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"Brandenburg" Concerto No. 6 in B-flat, BWV 1051

JS Bach

Late in 1718, JS Bach traveled to Berlin to order a new harpsichord. While he was there, he performed for the Margrave of Brandenburg, younger brother of the Prussian king. No information remains as to specifically what works Bach played, but it must have been an impressive concert, for soon after, the Margrave commissioned several compositions. Such royal requests could be quite lucrative for a composer; however, this project was less than profitable. Two years passed before Bach delivered a set of six concertos scored for diverse soloists. Even once the pieces arrived, the Margrave never paid for them. Perhaps he knew then what historians have shown since: that these so-called "Brandenburg Concertos" were not new and were not newly composed for the Margrave himself. Instead, they were revisions of earlier works, essentially the leavings of his composition files. Bach was passing off old works as new ones, but in one respect, the Margrave was well-served. Thanks to Bach's efforts, the Brandenburg name is recalled fondly throughout the musical world.

The Brandenburg Concerti are technically concerti grossi, a popular Baroque genre in which multiple soloists are contrasted with a small orchestra. That which is known as the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto is believed to be the earliest of the set, possibly written at Weimar prior to 1717. After that year, Bach moved to the court at Cöthen, where his employer was Prince Leopold, an amateur player of the viola da gamba, a cello-like instrument popular in the Baroque Era. Bach apparently revised the work at this point, giving it two solo viola da gamba parts, one of the prince, and one for the composer, who also played gamba. In addition to the two gamba parts, Bach also included parts for two violins, one cello, one bass and a harpsichord: a total of only seven musicians. It is the most lightly scored of the six Brandenburgs and one of only two (the other being number three) from which Bach entirely excluded wind instruments.

In tonight's arrangement of the Brandenburg Concerto no. 6, there are plenty of winds, at least from the brass family, but no strings. The arrangement, by Swiss horn player Jean François Taillard, is for brass octet. Dating from 2004, the arrangement is scored for two horns, three trumpets, two trombones, and one tuba. That Bach would not have done so – in part because in his time, the tuba did not exist and the horn was unpredictable in its results – is beside the point. The chosen instruments offer a wide range of pitches from high to low and various timbres, as well. Although the instruments overlap in range, their voices are sufficiently different as to give Taillard a varied palette. The music has as much diversity as it would in its original setting, in fact, more, as one hears more difference between a trumpet and a trombone than between a violin and a cello. It isn't just how high or low the sound is: what also matters is the color of that sound, and Taillard makes the most of those colors.

- I. (Allegro) no marking
- II. Allegro ma non tanto [Fast but not too fast]
- III. Allegro [Fast]

Wind Serenade in d, Op. 44

Antonin Dvořák

Literally, a "serenade" is a night-song, though its exact form has varied from culture to culture. In some countries, a serenade was a love-song sung with guitar accompaniment beneath the window of the beloved so as to impress her with one's ardor. Some operas set in Spain, notably as *The Barber of Seville*, have made the most of this tradition as an excuse for an aria for the male lead. It's a charming tradition, but the Viennese of Mozart's day believed in a rather different sort of serenade. It was still night-music. However, in place of the singer and the guitarist was a chamber ensemble of winds or strings, or perhaps a mixture of the two. Whatever the instrumentation, the compositions were often intended for outdoor performance, and they had a social flavor, for frequently these serenades were written with celebrations in mind, or at least a good party. Mozart, for example, produced thirteen serenades for various occasions, one for the wedding of a friend. Another serenade was written for some forgotten event, yet its name is everlasting; it's Mozart's *A Little Night Music*. The cheerful elegance of that familiar composition is typical of the classical serenade.

Antonin Dvořák wrote his two serenades over eighty years after the glory years of Viennese serenades, yet he was not unaffected by the tradition. This Bohemian revered Mozart above all other composers, and his two serenades are an eloquent testimony to that reverence. The first serenade, the one for strings, was written in 1875, in his last years of obscurity before fame caught up with him at last. The second serenade, scored mostly for winds with the addition of two low strings (specifically, pairs of oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, one contrabassoon, three horns, cello and bass) dates from early in 1878, arguably the most critical year in Dvořák's life. In that same year, he also composed his first set of *Slavonic Dances*; note that the *Serenade* is op. 44, and the *Dances* op. 46. It was the *Dances* that sparked his international reputation, when, at the instigation of Brahms, who admired it, it came to print with Brahms' own publisher. Its quick success boosted the popularity of Dvořák's other works, such as this lovely piece, which incorporates, particularly in its second and fourth movements, the intricate rhythms of Czech folk dance. The *Serenade* premiered in Prague November 17, 1878, and was published the following year.

- I. Moderato, quasi Marcia
- II. Minuetto: Tempo di minuetto
- III. Andante con moto
- IV. Finale: Allegro molto

Serenade No. 2 in A, Op. 16

Johannes Brahms

For most of the nineteenth century, a shadow hung over German music, a shadow from which up-and-coming composers struggled to emerge. The shadow was that of Beethoven, whose dominance in virtually every genre of music was so complete that no composer could escape comparison to the departed master. In whatever genre one wished to work --- symphony, sonata, concerto, quartet --- Beethoven had set the mark against which all others would be measured. To be willing to undergo such a trial, knowing that one could hardly best Beethoven at his own game, one had to be immensely confident. Unfortunately, confidence was not a strong characteristic of the young Johannes Brahms. Yet he still managed to work around the shadow by putting off symphonies and quartets until later in his career, by which time he had honed his skills through work in other genres not linked to Beethoven's name. These compositions, spared from the shadow, were able to stand on their own merits, and through them, Brahms developed the confidence he would need to write a symphony.

One seemingly approachable genre was the Serenade, a multi-movement composition often intended more for the purpose of casual entertainment than for insertion in a serious concert program. Serenades were less strictly structured than symphonies would be, and, whereas a symphony would have specified forms that were expected to appear in particular movements, a serenade had no such restrictions. Furthermore, serenades often draw their rhythms from the dance, giving them a lighter, more carefree

character than one would find in a proper symphony. Mozart composed thirteen serenades, included the famed *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. Yet Beethoven almost never bothered with them. Thus, Brahms regarded the serenade as a safe field for experimentation.

His Serenade no. 2 dates from 1858 and '59, about a year after the Serenade no. 1. Both works were written during a period in which Brahms was spending his summer making music for Prince Paul Friedrich Emil Leopold in Detmold, Germany. As was his custom, Brahms sent a copy of the score to his friend, the pianist Clara Schumann, who declared of the piece, "I fell in love with it from the opening bars and find it quite exquisite." Armed with Madame Schumann's praise and with the confidence that came from the work's publication by Simrock even before it had been performed, the composer must have had high hopes for the work's premiere in his native Hamburg February 10, 1860. Yet the performance was not well received. Of the new piece, one critic observed, "Brahms' Serenade is a monstrosity, a caricature, a freak, which should never have been published, let alone performed." The condemnation seems overly harsh for such a gracious piece, but Brahms was not dissuaded. He undertook moderate alterations to the score, particularly to dynamics and instrumentation, and eventually decided to drop the violins entirely, choosing to score the work for ten winds with violas, cellos, and basses, the winds often carrying much of the melodic focus. This revised version of the Serenade no. 2 would be published fifteen years after the initial premiere, in 1875.

- I. Allegro moderato [Moderately fast]
- II. Scherzo – Vivace [Scherzo – Lively]
- III. Adagio non troppo [Slow, but not too slow]
- IV. Quasi menuetto {Like a minuet}
- V. Rondo – Allegro [Rondo – Fast]

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