



Cheyenne  
Symphony  
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## Masterpiece 2 – French Connections

November 12, 2022

### *Hommage à Mozart* — Jacques Ibert

The music of Ibert is probably more familiar to music students and faculty, owing to his many contributions of interesting and apt chamber and solo instrumental compositions, as well as a large body of songs. But, American symphony audiences may well be familiar with his evergreen, early work *Escales* (Ports of Call), composed in a rather lush, impressionistic style. It was written soon after World War I, and based upon his experiences during the war in the Mediterranean as a naval officer. The son of two professors at the Paris Conservatoire, he received a solid music education, later moonlighting as a pianist in the silent movie houses—an experience that played some part in his musical style. Service during the war interrupted his musical career, but he astounded everyone by winning the Prix du Rome on his first attempt, in 1919. He went on to become one of France’s most important composers, music administrators, and pundits until his death in 1962.

In the midst of major changes in musical style during the twentieth-century, while living among a phalanx of bold innovators, Ibert nevertheless maintained his own course, not following any of the diverse, major “schools” of folks like Schoenberg, Bartók, Debussy, Ravel, Hindemith, and Stravinsky. His music fundamentally reflects a remarkable stylistic diversity—almost chameleon-like—each composition suitable to the task and subject at hand, whether lush, exotic, and somewhat impressionistic, like *Escales*, or biting and satirical, such some of his many scores for films and theatre. But throughout, the common element is typically French: clear, balanced, form; elegant and often witty melody; and a mastery of colorful, but transparent orchestration. Clichés, perhaps, but nevertheless true.

Ibert’s charming little musical bonbon, *Hommage à Mozart*, was composed in 1955 in tribute to Mozart’s upcoming bicentennial of his birth. So, from Ibert’s formidable “variety pack” of musical styles, he pulled out his personal take on what has come to be called “neo-classicism.” We may be familiar with Stravinsky’s brief foray into that new simplicity right after World War I—exemplified, among other works, by his *Octet for Wind Instruments* (1923). Other compositions that may come to mind in this new simplicity are Respighi’s *Ancient Airs and Dances* (1917) and Prokofiev’s *Classical Symphony* (1918). So, after the dense orchestral “cobwebs,” extended chromatic harmonies, lengthy musical structures—and all the rest of complex late romantic music—many composers sought and enjoyed a new clarity and simplicity, inspired by the music of the past.

Ibert’s short tribute to the virtues of eighteenth-century musical style is cast into one of the favorite forms of the time—the rondo. Simply, a happy, brisk single movement that features an opening section that returns after a parade of contrasting sections—the latter conveniently easy to differentiate from the cheerful opening one. And so it is, here. After a brief introduction, the opening main idea is followed by a new one that begins

with a flute solo. Soon, our familiar first idea returns, shortly followed by the second new idea, led by the trumpets. After some vigorous development, it all concludes with a return to the initial material. Throughout, Ibert indulges himself with his mastery of counterpoint—learned from the master at the French Conservatory, Gedalge, and a perfect tribute to Mozart’s musical style.

In reality, a musical tribute to Mozart would difficult to pull off in many of the more cerebral and complex styles of the “modern” 20<sup>th</sup> century. But, Ibert’s scintillating and bubbly homage was a most apt and entertaining response.

### **Symphony No. 3 in G Minor, op. 36 — Louise Farrenc**

Until recently Farrenc has been practically unknown to symphonic audiences—especially in this country--but in her time she was held in high regard in the first half of the nineteenth century in France. Unlike so many women composers of the past, she suffered little obscurity during her lifetime. She evinced immense talent early on as a pianist, and after study with some of the most august teachers, began a career as performer and composer while in her teens. By the age of thirty-eight she was appointed a professor of piano at the prestigious Paris Conservatory, and had a long and distinguished career. All the while she was a busy composer, working in all major genres except opera. Understandably, her early compositional efforts, beginning in the 1820s, focused primarily upon the piano. Subsequently, she turned her efforts to chamber music. The latter are considered her best works and they enjoyed substantial recognition. Early on she did produce two overtures for orchestra, and they are well-conceived, dynamic, and convincing works. Only somewhat later, in the 1840s, did she compose her three symphonies.

We must remember that opera was the far-preferred genre in nineteenth-century France, and the decades before and around the middle of the century were totally dominated by “French Grand Opera.” The most celebrated composers were Meyerbeer (from whom Wagner stole many of his ideas), Auber, Halévy, and Rossini (for his *William Tell*). Every night the Paris Opera presented these large, long, spectacular operas--operas that the more violent, sordid, and colorfully and elaborately staged, the better. And the vivid action on the stage was supported in the orchestra pit by virtuoso performers (usually professors from the Paris Conservatory) performing exciting scores. Scores that featured new instruments such as valved trumpets and horns, the bass clarinet, the English horn, and others—as well as an immoderate use of the piccolo. And yet, there was little interest or activity in symphonic music in the France of that time. Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique*, while immensely popular today, in no way was representative of contemporary French interest in the symphony. And that situation lasted into well later in the century.

The leading symphonic composers of Farrenc’s time were, then, primarily Germans: Mendelssohn and Schumann in the fore. Beethoven and Schubert had died while she was a student and young professional, and their model was undoubtedly influential. But her “symphonic contemporaries” were the former, and whose works provide an interesting context for her efforts. The great efflorescence of symphony composition of the later nineteenth century by composers such as Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Franck, Dvořák, and others, was yet to come.

Farrenc composed her third symphony in 1847, and the record shows that she heard it performed at least in 1849 by the Société des concerts du Conservatoire. She was lucky at that, for there were few opportunities in the Paris of the times for anyone's symphonic music to be performed. By that time she probably had the opportunity to hear most of Mendelssohn's orchestra music and at least two of Schumann's symphonies, and perhaps a third.

Farrenc did not stray far from the usual models in her third and last symphony: first movement in a variant of sonata form, lyrical second movement, scherzo for the third, and an energetic finale. She did eschew the temptation to lard the orchestra with the growing, heavy orchestration of the times, conservatively using only the standard woodwind octet, two horns, timpani, and strings (no trumpets!). She thus scored for lighter resources than did usually her German contemporaries.

The first movement is a substantial one, opening with a soft, slow introduction that very quickly leads to the intense allegro. It's an intense, darkly dancing affair that is redolent of Mozart's *serioso* G minor works. Busy, jittering strings gradually crescendo with the timpani into the leaping first theme. There are more than a few themes in the movement to divert, but of interest is the composer's adroit mastery of featured woodwind color, her use of rhythmic displacements and syncopations that would do justice to a Schumann or a Brahms, and a bold harmonic imagination typical of the early Romantic period. The extended development methodically works its way through all the material, but not in the typical fragmented way that palpably creates instability. The recap dutifully does its job, setting all the keys right, followed by a brief coda. It must be said that the style of the coda does rather surprisingly seem to come out of nowhere, but it nevertheless serves well, emphatically bringing the close.

The second movement is a lovely aria, led by the solo clarinet, sustained by soft horns and "throbbing" timpani. All have their opportunities with the material, with the bucolic atmosphere interspersed from time to time with more powerful, dynamic contrasts. It can be argued that the spirit of Beethoven's slow movements seems to be peering over it all. The third movement scherzo begins almost demonically in its rhythmic intensity, and maintains that drive even in the contrasting moves to major tonalities. Nevertheless, throughout Farrenc shows her complete command of the light, gossamer textures of the well-known scherzos of Berlioz and Mendelssohn. The usual contrasting middle section is a showcase for *sostenuto* woodwind colors, evidence of her experience in composing chamber music, perhaps.

While last symphonic movements traditionally can frequently be somewhat lighter in nature, and end in the major, rather than minor, key—not so here. Farrenc chose to imbue this movement with dramatic heft. It is as if she dared any misogynous critics to drag out the old bromide, "it sounds very masculine." So, no typical frisky little rondo and a happy ending in the major key. Rather, she uses the typical sonata form of a first movement, with a multiplicity of intense themes, interlarded with sizzling scales and dramatic pauses. To this add, adventuresome forays into rather distant keys, her imaginative woodwind scoring, solid counterpoint in the development, and an economical, but intense drive to the passionate end. It's tempting to credit the whole to her experience as a performer and her musical life in Paris, surrounded by blood and thunder operas.

Louise Farrenc obviously was not only a gifted pianist, pedagogue, and composer, but with this powerful work as evidence, she most certainly must have been a formidable personality. Her extensive *oeuvre* is a welcome addition to an expanding canon of worthy nineteenth-century compositions.

### **Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 77 — 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. But it would be a mistake to imagine Brahms as waging artistic war against the likes of Wagner and Liszt, and their followers—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 is evidenced in the long years he spent working on his first symphony—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, for in 1878, Brahms went on to write his violin concerto, one of five concertos in his *oeuvre*—the others: two for piano, one for cello, 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 Brahms—always engaged with various levels of society—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. Pursued by Hungarian authorities for his revolutionary activities, Reményi fled to America, only to return a few years later. Subsequently, the two went on a concert tour together. It was 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' violin concerto of 1878, written for, and dedicated to, Joachim, his best friend and one of the most respected

violinists in the world. Certainly, the attribute 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 other of his 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 now 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.

--Wm. E. Runyan  
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