

PROGRAM NOTES

Excelsior Symphony Orchestra

Spring Concert, April 27, 2025

Overture to “La Forza del Destino”

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Verdi’s opera, “La Forza del Destino,” was the result of an 1861 commission from the Imperial (Bolshoi) Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, where the work premiered on Nov. 22, 1862. But this initial version left Verdi dissatisfied, leading to a revision in 1868-69, including the freshly composed overture. This overture presents the key themes of a highly episodic opera. And true to its title, coincidences and sheer accidents of fate play out repeatedly. In shaping the opera, Verdi and his librettists were inspired principally by the Spanish drama, “Don Alvaro, o La Forza del destino” by Angel de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas, a champion of liberal reform.

The opening segment of the overture, roughly the first 50 seconds, is a mini-A-B-A structure. It consists of the theme -- an agitated four-note ascending motif -- associated with the ill-fated heroine Leonora, daughter of the Marquis of Calatrava. This theme is framed by double statements of the fate motto -- three ominous chords in the full brass section spread across multiple octaves. This ascending motif is used extensively in the body of the overture in counterpoint with other themes and as a source of developmental passagework.

The three ominous unisons stated twice relate to the two tragic triangles that precipitate Leonora’s eventual honor killing at the hand of her brother Carlo. If only she had not been in love with the half-caste Incan Don Alvaro and been planning to elope with him. But in the opera’s opening scene her father unexpectedly intervenes, brandishing his sword and making clear his utter disdain for Don Alvaro. Hoping to placate the Marquis, Alvaro hurls his loaded pistol on the floor. only to see the gun go off and kill his would-be father-in-law. The young couple make their escape. In due course, Carlo discovers what has happened and is relentless in his pursuit of vengeance.

What follows in the overture is an Andantino episode featuring flute, oboe, and clarinet playing a poignant melody in unison—an evocation of a church organ. This melody is drawn from the opening scene of the final act – a denouement set in the interior of a monastery, Madonna of the Angels. Somehow, both Alvaro and Carlo, disguised as monks, have come to the same monastery where Leonora has earlier found refuge. Alvaro pleads with Carlo, asking for forgiveness, but Carlo will have none of it. He forces Alvaro into a duel in which he is fatally stabbed.

Returning to the overture itself, we next shift to a soaring prayerful melody introduced by violins in octaves. The melody’s source is Leonora’s plea for pity and the granting of refuge at the same monastery—an event occurring in the opera’s first act. The music grows in intensity,

the agitated four-note motive serving as a counterpoint. There is also battle music followed by wisps of the poignant Andantino melody played by clarinet, oboe, and flute respectively.

A clarinet solo dominates the next episode. It is a melody glorifying a merciful God and alludes to Leonora's being allowed in Act I by the kindly Padre Guardino to seek refuge in a nearby cave on monastery property. There is some developmental passagework before we hear a chorale featuring horn and trombone choir, in a call-and-response pattern with strings—in the opera a further expression of thanks to the divine. What follows is a grand climactic statement of Leonora's prayerful theme.

In his coda, Verdi transforms the clarinet melody into a joyous affirmation. The rousing ending, while readily eliciting applause from any receptive audience, also refers to the divine grace that Don Alvaro is told will be awaiting him in the afterlife; after all, he is the only one of the three protagonists left standing. As for Don Carlo, even as he was dying and his sister Leonora was leaning over him to provide comfort, he somehow mustered enough energy to thrust his sword into her, finally avenging the death of the father, the Marquis of Calatrava.

Holberg Suite for Strings, Op. 40

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Dating from 1884 and originally written for solo piano, this work is a bicentennial valentine to Dano-Norwegian humanist and playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754). The suite is a beloved example of late 19th-century neoclassicism—a worthy precursor of what composers like Ravel and Stravinsky were to later do with works like *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *Pulcinella*.

Grieg's work is made up of five movements.

The Prelude is a buoyant Allegro vivace providing contrast between a duple strutting rhythm and sweeter lyrical passages.

Sarabande, marked Andante, is in a characteristic triple meter with an accent on the second beat.

The third movement is a Gavotte marked Allegretto—the epitome of grace and charm. An A-B-A form, it includes a Musette midsection with a characteristic folksy drone.

The fourth movement marked Air (Andante religioso) is haunting, and deeply reflective. Essentially an A-B-A structure, it is centered in G minor with a contrasting midsection in the key of B-flat major.

The finale is a Rigaudon – a rondo with two digressions. It is an effervescent Allegro con brio featuring a violin solo playing a catchy refrain boosted by delightful pizzicato accompaniment.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

In the core orchestral repertoire for over a century, Sibelius's Symphony No. 2 has the broadest appeal by far of his seven symphonies. It was premiered in Helsinki on March 8, 1902, at a time when Finland was a restless duchy under the heel of Russia, burdened by heavy taxes, the curbing of civil liberties and more. In partial reaction, Finnish language and legend saw a dramatic renaissance, notably in the body of literature associated with the Kalevala—the inspiration for so many of Sibelius's tone poems. Then again, the Symphony No. 2 can in many ways be heard as a vast symphonic expansion of many of the bold emotional gestures that are present in his moving patriotic work of two years earlier, "Finlandia." These two works helped seal Sibelius's destiny as "the" national Finnish composer in the first half of the 20th century. In fact, as early as 1897, Sibelius was awarded a pension by the Finnish government. This dispensation, combined with royalties from his music, soon made it possible for him to live for life in relative comfort with wife and family in his country home.

Embracing a symphonic tradition that includes Beethoven, Bruckner, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky, Sibelius communicates his message in a voice that is unmistakably his own. The overall trajectory of this symphony traces an arc from the pastoral, to painful struggle, to ultimate triumph. Our journey begins with the opening Allegretto movement, which is said to depict "the quiet pastoral life of the Finns undisturbed by thoughts of oppression." What one first hears is a gentle, somewhat hesitant rising three-note figure or motif in the strings. or Rodgers and Hammerstein aficionados, think of the melodic phrase from "Do-re-mi" from *The Sound of Music*, sung to the phrase "Me a name I call myself." This kernel of an idea is expanded upon in myriad ways in the opening movement and can later be heard transformed—most clearly in the midsection of the third movement and as a triumphant affirmation in the finale.

By contrast, the second movement, *Andante ma rubato*, communicates an overall mood of desolation and a struggle between the forces of good and evil. The extended opening passage for pizzicato double basses and cellos can be heard as perhaps suggesting the steps of a downtrodden people. Two bassoons in octaves then enter intoning what sounds like an ancient rather lugubrious priestly chant. To convey this archaic effect, Sibelius uses what is a transposition of the Phrygian mode. To get the basic sound of this mode or scale, play only the white keys on any keyboard, starting on E. Strings join the proceedings—prayerful, hopeful, but gradually growing much more agitated. Snarling militant brass and the rumbling of discontent in the strings heighten the drama. The movement ends with a mix of angry protest and resignation.

The third movement, *Vivacissimo*, with a midsection marked *Lento e suave*, is Sibelius's answer to the Beethoven scherzo. It is a movement meant to signify the awakening of national consciousness, the rousing of the Finnish folk. This message is inescapable as we transition from the repeat of the *Lento suave* section with a mighty build-up of sound as the gentle motif with which the whole symphony began is worked hard as we labor to see the dawning of a glorious new day—a grand gesture inspired by an analogous passage in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

The music of the triumphal finale -- an heroic expansion of the symphony's opening idea -- affirms this day has finally arrived. Freedom and independence have been won.

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About the author: A member of the first violin section and ESO board member, Dr. Berrett is a professional musicologist and is internationally recognized for his publications in such diverse areas as the history of the symphony and jazz. Dr. Berrett and his wife Lynne are co-founders of the non-profit Ageless Mind Project. Visit them at <http://agelessmindproject.org>.