**Concert 4 February 27, 2016**

Symphony No. 4 in Bb, op. 60—Ludwig van Beethoven

This symphony, along with the first and second symphonies of Beethoven, has not nearly the reputation of the rest of them. It especially stands in great contrast to its immediate predecessor, the monumental third—the “Eroica,” a work that changed forever the significance of the genre. Any great work of art must be judged by its intrinsic qualities, yet it often is illuminating to consider it in the context of the life of the artist. Beethoven finished this symphony in 1806 at a propitious time in his life; he was thirty-six years old, and widely recognized for his genius. Moreover, he had just finished a series of significant compositions that, had he never composed again, alone would have been sufficient to establish his reputation permanently. They include: his opera, *Fidelio*; the piano sonatas “Pathétique,” “Moonlight,” “Waldstein,” and “Appassionata;” the “Rasumovsky” quartets; the violin concerto; the first four piano concertos; and, of course, the aforementioned “Eroica.” What is more, he had endured some of his typically hopeless infatuations with unobtainable women, and was gradually coming to terms with his deafness—having considered and rejected suicide. And then comes the charming, light, fourth symphony, which for all the world seems like a reversion to the style of some ten years earlier when Joseph Haydn was the toast of the world and Beethoven was a journeyman.

The symphony begins with a slow introduction—a Haydnesque touch—that mysteriously wanders through some pretty remote keys: Bb minor and Gb major and minor. It concludes with a wonderful example of a Beethoven crescendo into the triumphal allegro of the movement proper. Note throughout this movement his imaginative use of the wind instruments in thematic statements. The slow movement eschews Beethoven’s wont to manipulate and develop, and simply unwinds a beautiful melody over a throbbing accompaniment. The usual dance-like third movement—a Beethovenian scherzo—entertains with his characteristic manipulation of accents that surprise. Ever the innovator—even in this modest work—he expands the usual form from three parts to five, more or less repeating the last two sections. The last movement is a kind of perpetual motion of continuous sixteenth notes, driving merrily along to a happy ending.

Although this symphony sits in the middle of works with considerable gravitas, Beethoven obviously felt a need to compose a cheerful work of affirmation as relief. It is not light in quality, only in mood, and reveals to us a side of the stormy and enigmatic composer that, while rare, is nonetheless genuine.

*Romanian Folk Dances*, Sz. 68, BB 76— Béla Bartók

Every great composer may be said to be unique, but Béla Bartók’s artistic position in the world of twentieth-century music stands apart. He was a Hungarian pianist and ethno-musicologist who also happened to compose, and as his career evolved, he contributed some of the most esteemed and respected works to the standard repertoire. His was a musical style that was founded upon an intimate knowledge of the great styles and techniques of the past; a seminal appreciation of the possibilities of integrating the materials of Central European folk music into art music; and an uncommon elegance, restraint, and sophistication. His innovations in textures, harmonies, colors, and structure laid the foundations for myriad others who followed.

Reared and educated in Budapest, he early on embarked as a typical conservatory pianist, performing the standard repertory with which we are all so familiar. He performed for much of his life, but his rather dour personality and lack of “soloist” image restricted his success. What changed his life was his “discovery” of the folk music of his native Hungary. Around 1905 Bartók began his association with Zoltán Kodály, pursuing a joint interest in folksongs, as well as composition. Soon they were collecting and publishing Hungarian songs, adding Slovakian material by 1906. Romanian folksongs entered the fold by the next year, and Serbian, Bulgarian, and Ruthenian were later included in their collecting. Of course, at that time, before the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I, those areas were all part of the empire. They toured extensively in the backcountry with an Edison cylinder machine, making recordings of thousands of folksongs. Their transcriptions and scholarly publications were literally pioneering efforts in the field. Both of them, but especially Bartók, sought to find ways of taking the scales, harmonies, and rhythms of this material and using them as a foundation for new ways of composing art music for a universal audience. And in this he was spectacularly successful. The litany of masterpieces that emerged in the ensuing years is an imposing one. Among them, to just name a few, are the six string quartets, *Mikrokosmos* (a series of graded piano compositions for youth), three piano concertos, the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, and the *Concerto for Orchestra*. All of which, together with others, constitute a body of compositions not exceeded in significance and integrity—not to mention popularity—by that of any other composer of the twentieth century.

The *Romanian Folk Dances*, in many ways, are exhibit “A” in Bartók’s integration of these ethnic materials into his personal musical style. Composed in 1915 as a suite of six brief movements for solo piano, he went on to transcribe them for small orchestra in 1917. The melodies are from the Transylvanian region of Romania, and were originally performed on flute or violin. The first dance, “Stick Dance,” Bartók related that he had heard played by two Gypsies. The second dance, “Sash Dance,” was danced with just that, and the third dance, “Pe loc,” in Romanian, means “in one spot.” A dance from a district in Romania originally called Bucium constitutes the fourth movement, with the fifth movement being a kind of Romanian polka. Finally two tunes played in quick succession make up the last movement. All of the melodies use the scales of the traditional modes—which are the same scales used in Gregorian chant, and are the oldest elements of Western music. But, one can also hear traditional melodic intervals from the Middle East, as well. The infectious rhythms and exotic scales of these folk dances are simply delightful, and are fundamental, but elegant, testimony to the unique orientation of this giant of twentieth-century music.

Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor, op. 61— Camille Saint-Saëns

Camille Saint-Saëns lived a long life, and was remarkable for his wide-ranging intellectual interests and abilities. As a child he was, of course, a precocious musical talent, but even then, he evinced a strong natural interest in almost every academic subject--including, but certainly not restricted to, astronomy, archaeology, mathematics, religion, Latin, and Greek. In addition to a life of musical composition and virtuoso keyboard performance, he also enjoyed success as a music journalist, champion of early music (Handel and Bach), and as a leader in encouraging French musical traditions. His father died when he was an infant, and he grew into middle age extraordinarily devoted to his mother--his marriage at the age of forty to a nineteen-year old did not last long. He simply left the house one day in 1881 and chose never to see her again; she died in 1950 at the age of ninety-five. Saint-Saëns went on to live an active life, filling an important rôle in the musical life of France--as performer, composer, author, spokesman, and scholar. He was peripatetic--researching Handel manuscripts in London, conducting concerts in Chicago and Philadelphia, visiting Uruguay and writing a hymn for their national holiday, and vacationing in the Canary Islands. He celebrated seventy-five years of concertizing in August of 1921 in his eighty-sixth year, and died a few months later.

Perhaps his most well-known and successful work is his opera, *Samson et Dalila*, one of a dozen. However, other works vie for that honor, for he was a most prolific composer, working in almost every genre common at that time. Despite this versatility he perhaps did his best work in the traditional Classical models--symphonies, concertos, chamber music, and sonatas. The concert-going public today may subconsciously think of French music as being defined by the innovations of the completely new directions in which Debussy and Ravel took Gallic musical style. But Saint-Saëns, a dominant figure in French musical life in the generation before them, was securely positioned in the Classical traditions from the century before. His work in those models bears that out, and that is clear in his concertos for solo instrument and orchestra. He wrote well over two dozen of them, including three for violin and orchestra. Of these, Concerto No. 3 has remained a concerto favorite, along with the evergreen *Introduction et rondo capriccioso* and the *Havanaise*, also for solo violin.

The first two concertos were relatively early works, but the third was written in 1880, when he was forty-four, at the top of his game, and during the period of his most successful works: *Samson et Dalila,* the “Organ” Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the “Carnival of the Animals,” and others. It is dedicated to the great virtuoso, Pablo de Sarasate, soloist at the work’s première.

While cast in the three traditional movements, with the usual forms, the concerto doesn’t hew dogmatically to convention. Saint-Saëns eschews the traditional orchestral introduction, with the soloist entering emphatically after just a few bars of tremolo in the orchestra. In the best Classical fashion, the main theme is composed of just four bold strokes, and it will be easy to track them in the rest of the movement. The solo part is replete with the expected virtuosic figurations, double stops, and the like, but after an orchestral transition, a lyrical second theme in E major ensues. The development continues the happy mood for a while, but the dark, emphatic first theme is soon fodder for a working out. The end of the movement is signaled by a return to the opening material, with busy virtuoso figures heralding the end. Another surprise awaits, for the composer also eliminates the conventional cadenza for the soloist, obviously because the exciting and challenging material in the solo part has pretty much taken care of the need for further technical display in this abbreviated recapitulation.

The gentle, lyrical second movement is a simple dance in the familiar *siciliana* rhythm. Various solo woodwinds gracefully fill in and out around the solo violin, with the strings providing a lush, undulating foundation. Just as in the first movement, where the incisive main motif provided Saint-Saëns with all the needed melodic material to build the movement, all in the Classical tradition—so in this charming middle movement are the tunes and phrases foursquare, and thus Classical, as well. Pay particular attention to the very end, where one will enjoy the truly unique sound of ethereal harmonics in the solo violin doubled octaves lower by the solo clarinet. Saint-Saëns without doubt could orchestrate!

In another unusual move, Saint-Saëns begins the last movement, not with an orchestra *tutti* setting the stage for the entrance of the soloist, but with the soloist playing what for all the world sounds like a dramatic operatic recitative for solo violin! After a series of impressive flourishes, the soloist jumps into the march-like theme in B minor---a jagged affair whose second part is a smooth ascending stepwise passage. Both aspects will be heard throughout. The second main idea, cheerfully melodic, and now in D major, closes out the first part. The development is distinguished—after the orchestra alone briefly tackles the main theme--by the introduction of a completely new theme in G major. The full string section sets a lush introduction to this chorale-like theme, followed by the soloist. After figural activity, the main theme from the beginning returns and heralds the recapitulation, which begins with a somewhat brief reëxamination of the main material. But the big, and pleasant surprise is a glorious, uplifting chorale played by the brass—supported by energetic strings--of the winsome new theme from the middle of the movement. The soloist takes it up, and spirited figurations lead the inevitable rush to the conclusion of this most satisfying work. Proving that, despite the innovative blandishments of the next French generation of composers—Debussy and Ravel--Saint-Saëns knew full well how to extract yet more new wine out of the Classical tradition and put it in old bottles.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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