoven has given us some wonderful examples of this in many compositions—even in his piano sonatas. He keeps our interest in this warm and regal simplicity by a series of color changes in the orchestration that carries on through the delicate filigree of the violinist's embellishments. A short cadenza leads us without a break—not unusual in this period—directly into the last movement. The solo violin immediately plays the tune—which, if not already familiar, soon will be. It's a rondo, meaning one easily recognized and usually cheerful idea is interspersed with a few contrasting sections, but with the main idea always coming back. And so, this little country tune, based upon a jaunty five-note figure, lopes and gallops to a rollicking conclusion, reminding us that Beethoven is not always storm and stress.

Hungarian Dance No. 5, WoO 1—Johannes Brahms

Who, indeed, can resist the spirited, soulful music of the “Hungarian” Gypsies? Well, apparently, almost no one of the gifted, leading composers of nineteenth-century Europe, including such luminaries as Liszt, Schubert, and a host of others. And, most notably, our Johannes Brahms—he of the most classical bent, the most serious mien, and the most redoubtable reputation as a composer. The “gypsy” style appears frequently in compositions by important serious composers of the time, including several of Brahms' important works: the violin concerto, the G minor piano quartet, and others. In 1853, early in his career, Brahms accompanied the virtuoso Hungarian violinist, Ede Reményi on a concert tour, which included several works in the Hungarian Gypsy style.

That episode in his life was evidently formative, for several years later, in the late 1860s, Brahms published two sets (five dances in each) of “Hungarian Dances,” for piano duet, and later, in 1880, he published eleven more, also in two sets. Altogether, they became some of his most popular works—not just for their intrinsic qualities, but also probably for their medium. Before the advent of “canned” music, if you wanted to hear music, you had to play it yourself, and piano duet was one of the most popular social activities; undoubtedly, more music lovers first encountered all of the well-known symphonies in this medium. He later re-arranged some of the dances for solo piano, but today, they live on most notably in orchestra arrangements. Brahms made only three of the arrangements for orchestra; the rest were done by a variety of folks, including Dvořák.

All that being said, it is interesting to note, that notwithstanding the common perception of these tunes—we now know that they are not by Brahms, not folk music, not authentically “gypsy,” and not even ethnic Hungarian! Brahms, himself, wrote only three original compositions in the whole set of twenty-one; the others are best thought of as salon or coffeehouse tunes in the style of the gypsies of Hungary, written by professional musicians for their commercial use in those venues. “Real” Hungarian folk music did not become well known until the ethnomusicological research around the turn of the twentieth century by composers Bartók and Kodály.

Well, nevertheless, these dances surely are in gypsy style, and have a distinct central European folk style. Numbers Five and Six were arranged for orchestra early on by a well-respected German military bandmaster and composer, Albert Parlow. No. 5—clearly the most popular of all of the dances, and the one we all know and love—is a perfect example of the confusion that surrounded these pieces. Brahms thought that it was a folksong, but in point of fact, it was a tune by Béla Kéler (“Remembrances of Bártfa”), who was a German-Hungarian bandmaster. Bártfa (now Bardejov) is a

town in present-day Slovakia, popular among tourists as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, distinguished by its Gothic architecture and importance in Jewish history—all of which admittedly puts an entirely different spin on our traditional imagery of “Hungarian Dance No. 5.”

Today, Brahms may suffer a reputation as a “stuffy” classicist among those who don’t really know the man or his music. But, of course, he was a complete artist, one who effortlessly crafted some of the most impressive masterpieces of European music, but one who also knew and enjoyed the more modest “bonbons” of art. Remember the old anecdote of the student who deprecated a Strauss waltz to Brahms as simplistic, hoping to curry favor by his putative “sophistication.” Brahms’ rejoinder? “Unfortunately, it’s not by Brahms.”

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, op. 88—Antonín Dvořák

Dvořák is the preëminent Czech composer of the nineteenth century, and perhaps of all of his successors, as well. This is no small achievement, considering the number of great musicians--Mozart, for example—who thought of Bohemia as the most musical country in Europe. Even today, one can hardly get on a streetcar in Prague without stepping around a double bass. Americans today, if they think of Czech music at all, other than two works by Smetana, it is of the music of Dvořák. They know little of the other composers of the incredible musical wealth of Bohemia—including Fibich, Ostrčil, Janáček, Foerster, Hába, and Martinů—just to name a few. Dvořák is merely “first among equals” in the history of Czech music. Dvořák owed his initial recognition to Johannes Brahms, who encountered his music somewhat early in Dvořák’s career, and saw to it that he was enabled to spend time in Vienna for further study. While Dvořák’s fundamental stylistic orientation is similar to the older composer in its classical restraint and dedication to traditional forms and procedures, his compositions are unmistakably Czech in myriad subtle ways. Turns of harmony, melody, and rhythm firmly establish Dvořák’s ethnicity, even within the disciplined tradition of musical composition leading back to, say, Beethoven. Like Brahms, Dvořák wrote stunningly well in the genres of string quartets, sonatas, and symphonies. But unlike Brahms, he also wrote tone poems, and was an active and successful opera composer, although only his *Rusalka* is widely known in this country. He was interested in almost every genre, and few of his contemporaries composed successfully in as many different ones as did Dvořák.

He clearly thought of himself as a champion of Czech music, and he incorporated significant Czech musical, literary, and historical elements into his works. His *Slavonic Rhapsodies*, tone poems, operas, and songs—the list goes on and on—all are heavily infused with Czech melodies, linguistic inflections and characteristic rhythms, and national legends and stories. And it must be admitted that these essential elements of his artistic voice are near the core of his attractiveness to audiences worldwide—not just in his homeland. Yet, to focus inordinately on these elements would miss the mark in understanding the most important aspect of the nature of his music. As deeply rooted as he is in the Czech musical tradition, it would be a mistake to consign him primarily to the category of “nationalist” composers. For Dvořák was a clear adherent of the artistic thinking of those composers of the nineteenth century who were firmly rooted in the tradition of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven (and later, Mendelssohn and Brahms) as a fundamental way of composing. That is, they favored classical forms and designs, integrated development of musical ideas, and in general, a restrained and balanced expression that placed strong emphasis on music as an abstract art. Generally speaking not for them were the “stories” and programs of folks like Liszt and Wagner, and their followers. And in

mastery of the resilience of this style, the symphonies of Dvořák—as well as those of Tchaikovsky—pretty much have come to dominate the symphonic music from those times that are favored today by concert audiences.

Dvořák wrote nine symphonies, but Americans are most familiar with Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, “From the New World.” His first four symphonies were not published in his lifetime, nor were they generally recognized until the 1950s. But, his sixth, seventh, and eighth symphonies are beginning to catch up in popularity in this country with the beloved ninth. It was the sixth (1880) that first brought him international recognition and acclaim as a symphonist; but it is the eighth that has come to take a place of “second to none,” in popularity. It’s a work of genial warmth, and suffused throughout with the color and melodious qualities so associated with Dvořák.

The first movement opens with a wonderfully melancholic theme in G minor played by the cello section; it’s not the main theme, however, but little matter. Dvořák full well knows its value, and it marks off each of the three main sections of the movement. The end of it concludes with an ingratiating move to G major, carried by warm brasses. The main theme is now here, and it’s a little “chirpy” birdlike theme, first heard in the flute. By and by other important material comes to fore, but not in the traditional key of these later ideas, but in the increasingly popular key with the romantic composers, two steps higher. It too, is in a minor key, and you’ll hear it first in the woodwinds. Dvořák brings in a few other concluding ideas, and then the melancholy theme from the opening announces the development, which, though appropriately stormy and fragmented, as these things tend to be, always bears the clarity and tunefulness typical of the composer. Powerful trumpets and trombones again intone the opening idea to mark the recap, followed shortly by the main theme. We heard it first in the flute, but this time it’s played by the English horn, making its only appearance in the symphony. The second theme gets a good going over as this shortened reprise burns to an uplifting conclusion.

The second movement is most easily heard as an ingratiating series of variegated moods, musical ideas, and instrumental color. It’s usually foolish to read too much into abstract music, but there is no doubt here, of the evocation of “Czech” local color in the beautiful episodes that seem to explore the rural life, stunning natural beauty, and the indigenous musical life of Dvořák’s homeland.

Dances are what we expect usually in third movements, and Dvořák provides two: a pensive, melancholic waltz, playing bookends for a warm folkdance in the middle, in the same waltz time. After the return of the first waltz, a short, cheerful coda built around the second tune, but now in duple, not waltz time, takes us gently to the end.

There’s no mistaking the beginning of the last movement—a brilliant fanfare in the trumpets leads to the theme. First heard in the cellos, it is a broad, sonorous melody derived from the theme that we heard way back in the first movement in the flute. It’s based upon the three notes of the G major triad, and Dvořák shows us the master he is, by wringing every possible use out of it. The movement is a series of marvelously creative variations on this simple theme. After the leisurely announcement by the cello section, and further restatements in the strings . . . Bam! The tempo takes off in a fury, driven by hysterical trills in the horns, followed by virtuoso filigree in the solo flute. Soon the next variation appears, a rather heavy marching affair that sounds vaguely like Janissary music (eighteenth-century Turkish effects found in Mozart, Beethoven, and others). After some allusions to the opening fanfare, the strings revert back to the peaceful statement of the main theme, enhanced by a little Rossinian flute obbligato, and the mood continues—teasing us by building up the “calm before the storm” that everyone in the house knows is going to burst out at any moment. On and on the teasing goes, softer and softer—then: the hysterical horn trills burst in, and we’re off to the races, faster and faster, and an apotheosis of Czech dancing fury that has few equals in the literature. It’s easy to see

why this great symphony—from the “Old World,” as it were—is the favorite Dvořák symphony of many.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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