



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 2 – A Time to Discover

November 13, 2021

Overture in C Major — Fanny Mendelssohn

Fanny, of course, was the older sister (by four years) of Felix, and her musical talent was as remarkable as that of her brother. The two were inseparable in their youth, and spent their hours together pursuing their mutual interests in diverse activities. They were born into a distinguished family of Jewish bankers and philosophers, and raised in a warm, intellectual, highly supportive artistic family. Fanny and Felix were incredibly precocious, and the two were probably among the best-educated composers of all time. Voracious readers, interested in science and philosophy, and daily conversationalists with the leading minds of Germany, the siblings even started their own literary magazine in their early teens. Obviously, they matured quickly, and a stream of musical compositions soon flowed from them both.

Both the siblings received first-rate musical training with recognized teachers, and enjoyed frequent opportunities to demonstrate their skills, both as performers and youthful composers, in the frequent family musicales. Fanny, being the older, was first to be recognized for her talent, and her reputation as a pianist was formidable. By the time Fanny was fourteen she was able to perform all of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* by memory. Nevertheless, she performed publicly rarely in her life, focusing on composition. The two siblings had great mutual respect for each other's talents, soliciting and giving frequent advice and analysis of their respective compositions—even into adulthood. Nevertheless, as was the overwhelming social convention of the time, it was soon made clear to them both that Felix could pursue music as a profession, but for Fanny it could only be an "ornament." And it must be said, Felix shared the conviction, despite his deep respect for her talent. His support for her included the gesture of allowing some of her early compositions to be published under his name! She married the artist, Wilhelm Hensel, at the age of twenty-four, and continued to compose extensively for most of the rest of her life, dying young of a stroke when forty-two. Her husband was strongly supportive of the publication of her compositions, and she published her first collection of works under her own name in 1846. Whereupon, Felix proffered his (it must be said) rather lukewarm blessings—but she was nevertheless grateful.

Despite the obstacles, Fanny was an assiduous and productive composer, with over four hundred and fifty compositions to her credit. Most of her work focused on German *Lieder* (over 250) and works for solo piano. Although she did compose a piano trio, a piano quartet, and several cantatas. Her only purely orchestra work is the *Overture in C*, composed around 1830-32. Not much is known about its origins, but reasonably could have been intended for one of the famous and numerous family musicales that often included small orchestras. It was only recently "rediscovered" and published, based upon manuscripts found in the Mendelssohn Archive in Berlin.

Though Fanny composed so little for orchestra she was nevertheless more than conversant with the medium. She had frequently conducted her brother's works, and is known to have made very strong recommendations about the orchestration of some of them during performance preparations. Accordingly, this little overture is evidence of her deft mastery of the orchestra—no matter that she never studied or played an orchestral instrument. It is scored for a modest ensemble that would have been typical of that of decades before in the works of, say, Haydn: strings, woodwinds, horns, trumpets and timpani.

It opens with sustained horns and a charming call and response between the strings and the woodwinds. The graceful and lyrical exchange is repeated, this time with the woodwinds taking the lead. An apparent recapitulation of this material quickly yields to a frenzied outburst by unison strings that leads us to the brisk tempo of the movement proper. Couched in the usual sonata form, but with creative touches throughout, Fanny provides a multiplicity of ingratiating themes—even the transitions are borne by significant ideas of their own. The composer is on record as denigrating her ability to develop ideas—so important in abstract instrumental music—and offering that as reason for dedicating the preponderance of her *oeuvre* to *Lieder*. Not so! The development section here is eloquent evidence of her skill at creative elaboration of musical ideas. Not only that, but the ear is diverted by a harmonic language that refreshingly moves through varied interesting keys—early German romanticism at its best!

The short recapitulation is followed by an even briefer codetta that, though seemingly slower, takes a deep breath and drives us to a dynamic conclusion. This sole example of the composer's orchestral output is sadly not followed by successors. The canon would have been greatly enriched had Fanny given her brother a run for the money in the genre.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, op. 26 — Max Bruch

Bruch was a talented and respected composer whose musical style was firmly in the camp of his contemporary, Johannes Brahms. Not for him the extravagant and progressive orientation of Wagner, Liszt, and their popular followers. Rather, like Brahms he composed in the more conservative tradition of Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and their admirers. He was a precocious musician, composing from an early age, and displaying throughout his long career a remarkable gift for lyricism and the ability to craft a melodic line. Active in many genres—operas, symphonies, choral music, chamber music, and song—he is best known for his immensely popular first violin concerto. He wrote two others, as well, but they did not achieve any lasting success. He came to rue the popularity of the first, hoping musicians would perform more frequently his many other fine compositions, but alas! To be sure, a few of his other compositions garnered renown, though, including the *Scottish Fantasy* for violin and orchestra and the *Kol nidrei* for violoncello and orchestra. The reception of the majority of his compositions suffered to some degree owing to his living in the shadow of Brahms; the lack of appeal to British audiences (before and during WWI) of his often German-themed works; and the mistaken assumption by Germans in the 1930s that he was Jewish. To top it off, his dyed-

in-the-wool romanticism was old hat by the time of his death in 1920. History is often not kind.

The first violin concerto has its origins very early on, in 1857, when Bruch was a student and only nineteen years old. He deemed it finished in 1865, when he was serving as court music director in Koblenz. It received its first performance a year later. But, it was clear that much revision needed to be done, and for that he sought the advice of the preeminent concert violinist of the time, the great Joseph Joachim (Brahms did likewise with his violin concerto, later). Joachim gave the première of the revised version in 1868, and, of course, the concerto went on to lasting popularity. Unfortunately, Bruch received only a pittance for his efforts, owing to a variety of reasons, basically being more or less swindled out of his autograph copy of the score. It finally ended up in the Morgan Library in New York City only a few decades ago.

The overall form of the work is a bit unusual, for the first movement is somewhat short, and serves rather like a prelude or introduction to the slow second movement. So, rather than a robust, significant first movement as is usual in solo concertos, Bruch was happy with an abbreviated *Vorspiel*, or prelude. It nevertheless does have two main themes, both firmly reminding us of Bruch's legendary gift for melody. In the beginning, one hears a brief idea in the woodwinds, followed immediately by a short, rather pensive, cadenza-like reflection from the soloist. All that repeats, and then the full orchestra starts the affair in earnest. Two main ideas follow: an emphatic, memorable first theme (which, it must be admitted sounds very much like Dvořák), and a much more tender, lyrical second one. Don't bother to look forward to a typical exploration, or development, of the ideas, for after a robust diversion, very quickly we hear the woodwind introduction from the very beginning of this "prelude," and it seems like there's a premature recapitulation. After revisiting the two brief cadenzas of the opening, and an answer from the full orchestra, the movement quickly glides via a sustained low note in the violins to the meat of the concerto: the extensive slow movement.

And a lovely one it is, accounting, no doubt, for much of the concerto's timeless appeal. Bruch composed a wealth of music, much of it first rate in every regard, yet he takes his place in musical history for this concerto, and this movement, to be sure. Here, his gift for soaring, lyric romantic melodies is supreme. In the last movement, the soloist enters after a brief introduction with the dramatic main theme, with its memorable multiple stops. The second theme comes quickly—another winsome example of Bruch's innate lyricism--heard first in soaring iteration in the full orchestra, taken up quickly by the soloist. And just as quickly, the development begins working through both ideas. Bruch was not one to "pad" his compositions, and the scintillating conclusion of this timeless work comes without delay. Bruch may have bitterly rued the popularity of this work at the expense of most of the others of his many worthwhile compositions, but a hundred years on, he no doubt would have welcomed the apparent immortality of just one of them.

***Shuo* — Chen Yi**

Chen Yi is a remarkable composer who has achieved worldwide acclaim for her many compositions--compositions that seek to reconcile--or at least convincingly meld--the very different musical styles of East and West. Born in Guangzhou, China in 1953, she studied violin early on, practicing surreptitiously with a mute upon the advent of the Cultural Revolution. Ultimately, she had to give up music, owing to her impressment into forced agricultural labor in a variety of locations in China. After that unfortunate episode in China's history, she was able to enter the Beijing Conservatory in 1977. Her career as a composer ensued with great success, culminating in a major, broadcast concert dedicated entirely to her compositions. She came to the United States in 1986 and studied composition at Columbia University with the distinguished composers, Chou Wen-chung and Mario Davidovsky. Thereafter, in 1996, she accepted a position at the Peabody Conservatory, and in 1998 joined the faculty of the University of Missouri at Kansas City. She is the recipient of numerous prestigious fellowships, awards, and prizes, and enjoys performances of her compositions all over the world.

Shuo for string orchestra was commissioned by the San Jose Chamber Orchestra and performed on their opening concert for the 1994 season. But its origin goes back to the first movement of her 1982 string quartet. It's not long, consisting of a few short episodic sections that in various ways are variations on traditional Chinese melodies. Chen is a trained ethnomusicologist and deftly weaves her vast knowledge of the folk music of her native land into her compositions. It has never been easy to combine distinctly different musical styles into a successful blend—witness the rise and fall of “third-stream music” (jazz and classical fusion) from the last century. But Chen's approach seems to work, in that it seems seamless and not just an admixture of cultures.

Shuo, based firmly in Chinese traditional music, in many ways transcends origins, and even suggests an impression of Celtic melodies. That, of course is owed to the common use of pentatonic scales (the black keys on the piano) in both cultures. I suppose one could say that pentatonic scales are fungible currency worldwide. Following that train of thought, many would hear hints of Vaughan Williams in *Shuo*—perhaps his *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus* or *The Lark Ascending*. But I digress.

Shuo begins softly with an extensive cadenza-like passage for solo viola over a sustained bass that soon yields to an “Allegro con spirito” dance for the ensemble. That soon yields to a quiet, throbbing “Andante,” featuring solo melodies in the ‘cellos followed by violins. Melodic material is passed around to all, followed by an “Allegretto.” This section, especially, demonstrates Chen's mastery of non-imitative counterpoint. Her vigorous grounding in Western musical techniques in Chinese schools serves her well, here. A scintillating “Presto” in triple octaves for all leads to another cadenza-like passage for first violins. The last variation on folk materials grows into a flurry of rhythmic activity for the emphatic ending.

The interest in this well-crafted, sonorous, and intriguing composition is multifaceted—whether its tuneful pentatonic melodies, its artful blend of Chinese and Western harmonies and techniques, or the great variety of textures and sonorities that Chen elicits from a string orchestra. While a pleasant and ingratiating listening experience, it is moreover testimony of the composer's

reputation of success where many have failed: a true reconciliation of disparate musical traditions.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major, op. 58 — Ludwig van Beethoven

It is Mozart, of course, to whom we owe the creation of the mature, symphonic piano concerto. Beethoven wrote five works in this genre; the first two from the 1790s owe much to the example of Mozart. The third, in C minor, was completed in 1803, around the time of his second symphony, and it is a far darker and impassioned work than the previous ones. By the time of the fourth concerto, finished in 1806, Beethoven had undergone remarkable growth as a composer. He had resolutely fought his way out of the deep suicidal depression occasioned by his increasing deafness. The monumental *Eroica* (third symphony), his opera, *Fidelio*, and the *Rasumovsky* string quartets had been created, and revealed the musical power, psychological depth, and progressive imagination of the mature composer. As such, the fourth piano concerto is of great significance in his *oeuvre*.

The première took place in the palace of Beethoven's well-known patron, Prince Lobkowitz, along with others of his compositions. While it enjoyed some approbation at the time, it nevertheless fell somewhat into obscurity, and did not receive widespread attention until Mendelssohn's interest in the mid-eighteen thirties. The work is rather more nuanced and less demonstrative than the composer's other piano concertos. It might be too much to suggest that its lyrical and more subdued nature was at the foot of its lesser reception, but it seems reasonable.

One notices straightaway in performance that, unlike the earlier concertos—typical for their time—there obtains much greater strength and independence in the rôle of the piano in the fourth. Beethoven's imaginative willingness to create strikingly new procedures is evident from the very opening of the first movement. The piano opens alone—a bold move—in a short, quiet lyrical passage and leaves the field for the orchestra to repeat the theme, but now in the totally romantic key of B major—one of the composer's favorite harmonic surprises. The orchestra proceeds to engage in a series of modulations that explore some related keys and fragments of some new ideas before a brief statement of the main theme in the “correct” key of G major, and we're ready for the piano soloist to take over the main theme. There follows significant interplay between soloist and orchestra, but the piano never seems secondary to the part of the orchestra. While there are other themes in the movement, the first theme is the one that is worked through most thoroughly in the development. In addition to the Beethoven's own cadenza (he wrote four!), there have been many others contributed by performers over the years. Most of them preserve the subdued nature of the movement, rather than engage in exaggerated dramatics than can intrude in these affairs. After the cadenza a short coda brings the close.

The seventy-two measure *Andante con moto* that follows the first movement is eloquent evidence of Beethoven's ability to work with thematic transformation in a small frame. But of more importance is the theatrical contrast between the personality of the soloist and that of the orchestra. While the latter seems austere—even severe—the soloist perseveres in a gentle, lyrical

vein, resisting the orchestra's stern blandishments. A lot of admitted persiflage has been written over the years about the presumed metaphor of "Opheus taming the wild beasts with music" and other nonsense, it is nevertheless true that Beethoven adroitly exploited the novelty of contrasting the gentle nature of the soloist with the stentorian orchestra.

The finale is cast in the typical form for this genre: a rondo (simply a section with a catchy theme that keeps coming back after some diversions--easy to follow). Its jaunty, jolly nature provides a perfect contrast to the preceding tranquility, and reminds us once again of Beethoven's sense of humor. He was not all shaking his fist at fate, and his deep sensitivity and *joie de vivre* is in full play in this happy work.

--Wm. E. Runyan
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