

Concert 4

March 10, 2018

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. 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 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 Brahms' 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. 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' 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. Moreover, 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 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 of—but far more tranquil than—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.

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis—Ralph Vaughan Williams

Ralph Vaughan Williams (incidentally, pronounced: “Rayf, not Ralf”) is perhaps Britain’s most important and influential composer of the first half of the twentieth century. Prolific in most musical genres, he was an active composer from his student

days right up until his death in 1958, at the age of eighty-six. He composed dozens of works that are part of the core repertory of British music of the last century, including the important series of nine symphonies. He lived a long life—long enough to have written in a number of rather different styles, all of them authentic and reflective of his changing interests and the times. He was born into an educated, upper middle class family, attended Cambridge University, and studied with eminent musicians and scholars, including a stint with Maurice Ravel. Among his early close friends and fellow students were such luminaries as Bertram Russell, Leopold Stokowski, and, of course, Gustav Holst.

In addition to his early activities as a rising composer, he and Holst were among the leaders in the efflorescence of serious study and collection of English folksong that arose in the late nineteenth century. He and Holst frequently spent time in the countryside tracking the rapidly vanishing body of song, writing them down, and preserving them. He later served as president of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. And, inevitably, his appreciation of this great literature became a major influence on one facet of his musical style—evidenced by every American band student's encounter with his *English Folksong Suite*.

Another important interest and activity of his early on was his editorship of the *English Hymnal* (1906), his interest in the great English composer, Henry Purcell, and of all of the music, in general, of the Renaissance in England. It is the latter that is the inspiration for one of his early and most beloved compositions, the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

Thomas Tallis, along with William Byrd, was the most important of English composers of the Tudor era. He served under English monarchs from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I, dying in 1585. If you were quick you would have seen his character on the television show, "The Tudors," so he certainly was not obscure. And he was resourceful, for though he openly maintained his faith as a Roman Catholic, he served under various religious regimes. One of his important publications (with his colleague, Byrd, he enjoyed a monopoly granted by Elizabeth I printing any kind of music) was his 1567 collection of polyphonic settings of Psalm tunes.

In 1910 Vaughan Williams chose the third one of these as the basis for his own composition. He was familiar with it, for he had included it in the 1906 *English Hymnal*. The tune's original title is simply "Third Mode Melody," which refers to it being in the Phrygian church mode. Not major, and not minor, it is a marvelously mysterious mode that can be heard by playing the scale from "e" to "e" on the white notes of the piano. Written for strings, alone, the composer divides the orchestra into three groups of varying sizes, thus providing some interesting textural changes. The main tune is heard several times, but like any good composer, Vaughan Williams take various elements of the melody and creates the "fantasy," which of course was a typical musical procedure during the sixteenth century. A winsome diversion takes place not too long after the beginning in the form of a viola solo, this theme appearing in the full orchestra towards the end. A dry description this is, doing little justice to a sonorous, timeless evocation of the genius of an earlier musical style that is rarely heard in the modern concert hall. Vaughan Williams simultaneously created a tribute to one of the high points in the English arts, along with a perfect reflection of his own twentieth-century musical aesthetic.

Symphony No. 8 in F Major, op. 93—Ludwig van Beethoven

It is commonplace, of course, for scholars to think of Beethoven's musical life in three great periods—the last one being the time of compositions that “challenge” comprehension and appreciation. The fecund middle period, roughly the first decade of the nineteenth century, is the time of dozens of the magnificent works that came to define the composer and establish his eternal reputation, and his eighth symphony stands pretty much near the end of that time.

Written mostly during 1811 and finished by early 1812, it—like its mate, the seventh symphony—is without doubt a complete reflection of the happy times and optimistic personal attitude of the composer at that time in his life—both professionally and personally. We are all familiar with the struggles and depressive moments in his emotionally up and down life, but times were good about then. The beloved “Pastoral” symphony was finished in 1808, and he had then busied himself with important works, among them, the “Emperor” piano concerto and the music for *Egmont*. Sketches for both the seventh and the eighth symphonies were all part of his activity during this time.

He had already suffered health problems by early 1811, and traveled to the spa in the Bohemian town of Teplice, where work on the symphonies went on during that summer. Both symphonies were finished the next year, and together they more or less demark the end of an era. From that time on, until the end of his life in 1827, Beethoven the man, and his musical works underwent significant changes. His health underwent further deterioration, with debilitating family squabbles and failures in personal relationships all contributing to the change. While there were great works still to be written, the flow of inspiration attenuated, his social isolation increased, and the style of his composition took on a new, abstract quality. So, the Symphony No. 8 in many ways roughly marks the end of the major creative period of the composer's life—what lay ahead were works that often tested his audiences in significant ways; they still do.

A common trait of Beethoven's creativity was to write works, though conceived almost simultaneously, that often end up quite differently. The contrasts between his seventh and eighth symphonies are a case in point. The seventh has significant “gravitas” and length, whereas the eighth is much shorter and full of humor, élan, and a certain light-hearted sparkle. Beethoven, himself, referred to it as “my little one.”

It's a rollicking, thumping affair, full of humor, and with some of the loudest passages that Beethoven ever called for. Even the so-called “slow” movement is not in the slightest, slow. The symphony starts right out with an emphatic, happy theme replete with dramatic pauses, with passages that almost sound like powerful ending material rather than an opening. The form is the familiar sonata form, but in typical fashion Beethoven almost dashes through it, seemingly to just get it over with, in order that he can indulge himself in a long intense coda with pounding sections and unprecedented sustained volume. And then the movement ends with a Beethoven surprise: intense hammer strokes followed by unexpected soft little accents.

As noted above, the second movement is not the usual slow movement but a fairly rapid exercise in what many generations have thought of as some kind of parody on a metronome or a clock. It's not proven, and you can draw your own conclusions, but it goes from the first to the last bar with almost unremitting sixteenth note “tick-tocks” in

the woodwinds—it doesn't vary a whit in tempo, even during the “stutter stops.” More Beethoven humor, it would seem—what else could it be?

There are not many serious moments so far, and the third movement—usually a brisk, and often dramatic “scherzo” in Beethoven—is a throwback to the old minuet of Haydn and Mozart, but with a major difference. This is not a gentle, stately dance of old. In Beethoven's hands, this one is nothing less than a bit weird in rhythm, and full of unusual accents that would make it a challenge to dance to for even Fred and Ginger. It's as if the composer deliberately set out to confuse us as to what this is, and he succeeds famously at continuing the unusual nature of this symphony with yet another bit of eccentricity. Most will find the horn and clarinet solos in the middle section ingratiating and a rather smooth diversion from the outer sections.

The last movement is a run for the money. Taking off at blistering speed, there is a shower of machine gun-like notes that occasionally pause, followed by an enigmatic loud note that seems from some other key. We hear a main section that returns on a regular basis, with contrasting ones and a bit of a development, as the movement explores a variety of unusual and entertaining keys that surprise and delight. But, it's a relatively short affair—rather like the first movement—for Beethoven more or less zips through the form almost perfunctorily to indulge himself in a coda of literally unprecedented length. Along the way, the unexpectedly loud “wrong” notes continue to be heard—but now in a context that rather explains them. The rustic humor continues in the funny, thumping octave jumps in the bassoons and timpani. This whole amusing symphony ends with what seems to be another poke at convention: tonic chords are repeated, repeated, and repeated to nail the conclusion. It's almost a self-parody of the “long hair” Beethovenian emphatic ending. This is a delightful work, and constantly surprises those who are more familiar with all of the other “big” symphonies,” and it is well deserving of the composer's documented pride in it.