

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
April 29, 2017
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We welcome the dynamic young violinist Arnaud Sussman for this Peoria Symphony Orchestra program, where he will perform the challenging Brahms *Violin Concerto*. The other work on the program is Beethoven's grand third symphony, his tribute to the heroic spirit.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, Op. 77

Brahms composed this concerto in the summer of 1878, and it was first performed at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, on January 1, 1879, with the composer conducting. Joseph Joachim, to whom it is dedicated, played the solo part at the premiere.

“One enjoys getting hot fingers playing it, because it's *worth it!*”
- Joseph Joachim

In the summer of 1878, Brahms retired to the town of Pörtlach in southern Austria to work on his violin concerto. The concerto was dedicated to his friend and colleague, violinist Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), and the concerto was, in a limited sense, collaboration between composer and soloist. Brahms and Joachim first met in 1853, beginning a lifelong friendship and musical association. When he had completed the first three movements in August of 1878, he sent a copy of the solo violin part to Joachim with a letter:

“After copying it, I am not sure what you can do with a mere solo part. Of course, I would like you to make corrections; I had intended to leave you no excuse whatsoever - neither that the music is too good, nor that it isn't worth the trouble. Now, I would be satisfied if you write a letter to me or perhaps mark the music: difficult, awkward, impossible, etc. I have just started the fourth movement, so you can overrule the awkward passages at once.”

Joachim promptly replied with a marked copy of the part and a letter of his own:

“It is a great, sincere joy for me that you are writing a violin concerto (even one in four movements!). I immediately studied what you sent to me, and you will note a few remarks and notes for changes, but without the score, one cannot appreciate it. Most of it can be executed and some parts have a quite original violinistic flair. I cannot say whether everything can be played with ease in a hot concert hall until I have tried out the whole.”

Brahms incorporated several of Joachim's suggestions into the final version of the score, and rather than providing a cadenza for the first movement, he used one written by Joachim.

The *Violin Concerto* stands as one of the largest and most challenging works in the solo violin repertoire. While his projected fourth movement was not included in the final form of the concerto, the concerto's traditional three-movement design nevertheless has symphonic proportions. Indeed, there are several close ties between the *Violin Concerto* and the *Symphony No.2*, written a year earlier (and in the same key). Brahms also makes several subtle references to Beethoven's violin concerto, which is also in D Major. The concerto, written with the talents of Joachim in mind, presents formidable challenges for the soloist. One violinist, Bronislaw Huberman, referred to the work - only half-jokingly - as "...a concerto for violin *against* orchestra - and the violin wins!"

The orchestral introduction to the first movement (*Allegro non troppo*) presents nearly all of the movement's thematic material in a single dramatic phrase. Musical material is disengaged from this phrase - like single strands from a larger thread - as the movement continues. The violin's opening music presents a fiery variant of a melody fully introduced later in the movement above the orchestra's presentation of the lyrical main theme. Throughout the movement, Brahms restlessly develops his themes, even in the short coda that follows the cadenza.

The second movement (*Adagio*) presents a theme and several variations, a form that interested Brahms throughout his life. The theme is presented by the oboe, and then picked up by the soloist in variations that exhaustively develop the theme and its component parts. There is an abrupt contrast between the reserved ending of this movement and the spirited opening of the rondo-form finale. The main theme of the third movement (*Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace*) is presented immediately by the violin: a Hungarian-flavored melody spiced with double stops. A second section, presenting a stormy dotted figure, drifts gradually back to a restatement of the main melody. A more lyrical central episode, which refers subtly to the opening melody gives way to a restatement of the second section. The movement closes with a long and dramatic coda, in which both soloist and orchestra develop the main theme.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) **Symphony No.3 in E-flat Major, Op.55, "Eroica"**

Beethoven composed his third symphony in Vienna, during the years 1802-1803. It was premiered in Vienna on April 7, 1805. Duration: 47:00.

The years 1802-1812 in Beethoven's life have frequently been labeled the "heroic decade" - the most productive period in his life, and years which saw a new set of personal and musical concerns. In the face of this the ultimate challenge to a composer - ever-encroaching deafness - Beethoven's output over the next decade was indeed heroic: the third through eighth symphonies, the "Razumovsky" quartets, the final two piano concertos, the violin concerto, and *Fidelio*. Beethoven's writings and the dramatic content of his music during this period - particularly his only opera, *Fidelio* - show an increasing preoccupation with the ideals of human dignity, heroism, and freedom. These works greatly expand the Classical forms, sometimes transcending these forms

altogether, and they focus on exhaustive development of thematic material. Nowhere are Beethoven's "heroic" tendencies more readily apparent than in the "Eroica" symphony.

The well-known story of the symphony's dedication reflects Beethoven's political and humanistic concerns during this time of great turmoil. He had followed the career of Napoleon Bonaparte with great interest, though like many Austrians, he probably began to question the French First Consul's commitment to the ideals of the French Revolution as France became more and more warlike. The symphony was originally titled "Bonaparte" in recognition of Napoleon's republican ideals. However, when he heard of Bonaparte's coronation as Emperor, Beethoven tore up the dedication page in disgust, exclaiming: "Is he too nothing more than an ordinary man?" (In an early manuscript copy of the symphony, Napoleon's name has been crossed out so violently that there is a hole in the page.) In the first published edition, Beethoven has noted merely that the work was composed "...to celebrate the memory of a great man."

The *Symphony No.3* is formidable in length and depth. It was certainly one of the longest and most complex symphonic works that his Viennese audience had ever heard, and several critics expressed dismay at its "incomprehensibility." (Beethoven's fascination with the gigantic works associated with revolutionary France - works by composers such as Cherubini and Méhul - was clearly an influence in this piece.) The heroic ideal of struggle and triumph is what this symphony is about. It is not a really a programmatic piece, despite the evocative "funeral march" of the second movement, but one which creates a clear sense of valor and courage. One added dimension that would have been clear to listeners in 1803 is his pointed reference to the music of his *Prometheus* ballet in the final movement. His ballet score had been wildly popular after its premiere two years earlier, and its main theme in the context of a "heroic" symphony would have brought to mind the central character of the ballet: a mythical figure who defied authority to enlighten the human race.

The *Symphony No.3* begins by breaking molds. Most of the later symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, and Beethoven's own first and second symphonies begin with extensive slow introductions. Beethoven brusquely disposes of the introduction to the first movement (*Allegro con brio*) in two *forte* chords, which lead directly into the opening theme, which is played by cellos and basses. This theme begins simply enough, but a feeling of restless instability appears almost immediately. An extended transition section culminates in the second main theme, which is first stated by the clarinets and oboes, and immediately varied by the strings. The exposition ends with an immense codetta, which serves to introduce even more new melodic material. The development section is heroic both in dimensions and style. In the broad expanse of this section, which is longer than many contemporary opening movements, Beethoven explores the wealth of thematic material from the exposition. After a climactic series of crashing dissonances, we hear a new theme, a melancholy melody played by the oboe. After a recapitulation of the main themes, the movement closes with a enormous coda that continues to develop Beethoven's wealth of thematic resources.

The funeral march (*Marcia funebre*) is constructed as a rondo, with the somber main theme presented at the outset by the strings. A major-key episode interjects a note of hope, but this is soon overtaken by the main theme. A second contrasting episode begins with bass rumblings and intensifies through a great fugal passage to an impassioned climax. After a final return of the main theme, the movement closes with a stark and haunting coda.

As in the *Symphony No.2* of 1801, the third movement (*Scherzo: Allegro vivace*) is designated as a scherzo (Italian for “joke” or “trifle”), replacing the minuet used in the symphonies of Beethoven’s contemporaries. This scherzo is set in the same three-part form as the minuet, but it has none of the minuet’s courtly grace (or aristocratic associations). The opening section is a mix of perpetual motion in the strings and a playful melody in the upper woodwinds that builds towards a great orchestral climax. The central trio has a more noble quality, beginning with a horn call. This call is answered by the strings and woodwinds. The movement closes with a return of the opening section and a brief coda.

Beethoven was never one to avoid recycling a good tune - to cite merely one example, the famous “Ode to Joy” theme from the *Symphony No.9* appeared in at least two earlier works. Here, the music of the finale (*Allegro molto*) is Beethoven’s final reworking of music that had appeared in three earlier works, beginning with his music for the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1801) and a piano contra dance of the same year, and finally, the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme from Prometheus* for solo piano. After a brief storm at the opening of this movement (probably a reference to the plot of the *Prometheus* ballet), Beethoven introduces a simple bass line in *pizzicato* strings. This bass line moves through an increasingly complex set of variations, acquiring a countermelody on the way. The central section is a tremendous fugue, which builds towards a broad and triumphant coda. In symphonies by his contemporaries, the fourth movement was typically a rather lightweight, breezy piece, but this finale is a weighty counterbalance to the symphony’s opening movement. If the opening movements of the “Eroica” break the 18th-century mold of symphonic form, this one kicks away the last traces!