



April 12, 2011 Program Notes

Academic Festival Overture, op. 80

Brahms

No doubt it was intended to be a solemn occasion. The University of Breslau had conferred an honorary doctorate of music upon Johannes Brahms, arguably Germany's greatest living composer, and had invited him to write a new work that he might conduct at the award ceremonies. He agreed, and arrived in Breslau with a new overture. Yet Brahms, never an ivory-tower intellectual, had provided a work different from anyone's expectations. Rather than composing a Germanic equivalent of *Pomp and Circumstance*, he produced instead what he described as a "rollicking potpourri of student's songs," in this case, mostly drinking songs. It is easy to imagine the laughter of the assembled students, as well as the forced smiles on the faces of the dignitaries, when this light-hearted caprice premiered on January 4, 1881.

In *Academic Festival Overture*, Brahms showcased four songs that were popular at the time on college campuses throughout the various German states. The first to be heard was "Wir hatten gebauet ein stattliches Haus," proclaimed in the trumpets. "Der Landesvater" followed in the strings, then the bassoons took the lead for "Was kommt dort von der Höh." Lastly, the entire orchestra joined together for a grand rendition of "Gaudeamus igitur," beloved by operetta lovers for its appearance in Romberg's *The Student Prince*, but it was the first melody which was most notorious in the composer's day. "Wir hatten gebauet" was the theme song of a student organization that advocated the unification of the three-dozen independent German principalities. This cause was so objectionable to authorities that the song had been banned for decades, and although the proscription was lifted in most regions in 1871, it was still in effect in Vienna at the time that Brahms completed this overture. Due to the ban, police ordered the Viennese premiere of the *Academic Festival Overture* delayed by two weeks, for fear of student protests.

Violin Concerto in d, Op. 47

Sibelius

Finnish composer Jean Sibelius began his musical studies at the piano, then changed to the violin. It was as a violinist that he began his college career, and only then did the instrument step aside in favor of composition. Yet he knew the instrument intimately and wrote for it powerfully, most notably when he began his violin concerto in 1902. From the start, he knew that he would not perform the work himself. Rather, the concerto was intended for the virtuoso Willy Burmester, who, as an admirer of Sibelius's work, agreed to give the premiere, but the composer, facing financial difficulties, decided to generate some immediate income by presenting the work at a Helsinki concert in February 1904. Burmester was unavailable; a local soloist who was recruited in his place but proved utterly unequal to the challenge.

Critics were unforgiving, both of the soloist and of the composer, who conducted that day. "Boring," declared one critic. Another remarked, "from time to time there were terrible sounds," although he was unclear as to who might be at fault for those sounds, whether it was Sibelius himself or the hapless violinist. Undismayed, the composer undertook some revisions of the work, then arranged a second premiere in Berlin the following year. On that occasion, with Richard Strauss at the helm, the concerto was far better received. "Sometimes hypnotic, sometimes powerful," declared one critic, who went on to

compare the piece favorable to the austere beauty of the Scandinavian landscape paintings. The concerto has never quite equaled the popularity of some other Sibelius works; though what, after all, could equal the popularity of *Finlandia*? However, the concerto has won a secure place in the violin repertoire.

Scholars often observe that very few great violin concerti were written by actual violinists. Beethoven's concerto, for example, is an acknowledged masterpiece, despite the fact that he himself was a pianist; similarly, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Bruch all managed to write fine concerti for an instrument that they themselves did not play. Yet Sibelius was a talented violinist, even if his skills fell short of his ambitions. Thus, it seems possible that his concerto might be even better suited to the instrument than those other fine works, might even more marvelously exploit the violin's particular beauties. The answer, it seems, is both yes and no. Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, one of the greatest violinists performing today, says of the piece, "Some passages are very idiomatic for the violin and others are so awkward that either Sibelius was a phenomenal technician or he was playing an enormous joke." Perhaps behind that familiarly dour exterior, Sibelius concealed the spirit of a prankster, or of a would-be virtuoso who dreamed of playing the notes he could only write.

- I. Allegro moderato (Moderately fast)
- II. Adagio di molto (Very slow)
- III. Allegro ma non troppo (Fast, but not too fast)

Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor

Borodin

Alexander Borodin was born in 1833, the son of an elderly prince and a young woman who was not the prince's wife. Neither parent was named Borodin. Rather, the future composer's surname was selected from a list of names of the prince's serfs. Despite the awkward circumstances surrounding his birth, the boy was raised in comfortable surroundings. Young Alexander showed an early flair for languages, as well as for music, and began to compose at the age of nine. Along with the pleasure he took in music, the boy also discovered the delights of chemistry, particularly the chemical processes leading to fireworks, and as science seemed a more lucrative profession than composition, science became Borodin's chosen career. His doctoral thesis, entitled "On the Analogy of Arsenical with Phosphoric Acid, " was a document that could have emerged from the desk of no other notable composer.

Although chemistry was his profession, music remained his passion. He played piano, organ and cello for his own pleasure, married a concert pianist, and kept a piano in his chemistry laboratory so he could work on compositions while awaiting the outcome of experiments, sometimes to the detriment of the scientific process. Yet generally work took precedence over music. Only during school holidays and on days of slight indisposition could Borodin concentrate on composition. For eighteen years, his nationalistic opera *Prince Igor* was a work in progress, but when he died suddenly in 1887, the piece still lacked an overture, most of its third act, and half of its orchestration. It fell to Borodin's friends Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov to complete the work for its premiere in 1890 at St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre.

The beloved *Polovtsian Dances* from Act One of *Prince Igor* are amongst the sections that Borodin managed to complete himself. In this scene, the Prince's armies have been at war with the tribal Polovtsians, and have captured a group of Polovtsian women whom they are holding prisoner. The women sing of their longing for the homeland while the soldiers sing of the glory of their prince, setting up a marvelous musical contrast between the wistful and the warlike. The women's melody achieved particular fame when it later served as the theme for the song "Strangers in Paradise" in the

Broadway musical *Kismet*. Although originally written for chorus and orchestra, the scene is often performed only with instruments, the vocal parts being worked into the orchestration.

Text in transliterated Russian and English translation on last page

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Women's Chorus:

Uletay na kryliyakh vetra ty v kray rodnoy,
rodnaya pesnya nasha,
tuda, gde my tebya svobodno peli
gde bylo tak privolno nam s tobouy.
Tam, pod znoynym nebom, negoy vozdukh
polon;
tam, pod govor morya, dremlyut gori v
oblatakh.
Tam kak yarko solntse svetit,
Tam kak yarko, rodneye gory svetom ozaryaya:
solntse v dolinakh pyshno rozy rastsvetayut
tam roza i solovy poyut v lesakh zelyonykh
tsvetyot poyut v lesakh i sladky vinograd
rostyot.
Tam tebe privolney, pesnya, ty tuda i uletay.

Chorus:

Poyte pesni slavy kahnu! Poy!
Slavte silu, doblest khana! Slav!
Slaven kahn! Khan! Slaven on, khan nash!
Bleskom slavy solntsu raven khan!
Netu navnykh slavoy khanu! Net!

Women's Chorus:

Chagi, khana, chagi khana slavyat khana
slavyat khana svoevo, slavyat khana.

Chorus:

Poyte pesu slavy khanu! Poy!
Slavte shchedrost, slavte milost! Slav!
Dlya vragov khan grozen on, khan nash!
Kto zhe slavy raven khanu?
Kto? Bleskom slavy solntsu raven on!

Men's Chorus:

Slavoy dedam raven khan nash,
khan, khan Konchak!
Slavoy dedam raven khan nash,
khan, khan Konchak!
Grozny khan, khan Konchak!
Slaven khan, khan Konchak!
Slaven khan, khan Konchak! Khan Konchak!

Women's Chorus:

Uletay na kryliyakh vetra ty v kray rodnoy,
(etc. as before)

Chorus:

Tam, pod znoynym nebom, negoy vozdukh
polon;
(etc. as before)

Men's Chorus:

Slavoy dedam raven khan nash (etc. as before)

Chorus:

Plyaskoy vashey teshte khana
Plyaskoy teshte khana chagi, khana svoevo!
Plyaskoy teshte khana chagi,
Plyaskoy teshte!
Khan Konchak! Nash khan Konchak!

Women's Chorus:

Fly on the wings of the wind to our native
land,
you folksongs;
To the place where we sang in freedom,
where we existed so simply.
There, under the burning sky, the airs are full of
languor;
There, amid the sound of the sea,
the mountains dream in the clouds.
There, the sun shines so brightly, there,
the sun, bathing our native mountains in light;
The sun, roses blossom luxuriously in the
valleys, blossom,
Sing in the forests, and the sweet vine grows
tall.
There, you will be freer, oh song, therefore, fly
there!

Chorus:

Sing songs in praise of the Khan! Sing!
Praise the measure of our Khan's glory! Praise!

Hail the Khan! The Khan! He is glorious, our
Khan!
The Khan's glory is like unto the sun's rays!
Nothing equals the lorry of our Khan! No!

Slave girls, entertain the Khan with your
dancing,
entertain the Khan!
Khan Konchak! Our Khan Konchak!

Women's Chorus:

The Khan's slave girls sing the praises of the
Khan.
Praise our Khan, praise the Khan.

Chorus:

Sing songs in praise of the Khan! Sing!
Praise his generosity! Praise his kindness! Praise!
To his enemies, the Khan is terrible. Terrible is
our Khan!
Who can equal the Khan in glory?
Who? His glory is like unto the sun's rays!

Men's Chorus:

Our Khan is as glorious as his ancestors,
our Khan, Khan Konchak!
Our Khan is as glorious as his ancestors,
our Khan, Khan Konchak.
The terrible Khan, Khan Konchak.
Glorious Khan, Khan Konchak!
Glorious Khan, Khan Konchak! Khan Konchak!

Women's Chorus:

Fly on the wings of the wind to our native land
(etc. as before)

Chorus:

There, under the burning sky, the airs are full of
languor
(etc. as before)

Men's Chorus:

Our Khan is as glorious as his ancestors (etc. as
before)

Chorus:

Entertain the Khan with your dancing,
slave girls, entertain the Khan, your Khan!