Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
October 22, 2016

The theme of this concert is “prodigies,” featuring works by three composers who were phenomenal child prodigies: Mendelssohn, Beethoven and Mozart. Our featured performer is herself a prodigy, eleven-year-old Harmony Zhu, performing Beethoven’s *Piano Concerto No.1* - one of the works Beethoven wrote as a very young man when he was beginning has career in Vienna. Our opener, Mendelssohn’s *Hebrides*, a musical picture of a craggy Scottish cave, was written when the 21-year-old composer was on a “grand tour” of Europe. Mozart, perhaps the greatest musical prodigy of all, astonished audiences around Europe when he was still a very young child. We end with one of his later works, however, the deeply serious *Symphony No.40*.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
The Hebrides, Op.26 (“Fingal’s Cave”)

> *Mendelssohn began work on his concert overture* The Hebrides *during a visit to Scotland in 1829, and completed the score in Rome in December 1830. The first performance took place in London on May 14, 1832.*

In August of 1829, during a tour of Scotland, Mendelssohn visited the rugged Hebrides Islands off the Scottish coast. The composer and a travelling companion visited the isolated island of Staffa, site of Fingal’s Cave, an immense sea-carved grotto. The cave was practically a place of pilgrimage for the Romantics: there are dozens of paintings and literary descriptions from the 19th century. Sir Walter Scott’s reaction was typical - he described the cave as “…one of the most extraordinary places I ever beheld. It exceeded, in my mind, every description I had heard of it. [The cavern,] composed entirely of basaltic pillars as high as the roof of a cathedral, and running deep into the rock, eternally swept by a deep and swelling sea, and paved, as it were, with ruddy marble, baffles all description.” Mendelssohn and his friend braved seasickness and dampness to row directly into the cavern, and though he was uncomfortable, he was also deeply impressed. Later that day, he wrote to his sister Fanny: “That you might understand how deeply the Hebrides have affected me, the following came into my mind here.” He enclosed a sketch of the overture’s opening theme. Mendelssohn continued to work on the overture as he traveled, finally completing it a year later, in Rome. When *The Hebrides* was finally performed in London in 1832, it helped to solidify his reputation in England, where he was hailed as “a second Handel.” Critics, including Wagner and Schumann, praised the overture as a masterpiece.

The opening theme of the overture - the very theme that Mendelssohn mailed to his sister - is played in dark colors by the cellos, violas, and bassoons. A turbulent transition leads to expansive major-key subject introduced by the cellos and bassoons. (The critic Donald Francis Tovey called this subject “...the greatest melody Mendelssohn ever wrote.”) The development section is concerned primarily with the opening music, spinning dramatically extended phrases from this six-note figure. An abbreviated recapitulation brings back the two main themes, the second idea these now played by

the solo clarinet. The coda begins with a new idea, a brief scherzo-style statement that leads into a final reworking of the opening music.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Concerto No.1 in C Major for Piano and Orchestra, Op.15

> *Beethoven wrote this concerto in 1795 and performed it in Vienna on December 15, 1795. He made later revisions to the score in 1800 before publishing it in 1801.*

We, of course, know Beethoven as a composer, but when he was a young man attempting to make a name for himself, it was his skill as a pianist that made the Viennese musical public take notice. Throughout the 1790s, he played at private salons at the homes of aristocratic music-lovers, eventually gathering enough of a following to do public concerts. His repertoire as a performer showcased his own works and his phenomenal skills as an improviser. We have many accounts that describe his playing, several of which were written by other pianists who were impressed (and perhaps a little scared) by his virtuosity. The autobiography of the Bohemian pianist Johann Tomaschek, who heard Beethoven play in 1798, is typical: "Beethoven's magnificent playing, and particularly his daring flights of improvisation, stirred me strangely to the depths of my soul - indeed, I was so profoundly bowed down that I did not touch my piano for several days…"

For larger public concerts, Viennese audiences demanded concertos - the same genre that had served Mozart so well a decade earlier. One of Beethoven's earliest public performances was a charity concert in March of 1795; he probably played his B-flat Major concerto at this event. [Note: This work known by the somewhat misleading designation *Concerto No.2*. The C Major *Concerto No.1* heard on tonight's concert was written about a year later, but was published first…I'm glad we got *that* cleared up!] The *Concerto No.1* was performed for the first time at another Viennese concert on December 15, 1795. It was finally published - probably with revisions - in 1801, with a dedication to one of his aristocratic patrons, Princess Barbara Odescalchi.

In both of his early concertos, Beethoven was clearly working within the Classical outlines laid out in the concertos of Mozart and his teacher Haydn. However, there is a power and expansiveness in these works that is pure Beethoven, particularly in the *Concerto No.1*. Much of this character must have come from Beethoven's own character as a soloist. We know, for example, that he favored extreme dynamic contrasts - in fact, he seems to have destroyed more than one of the rather delicate fortepianos of the day with his forceful playing! His personality comes through in the many contrasts to be found in the *Concerto No.1*: from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, from simple melodies to flashy passage-work, and from cool gentility to emotional flourishes.

The opening movement (*Allegro con brio*), set in sonata form, opens with a distinctly military-sounding passage for the orchestra - a character often associated with the key of C Major in Classical works. The soloist carries most of the weight during the development section, expanding and ornamenting the main themes. At the end of the

exposition, there is a lengthy solo cadenza, and the movement ends with a final version of the opening theme.

Where the opening movement was full of martial energy, the second (*Largo*) recalls many of Mozart's slow movements with its calm grace. The main theme is a leisurely melody laid out by the piano, strings, and solo clarinet. There is brief central section in which Beethoven introduces a slightly more agitated feeling, but he then returns to the whole of the main theme, now presented in an ornamented fashion. The movement closes with a lengthy coda.

The final movement (*Allegro*) is a brilliant rondo. The main theme, witty and humorous with its curious off-beat accents, returns several times through the movement in alternation with two secondary ideas. The first contrasting section, introduced by the oboe and strings is much more suave. The central section, beginning in A minor, begins with a little comic-opera episode in the piano, and moves towards a more lyrical feeling. The ending contains a typical Beethovenian joke: when things seem to be winding down, there is a pastoral episode that seems to be leading off in a completely new direction. Just as we begin to follow the oboe's lead, Beethoven rudely interrupts with a final statement of the rondo theme, and the movement ends rather abruptly.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Symphony No.40 in G minor, K.550

Mozart composed this work in 1788. The precise date of its premiere is unknown.

In 1788 Mozart returned to Vienna after the premiere of *Don Giovanni* in Prague. While the opera had been a huge success, it does not seem to have helped his financial situation - we have several heartbreaking letters from 1788 to his friend Michael Puchberg asking for loans. He seems to have been downhearted about his situation, at one point writing to a friend about "gloomy thoughts which I must repel with all my might." None of this slowed him down, and he completed his last three symphonies (nos. 39-41) in quick succession during the summer of 1788. It is unclear what he had in mind for the symphonies, but there are a few possibilities. (Despite our picture of Mozart as an effortless genius, he very seldom wrote large works without a commission or clear purpose in mind.) The symphonies may have been intended for a series of subscription concerts planned, but never executed, for the fall of 1788. Mozart may also have been planning to publish them as a set - three or six being the usual number of symphonies published together as an opus. Finally, the symphonies may have been intended for a planned London tour that never materialized. Biographer Neal Zaslaw has quashed the persistent myth that Mozart never heard performances of his final three symphonies. At least one and probably all of them were conducted by Mozart in concerts played in the last two years of his life. Whatever their reason for being, the last three symphonies are transcendent music that shows Mozart at the peak of his creative power.

The *Symphony No.40* - often called the “Great” G minor to distinguish it from the “Little” G minor symphony, K.183, of 1773 - comes between the jovial E-flat Major *Symphony No. 39* and the massive C Major *Symphony No.41* (“Jupiter”). *No.40* is a work of muted intensity: minor-key symphonies were still a relative rarity at this time, and his insistence on staying in minor for the final movement is even more unusual. Mozart’s orchestration lacks the usual trumpets and drums that typically add brilliance to outer movements of Classical symphonies - he uses much darker colors here. The original score lacked clarinets, but Mozart later re-orchestrated the symphony to include them. In nearly every revised passage, he has substituted the deep, lyrical timbre of the clarinet for the brighter sound of the oboe.

In the opening movement (*Molto allegro*) Mozart dispenses with the usual slow introduction, and launches directly into his main theme, a pensive, offbeat melody in G minor. The second theme is somewhat brighter: a major-key descending chromatic line. But even this seems to maintain the sense of agitation of the beginning. The development is intense and fugal, focusing on the opening motive. In the recapitulation section, Mozart maintains minor key throughout, rather than giving way to major, as would more normally be the case.

The mood of the *Andante* is outwardly cheerful - or at least peaceful - but there is an undercurrent of tension even near the beginning, and this tension finally comes to a head in the development section. Mozart returns to a major key at the end, but the mood remains subdued. The *Menuetto* begins, uncharacteristically in the minor key of the opening movement - only in the central trio section is there the courtly amiability usually associated with minuet movements.

The last movement (*Allegro assai*) maintains the minor key and the gloomy mood of the opening. The two movements even begin similarly with a direct statement of a rhythmically distinctive theme - in this case, a melody that rockets up nearly two octaves in its first six notes, setting up a tone of uncertainty that lasts throughout the finale. Once again, there is a fiercely contrapuntal development, and Mozart maintains minor key until the end - this symphony closes with no note of triumph or affirmation.

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