



Cheyenne  
Symphony  
Orchestra

**Masterpiece 4 – A Time to Reflect**

**February 19, 2022**

***La Follia Variations* — Michi Wiancko**

Wiancko is a gifted young violin virtuoso, composer, and arranger, whose talent and imagination have catapulted her into the upper echelon of the country's musical scene. In her triple threat career, she simultaneously has been a lauded violin soloist with some of our top symphony orchestras, an important member of the highly praised East Coast Chamber Orchestra (and leading arranger of some of its repertoire), and a successful composer of music for an astonishing variety of genres and media. Various, she has collaborated with such luminaries as Yo-Yo Ma, Emanuel Ax, and Steve Reich; soloed with the New York Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Philharmonic; written an opera premièred at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and helped create music for important films and commercials. Not to mention extensive engagement in the distinctive field of indie rock bands and electro-acoustic music. That's impressive and there's much more.

Wiancko has provided several compositions for the East Coast Chamber Orchestra, many of which fall into a rather hybrid genre that she calls her "re-imagining" works. These are compositions—or rather, "re-compositions" shall we say--of works from the past, often the eighteenth century, wherein she works them over completely, tapping them for the raw materials for essentially new compositions, but preserving the basic identity of the source. This approach to musical creativity is not new of course, but it is rather popular these days with many of the young composers. All of the arts since the beginning of time have drawn upon the works of previous artists for inspiration, reinterpretation, and as an inspirational repository of materials for new visions. The various approaches to this in music are myriad. A simple melody, chord progressions, a bass line, or even the whole weft of a complete composition can be the basis for new works. This is true from the first polyphonic compositions of the Notre Dame School of the Middle Ages, masses of the Renaissance—all periods right up to jazz artists playing variations over, say, Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" or the blues format.

Composers of the Baroque period in music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were particularly fond of variations composed to familiar tunes or bass lines. "La Follia"—perhaps the most renowned of them--is a simple chord progression and melody used by over a hundred and fifty composers over the centuries as the basis for variations. The names are all familiar: Corelli, Handel, and Bach, later even Rachmaninoff. Later in this concert, in the second movement of Beethoven's fifth symphony, you can hear his brief, clear take on it. One of the most popular of all these many uses of it was "La Follia" Variations by the Italian violin virtuoso and composer, Francesco Geminiani. Student of Scarlatti and Corelli, he is known for his concerto grossos and works for solo violin, as well as his treatise on violin playing. He spent most of his adult life in the British Isles. As a student of Arcangelo Corelli, he redid some of his

teacher's violin sonatas into concerto grossos, one of which, Concerto Grosso No. 12, "La Follia," is the basis for Wiancko's "re-imagining."

Wiancko's take on Geminiani's work is subtle, largely preserving much of the familiar bass line, harmonies, and melody in almost two dozen iterations of the short, original iconic structure. Like everyone before her who essayed variations on the original, she dazzles us with an apparently infinite number of musical ideas. Tempos vary, an array of Baroque dance rhythms parade, innumerable melodies and counter-melodies beguile, and the bass line constantly changes guises. Textures never remain the same. While at first, her arrangement seems to just echo the eighteenth-century Geminiani, gradually we hear her moving into new sonic territory from later centuries. As we approach the last variants, she slyly integrates modern, lush harmonies, and even a Latin flavored dance, replete with claves! Finally, near the end there's an enigmatic *forte* "thump" from out of the blue, and the claves rejoin us. And perhaps most tantalizing of all is a little glissando at the end that sounds for all the world like a human, high soprano sigh. It's all a refreshing and interesting re-examination of an old musical friend. New wine in old bottles, so to speak.

### ***Songs of a Wayfarer* — Gustav Mahler**

Gustav Mahler's excruciating beautiful music is laden with the melancholy and presentiment of hopelessness that often infused late nineteenth-century Romanticism. His large-scale symphonic works often require large numbers of performers (in great variety), and can challenge the endurance of the audience, as well as that of the players. More recognized in his time as conductor than as composer, he assiduously composed in summers, while pursuing a strenuous conducting career that was brought to an early end by heart disease. He was married in 1902 to the famous--some would say infamous--and beautiful Alma Schindler, a woman almost twenty years his junior. They had two winsome daughters, one of whom, Maria ("Putzi") died tragically at the age of four in 1907. It is said that Alma bitterly blamed him for tempting fate by writing his *Songs on the Deaths of Children*. Constant bickering with singers and the virulently anti-Semitic press in Vienna led Mahler to New York City in the same year, where he became a star conductor with the Metropolitan Opera. His success there led him to an appointment with the New York Philharmonic in 1909 as principal conductor--a rival of Toscanini. Life was fulfilling, for he enjoyed working with the professionalism of the players there; but that year was marked not only by great success with the première of his Eighth Symphony, but by grief at the discovery of Alma's affair with the famous young architect, Walter Gropius of Bauhaus renown. She married the latter after Mahler's death, and later enjoyed a dalliance with the equally famous painter, Oskar Kokotchka, as well as with other artistic geniuses. Mahler was heartbroken, and even consulted Sigmund Freud. After one more season in New York Mahler's ill health forced his return to Europe, where he died of bacterial endocarditis in May of 1911.

Against this backdrop of personal stress and grief, Mahler seems today to be the perfect creator of intense, existentialist reflections on the banal duality, yet transcendent, nature of human existence. His personal--and to my mind it is

uniquely so—ruminating on life's meaning can be somewhat prolix and repetitive at the symphonic level, or penetratingly aphoristic in his songs.

While the nine completed symphonies—expansive, not only in length, but in artistic import, as well—naturally tend to loom supreme in Mahler's historical legacy, his songs inform them as with no other symphonist. Moreover, his songs reflect the essence of his whole artistic soul; it is in them that the composer is most directly and authentically understood. Igor Stravinsky once observed that the short, concentrated works of the composer, Anton von Webern, were like "dazzling diamonds." And so are Mahler's songs. The first four symphonies are specifically related to his *Lieder* in tone and thematic content, and of no other significant composer may one posit this close connection. His mastery of scoring for orchestra is reflected in his preference for writing songs with orchestral accompaniment, as well as including the voice in various symphonies. In addition to various other songs, he composed several significant collections of orchestral *Lieder*: *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, *Rückert-Lieder*, *Kindertotenlieder*, and *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer).

The latter group of four songs was the early work, composed in 1884-1885, when he was in his mid-twenties. At the time he was early in his career as an opera conductor—in Kassel, Germany—and was passionately in love with one of his sopranos, Judith Richter. In the heat of his ardor—doomed, of course—he wrote a group of poems, and subsequently set four of them for voice and orchestra.

Although Mahler wrote the texts, they bear a connection to a large collection of German romantic poetry, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn), a favorite reading for Mahler. He later set some two dozen of the poems, and incorporated some into three of his early symphonies. The conceit of the four Wayfarer poems as a cycle is not unlike that of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*—a young journeyman traveling along, musing over the many reflections of his beloved—in this case, a lost one.

The first song, "Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht" ("When My Sweetheart is Married"), is directly "derived" from one of the poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. The contemplation of nature as respite from the darkness of human existence is central to Mahler's art. Here, the opening, simple folk-like lament over her marriage to someone else is contrasted in the central section with a turn to nature—replete with birdcalls—as solace. But the bleakness of the beginning returns at the end: songs and thoughts of nature end, and the young man goes to sleep only with the thoughts of his sorrow.

"Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld" ("I Went This Morning over the Field") is in a much more optimistic mood, lightly scored, and reflects humankind's universal turn to contemplation of the beauties of nature when faced with the realities of personal despair. A finch chirps for him, the bluebells cheer him, and the sunshine beams. Again, Mahler turns to his characteristic evocation of simple, folk-like textures for this perspective. But, of course, despair returns.

In the third movement, that despair reigns supreme. He thinks of the "knife in his breast" driven by his lost love; he sees her blue eyes in the sky, her hair in the golden fields, and so forth. And his corpse lies on a black bier. It's not a good picture.

The last song, "Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz" ("The Two Blue Eyes of my Beloved"), brings acceptance of the finality of the sorrow of his lost love. It begins in abject contemplation of a life of eternal sorrow. But, in

typical German romantic fashion, a brief nap under a linden tree, and a snowstorm of its blossoms, brings resolution (death?), or at least acceptance. However, one of the composer's characteristic funeral marches tells us the truth.

### **“Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen” (“I am lost to the world”) — Gustav Mahler**

As we all know, the world changed in permanent and profound ways shortly after Mahler's death. In most respects the cataclysm of World War I was the turning point of modern history--all that was before passed away, and the horrors of the ensuing times began. Mahler's introspection seems to understand that the “Guns of August” were near. His life's epitaph perhaps is best heard in his poignant song, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*. It is one of his last works, and part of the group of *Rückert-Lieder*, after the poet, Friedrich Rückert, who not only wrote the poetry for this group of five songs, but also for Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (“Songs on the Deaths of Children”). They were given their première in Vienna in January of 1905.

This is a special song, considered by most to be perhaps one of the composer's most intimate and personal expressions of the intensity of his love affair with life, and the tragedies that it dealt him. He has done his best, and now drifts into eternity. Serenely and acceptingly his soul departs the world and its tragedies...

*...I am dead to the bustle of the world  
and repose in tranquil realms.  
I live alone in my heaven,  
in my love, in my song.*

### **Novelette, op. 52, No. 4 — Samuel Coleridge-Taylor**

Taylor was an eminent British composer of the late nineteenth century. Born and bred in London and the vicinity, he enjoyed a highly successful career as both a prolific composer and an admired conductor during his relatively short life. He was the illegitimate son of a British woman and a mixed-race Creole doctor from the British colony of Sierra Leone, in West Africa. Except for Liberia, Sierra Leone is unique in African history and culture, being founded in the eighteenth century by various groups of expatriate African-Americans, many of mixed races, who left the New World and immigrated back to Africa. English was, and is, the official language. The Creoles of Sierra Leone, under the colonial British, lived in a culture with many Western institutions, and distinguished themselves in medicine, politics, science, the arts and more. The presence of a doctor from Sierra Leone in London at that time would not have been exceptional at all. Taylor's father, Daniel Taylor, left England before Taylor was born, probably ignorant of the situation and the youth was raised by his mother in the warm arms of a lower class English extended family.

His musical talent became evident early, and by the age of fifteen he was enrolled in the Royal College of Music to study violin, but soon switched his interest to composition. While there he was a fellow student of such luminaries as Vaughan Williams, Holst, Ireland, and Bridge. The poems of Longfellow were all the rage then, and at the age of twenty-two Taylor achieved early success with his cantata, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*. It became all the rage in England, rivaling the popularity of *Messiah* and *Elijah*; it remains perhaps his most popular composition. He went on to compose a large variety of works, in various genres—most enjoying widespread performance and recognition.

Critics pointed to his affinity for the style of Brahms, and especially his idol, Antonín Dvořák. He later finished his *Hiawatha* trilogy, composing *The Death of Minnehaha* and *Hiawatha's Departure*, and generally focusing more on vocal music in his later career. He made several trips to America, where he was hailed as a conductor, even called the “Black Mahler.” On these trips he engaged with Black American luminaries of the time, among them, Booker T. Washington, Harry T. Burleigh, and W. E. B. Du Bois. He even considered immigration the United States, perhaps more in consideration of his father's ancestry than of the American social climate.

The four *Novelettes* were written in 1903 and are a modest example of his complete mastery of British late romantic musical style, as well as of his own creative voice. All four works are engaging, melodious miniatures—light and in an almost popular vein. There's no focus here on variation, sonata form, development, recap, and the like. But rather, an attractive parade of seemingly inexhaustible melodic invention and expertly crafted string textures. A novel (sorry!) touch is the inclusion of parts for triangle and tambourine. The last movement—*Novelette #4*—is perhaps the most “symphonic” of the four, working thoroughly the possibilities of the distinctive opening rhythmic turn. In the best tradition of Taylor's models, Brahms and Dvořák, it combines a melodic gift with a disciplined economy of means.

Taylor, while undoubtedly suffering social privations in Victorian England, achieved a success as a composer that would not have been possible for him in America at that time. His many works were published, admired, and widely performed all over Great Britain in a manner that one would not now have expected. So secure was his position in British public life, that upon his death at the age of thirty-seven in 1912, a great performance in Royal Albert Hall was given for the benefit of his family, and King George V awarded a life pension of £100 (about \$16,000 today) annually to his widow—a significant tribute to his achievement and to a nation willing to acknowledge it.

## **Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, op. 67 — Ludwig van Beethoven**

Beethoven's fifth symphony is the iconic work of classical music. It pervades the whole world of symbols and imagery of musical art as an evocation of a welter of ideas. In a sad way it is almost impossible to escape all of these associations extrinsic to the work itself and to focus only on Beethoven's composition. But distancing one's self from it all and listening to the symphony

as if for the first time can be a joy—as this writer has found, sitting in the best seat in the house (in the back of the orchestra).

By the time that Beethoven had composed this work he was a well-respected composer in Vienna, but certainly not hailed as a genius. The first three symphonies, three piano concertos, piano sonatas, string quartets—all had bolstered his growing reputation before he finished this symphony. It took him rather a long time, almost four years, as he interrupted his work frequently to produce some significant compositions: the *Razumovsky* string quartets, the fourth symphony and fourth piano concerto, and the first version of his only opera, *Fidelio*. Beethoven was a practical man, and when a commission materialized, he shifted his work to where the money was. He finally ground out the completion of the fifth symphony and presented it on an ill-starred concert at the Theater an der Wien on December 22, 1808. It was an all-Beethoven affair, presenting the premières of, not only the fifth symphony, but also the sixth symphony, the fourth piano concerto, and the Choral Fantasy (a precursor to his ninth symphony), as well as various other compositions. The concert was four hours long and the hall was literally freezing. Moreover, Beethoven, who was conducting, had to start over in one work after a mistake derailed things. The proceedings were not helped by his awkward, grand-eloquent conducting, which led to knocking over some lamps and accidentally smacking an unfortunate stagehand in the face. All of this was soon forgotten and the written record shows that Beethoven's fifth symphony was quickly accorded general acclaim, and was on its way to immortality.

The defining characteristics of the work are well known, and focus upon rhythmic vitality, a hitherto unknown sense of drama, and imaginative structural details—but most of all, upon a stunning coherence and economy of elements. The latter is the foundation of the first movement, famous for its four-note motto beginning and the “wringing” almost to death of every musical possibility of the short idea. Forget “fate knocking at the door,” this is simply a dramatic *tour-de-force* of musical coherence. And even if one ignores the adroit manipulation of the melodic content of the opening idea, it is astonishing how well the movement stands upon its own feet from a purely rhythmic perspective.

The second movement is an elegant set of variations on two themes. The key of the movement is A<sup>b</sup>, and even if most of us don't have perfect pitch, it just “sounds” fresh and unexpected when the violoncellos and violas enter with one of Beethoven's most ingratiating melodies in that particular key. The second theme is a more triumphant one, in C major, another remote and refreshing key. The variations gracefully work themselves out with these contrasting themes in a movement quite different from the first.

The third movement is the traditional dance movement, here cast in Beethoven's innovative “scherzo” rhythm—the stately dance of his predecessors being sped up considerably. But it's not a rollicking good time to be had by all, here. Rather, it opens with a mysterious arpeggio in the low strings that ends shortly on some chords with enigmatic meaning. Soon this is shatteringly interrupted by the unison horns in a virile melody that seems related to the opening of the symphony. The middle of the movement, called the “trio,” is usually an opportunity for contrast, and we do get it. It starts out contrapuntally with a vigorous and challenging passage for the violoncellos and double basses—it's a famous one! They snarl and shake it like a dog. Ultimately, a truncated version of the opening returns, but even softer, and here is where real

magic occurs. Beethoven “bridges” the transition into the last movement with a delicate solo passage in the first violins played over *pianissimo* sustained notes in the seconds and violas—the basses and timpani softly “throb.” In one of the most eerie and tension-building passages in all the literature the melody snakes up and down in a crescendo that jubilantly leads to the C major theme that resolves all previous “troubled thought.” For this glorious moment Beethoven brings in three trombones, contra-bassoon, and piccolo—hitherto found only in the opera orchestra. The last movement is long, as three themes are worked over, interrupted only by the striking innovation of a brief reference to the third movement. It’s as if Beethoven is saying, “OK, we win, but it may be only a brief victory.” The recapitulation ensues, followed by an enormous coda—longer than any other section so far. We hear the main three themes again, only in a kind of reverse order. The long coda is needed to erase all doubt as to what prevails over the diversions and dark moods of the other three movements. Victory is ours, and the fifty or so measures of emphatic C major chords seal the finale.

--Wm. E. Runyan  
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