



Masterpiece 3 – Riveting Rhapsodies

January 23, 2021

Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Piano in C Major, op. 56—Ludwig van Beethoven

The concerto in its various guises has long been an important part of the symphonic literature, going back to the middle of the seventeenth century. But by Beethoven's time, some 150 years on, concertos were most often written for one instrument—usually piano, violin, or 'cello—with orchestral accompaniment. Of course, many fine compositions were written for other solo instruments: predominantly any of the woodwinds, horn, or trumpet. But, piano, violin, or 'cello were the stars—and so it has remained. Beethoven, a virtuoso pianist, wrote five significant piano concertos, initially of course to showcase himself, and an important violin concerto. But, the concerto that he composed in 1803 for three solo instruments and orchestra stands apart for several reasons. It's the only concerto that he wrote for more than one solo instrument, and in the rest of the nineteenth century not very many of them were written at all.

Now the idea of a group of soloists accompanied by an orchestra was not a new one by that time, for an important genre of the Baroque era was the *concerto grosso*. And during the time of Haydn, Mozart, and frères, the so-called *sinfonia concertante*, along with the *concerto grosso*, exploited the idea of a group of soloists accompanied by an orchestra. But, there was a rub. By Beethoven's time, and especially with the great man himself, musical style had moved to one of extended musical architecture, driven by an integral emphasis of developing and manipulating musical ideas, and a greater rôle for the accompanying orchestra. All of these factors didn't leave as much room (and time) for multiple soloists to fully occupy the limelight. So, simple traffic control between the soloists and the orchestra posed structural problems. To allow each of the soloists to develop and expand on their material and share ideas with each other—not to speak of giving the orchestra a significant part—would have made for compositions that were just too long and unwieldy, among other things.

But great artists meet difficulties that deter lesser folks, and Beethoven was more than up to the job. Just why he wrote his "triple concerto" is subject to some conjecture, but there is some evidence that he had in mind as his pianist his well-known pupil and patron, Archduke Rudolf of Austria—the Emperor's son. The Archduke studied both piano and composition with Beethoven for almost two decades, and became a very creditable pianist—his patronage was significant financial support for Beethoven, and the two were close friends to boot. Several of the composer's finest works are dedicated to the young archduke. Some speculate that the somewhat easier piano part, compared with the two string soloists, is evidence that the archduke was the pianist in mind, but that's not established. In any case, at the première in 1808, the archduke was neither the pianist, nor the *dedicatee* in the earlier publication.

Cast in the usual three movements, the extensive first movement, full of *gravitas*, has a conventional first-movement form of several themes, appropriately worked through, with recapitulation and coda. The following *largo* is quite brief, and

leads directly into a substantial, energetic rondo.

The first movement begins quietly, with the main theme heard immediately in the low strings—there will be several more in the structure of this rather complicated movement. You can spot the next main idea when the woodwinds take it. Finally, our soloists enter, the ‘cello—as it does frequently in this concerto—taking the lead. Throughout this movement—given that three soloists have to be given ample opportunity to shine—one does not hear much as one would expect of the composer’s vaunted ability to develop and extend aphoristic ideas. Rather, somewhat in the manner of Schubert, there’s just a lot of delightful repetition. So, the listener gets to hear a lot of familiar material, as each soloist takes his turn, with a constant trading back and forth between the three. The movement is in a rather complicated sonata/concerto form, but that needn’t detain us. The pleasure in this substantial movement is in following the variety of the constant interplay, as well as the entertaining tunes and enterprising harmonic turns. A quick little, almost perfunctory, coda, with the requisite cascading scales, brings us to the end.

The ensuing slow movement is an elegant example of one of Beethoven’s most endearing characteristics. In like manner to the beloved slow movements of his solo piano concertos, it leisurely and serenely spins out a remarkable long-breathed melody of breathtaking beauty and eloquence. The key is A^b, a relationship to the main key of the work that is a favorite of the composer, and a decidedly “romantic” characteristic. It provides a surprising, breathtaking harmonic moment at its inception. As in other parts of the concerto the ‘cello take the lead, singing out in its higher register, before yielding to the violin, which takes its turn with the same material. Throughout the movement the piano stays in the background, providing a filigree accompaniment. After a short time, all three instruments participate in a kind of dance of teasing give and take, and we’re quickly into the boisterous *Rondo alla polacca* of the last movement.

Rondos are a popular form for last movements, for they are tuneful, energetic, and the “roadmap” easily followed. Typically, a clear, sharply profiled main theme is followed by a variety of contrasting sections, most not too long, and the main theme entertains by constantly returning. Nothing lasts too long, everything is usually pellucid, and on the whole it’s a welcome contrast to the seriousness and complexity of what went before. In this particular rondo, Beethoven chose the time signature of three beats to the measure, with the characteristic dance accents of a *polonaise*. The main theme appears immediately, first in the ‘cello and quickly taken up by the violin. Without much delay we’re into the contrasting material, much of it figurative. The orchestra then thunders in shortly with the main theme—this is a rondo, after all. And so it goes—the middle section has an attractive turn to the minor mode. With each solo section, each of the soloists burns through increasingly impressive virtuosic figures, as Beethoven cunningly builds to a climax—interspersed with typical Beethovenian dramatic pauses, before bolting off again. Moving ahead, the composer turns on the heat with a turn to duple metre, allowing the tempo to really surge in a blazing coda. A massive tutti statement of the main *polacca* theme brings us to the triumphant end. The “Triple Concerto” may be somewhat of a stepchild of Beethoven’s concertos, not garnering near as many performances as the solo works, but it is marvelously entertaining, and a *tour de force* of handling a treacherous musical architecture.

Soul of Remembrance—Mary Watkins

Watkins is active not only as a composer, but also as a respected pianist in both jazz and classical circles. A native of Denver, Colorado, she was graduated from Howard University with a degree in music composition in Washington, D.C. in 1972. She established herself as a working jazz pianist there before moving to the west coast. Her musical style as a composer is eclectic, encompassing such diverse elements as country/folk, gospel, blues and pop. In addition to compositions for symphony orchestra and chamber orchestra, she also has worked in film and the theatre. She is known for her unusual jazz adaptation of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* (*The Revolutionary Nutcracker Sweetie*) and her musical score for a play based upon the life of the immortal saxophonist, Lester Young.

Soul of Remembrance is the second movement from the 1994 orchestral suite, *Five Movements in Color*. Commissioned by the Camellia Orchestra in Sacramento, California, it is intended by Watkins as a "statement about the African-American experience." Its lush string textures, funereal tempo, and expressive melodic lines are an eloquent paean to lingering memories of the tragedy of the African Diaspora and its aftermath.

Adagio for Strings, op. 11—Samuel Barber

If any composer may truly be considered our national composer, Samuel Barber should surely be in the running. Notwithstanding the adulation of Aaron Copland's populist music from the 1930s and 40s, most of the latter composer's compositions in other musical styles are not well received by the American public--too dissonant and modern! On the other hand, no major American composer of the twentieth century was a more ardent and eloquent champion of a lyrical, accessible, yet modern idiom, than Samuel Barber. His musical style is founded in the romantic traditions of the nineteenth century, whose harmonic language and formal structures were his point of departure. Unlike so many of his peers, he was not powerfully swayed by the modernism emanating from Europe after World War I, but pursued his own path.

Consistently a lyrical composer throughout his career, it is telling that his songs constitute about two-thirds of his compositions in number. His vocal works include two major operas, *Vanessa* (1956), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966), the latter composed for the opening of the Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center. But he also composed at least one work for almost every musical genre, and unlike most composers, he was a recognized and published composer from his student days on. At the age of twenty-one his overture to *The School for Scandal* was an instant success, was forthwith published, and remains in the standard repertoire.

Though his choral music and solo vocal music are concert mainstays, the *Adagio for Strings* is undoubtedly his most well-known work. It is the second movement of his *String Quartet*, arranged for string orchestra. In 1936, when he was twenty-six years old, he and his life's partner, the equally distinguished Italian composer, Gian Carlo Menotti, were living in Europe for the summer, and the quartet was written there. The quartet has only three movements, and apparently, the composer knew from the beginning that the slow middle movement was something special. The quartet received its première in Rome in late 1936, but Barber revised the last movement the next year before its first performance in the U.S. Even before all this, it is apparent that Barber had recognized the gold of the middle movement, and extracted the movement,

arranging it for string orchestra right away in 1936. In this full, lush guise the composer sent the full score to Toscanini in early 1938, and soon received it back with no comment. That was a bit irksome, and Barber felt slightly offended, but soon all was put right, as the legendary conductor soon informed Barber that he had memorized the complete score, and sent it back as a courtesy. Toscanini conducted the première of the string orchestra version in November of 1938 in a live radio broadcast (a recording was made) from Rockefeller Center, and the rest is history, so to speak. It went on to take its place as a very special composition in the American psyche, and like the “Nimrod” variation from Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* in Great Britain, a performance of the *Adagio for Strings* is almost mandatory for moments of great national reflection and grief.

It is a relatively simple work, like much great art, but concomitantly is also the stunning application of genius and inspiration in its creation. A straightforward melody enters after a unison low B^b in the violins and a rich response from the low strings. Composed of a searching three-note figure and a descending scale and return, this idea is passed around the orchestra in a dialogue of string voices. Beneath it all, a rich bed of ever-shifting harmonies sustains. Barber makes much of the homogeneous timbre of the string section—like great, unaccompanied vocal choruses—to “sneak” remarkable dissonance and its resolution into the texture. And of course, it is this very commonplace of music technique that produces much of what has always been perceived as beauty, in this case, wrenching beauty. Expressive upward leaps in the melodic line, resolving to ever-shifting harmonies, mostly complete the picture, as the instruments—and the tension—climb higher and higher. An ever-changing pulse contributes to the unease, as the soaring climax is reached. A few dramatic chords, a pause, and Barber returns to a brief restatement of the beginning. As it ends, impossibly softly, there is no traditional harmonic resolution, but concludes with a “hanging” chord, with no real sense of finality. It could not better mirror the irresolution of existence, grief, and human lives.

Mother Goose Suite (Ma mère l'Oye) —Maurice Ravel

Ravel was the son of a Basque mother and a Swiss father, but he was quintessentially French in his elegant, stylish artistic imagination. He is clearly in the camp of those classicists who elegantly re-interpret the genres, forms, and musical syntax of the past. Only a cursory review of many of the titles of Ravel’s works will bear out his deep fascination and appreciation for the uses of the musical past for imaginative, original contributions to a musical future. And yet, his music smacks nothing at all of the reactionary. Rather, while he definitely didn’t storm the ramparts of startling change in musical style as did so many of his early twentieth-century compatriots, his music just “sounds” modern. As did so many seminal intellects of romantic and post-romantic Europe, Ravel knew and appreciated the works of the American poet, Edgar Allen Poe—which fact may surprise most Americans these days, who have consigned Poe and his raven to the dusty closet of school-house poetry. But, interestingly, Ravel considered Poe his “third” teacher after that of actual French musical models. For Ravel, Poe’s stress on craftsmanship, as well as his ideas on the process of artistic conception and creation, were strongly influential. Ravel also admired Poe’s thoughts on proportion, economy of means, beauty, and perfection.

While Ravel’s lifetime production was relatively small for a major composer—he consciously lamented that fact—few have so consistently created works at such a high

level of artistry and craftsmanship. In fact, almost everything that he wrote takes an honored place in the repertoire, today. And while he only produced a handful of orchestral music that was conceived originally for that medium, the frequency of performances by today's orchestras of his orchestral works and transcriptions for orchestra are exceeded by only a handful of composers.

In keeping with his great respect for cultural traditions, his *Mother Goose Suite* reveals yet another aspect of his penchant for reinterpretation of honored legacies. Ravel took pleasure in the companionship of animals and children, and enjoyed reading fairy tales to Mimi and Jean Godebski, children of his close friends. In 1910 he composed a piano duet for the young children based upon a few of these stories and orchestrated the suite the next year. The various movements of *Mother Goose Suite* are based upon versions of traditional tales as told by three well-known French authors. Ravel is likely the most adroit of those who orchestrate, or adapt for orchestra, music originally written for piano or other instruments. His version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is certainly the best known, and he was wont to orchestrate his own keyboard works, as well. What is most intriguing about this suite is the way in which very simple textures for young pianists assume a marvelously profound quality under the expert pen of Ravel the orchestrator—no obvious vestige of the original medium is palpable. While conceived in a refined, accessible, and modest style, the various movements exhibit Ravel's sophisticated use of "exotic" musical materials, including pentatonic scales (the black keys on the piano) and quartal harmonies (chords made of stacked fourths—not the usual thirds).

His mastery of orchestral sound is aptly illustrated by the flute and harp of Sleeping Beauty; the plaintive English horn of Tom Thumb after the birds (woodwinds) have eaten the trail of crumbs; and the exotic (and perhaps clichéd by now) music of the little Chinese empress and her orchestra of tiny dolls. In the Beauty and the Beast (clarinet and contrabassoon, respectively), the transformation of the Beast into the Prince is easy to spot in the solo violin and harp passage. The Fairy Garden begins simply, perhaps as an extension of the mood of the previous, happy moments, and grows into a luminous celebration of its subject.

--Wm. E. Runyan
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