Excelsior Symphony Orchestra Program Notes, Spring Concert, April 21, 2024

PROGRAM NOTES

By Joshua Berrett, Ph.D.

Concertino in E-flat for trombone and orchestra, Op. 4

Ferdinand David (1810-1873)

Allegro maestoso

Marcia funebre (Andante)

Allegro maestoso

Ferdinand David enjoys a special stature in 19th-century German music as virtuoso violinist, pedagogue, editor of core violin repertoire, and as composer. To a large extent, his claim to fame is defined by his association with Felix Mendelssohn. In 1835, he was appointed Mendelssohn's concertmaster at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, and became the first professor of violin at the newly established Leipzig Conservatory eight years later – an institution founded by Mendelssohn—and where for a while people like Robert Schumann taught classes in piano and composition. But perhaps most of all, David is remembered as an important partner in the composition of Mendelssohn's iconic violin concerto in E minor, making valuable suggestions about both the solo part and some details of orchestration. It was he who gave the world premiere performance in 1845. His collaborative role was to be later emulated in the case of Joseph Joachim working with Brahms on his violin concerto.

As a composer, David has some 50 works to his credit, of which the best known by far is the Concertino for Trombone and Orchestra. The work was composed in 1837 and is dedicated to Karl Traugott Queisser, a trombonist colleague in the Gewandhaus Orchestra. Beyond that, however, some vital details remain murky, given that no autograph score has survived. Apparently, Queisser initially asked an already-overextended Mendelssohn to write him a trombone concerto. It is probable that David came to the rescue by rewriting part of a pre-existing violin piece of his own. Then again, there are passages in the concertino that suggest the hand of Mendelssohn himself. In any event, the version of the concertino that is usually followed is the edition of 1838. Strange to say, there does exist an autograph score of a cello and piano version of the concertino David created the same year; it happens to be one of the holdings of Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

The David Concertino is a work of broad appeal, a treasure to trombonists and often used as a test piece for major orchestral auditions. In terms of style, it displays many traits reminiscent of Beethoven, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. The work is continuous, essentially made up of three interconnected segments, with the concluding Allegro maestoso, marked Tempo Primo, representing a varied reprise. The deeply expressive c-minor Marcia funebre (Andante), is preceded by a dramatic instrumental recitative. Consolation comes with its Beethoven-inspired A-flat midsection. And it is worth noting that in at least three cases of Beethoven works in C

minor, the slow internal movements are indeed in A-flat: the “Pathetique” Piano Sonata, the Fifth Symphony, and the Violin Sonata, no. 7. One final item of interest: this second movement was arranged by David for violin and piano, and was played at his own funeral.

Xyklus 3

William Eckfeld (b. 1951)

Beginning in 2011 and extending through 2013, Eckfeld wrote a series of pieces for string orchestra, called Xyklus 1, Xyklus 2, and Xyklus 3, for a group of very talented string students at White Plains High School. Xyklus 3 opens with just the double basses playing in three-part harmony. Soon, there is a cello solo cadenza that explores the entire range of the instrument. Then the violins enter with a very rhythmically driven theme. This all culminates in a dance-like melody that builds to a giant climax. Throughout the piece, there are important solos for every section which keep reappearing in a cyclic way. Xyklus is the German word for cycle and it describes the modus operandi of this piece. Xyklus 3 was last performed in 2013 at the SUNY Purchase Performing Arts Center by the New York Area All-State Orchestra under the composer’s direction.

Note by William Eckfeld

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Andante – Allegro con anima
Andante cantabile. con alcuna licenza
Valse: Allegro moderato
Finale: Andante maestoso – Allegro vivace

This symphony from 1888, now among Tchaikovsky’s most popular works, had a difficult early history, so plagued was the composer doubt about how “sincere” he was. Writing to his “beloved friend” and mysterious patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, he confessed:

> Having played my Symphony twice in St. Petersburg and once in Prague, I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure. There is something repellent in it, some over exaggerated color, some insincerity of fabrication which the public instinctively recognizes. It was clear to me that the applause and ovations referred not to this, but to other works of mine, and that the Symphony itself will never please the public. All this causes a deep dissatisfaction with myself.

By all accounts, audiences at the first performances were enthusiastic, even though critics found it unworthy of Tchaikovsky. His brother, Modeste, believed the main reason was not so much the inherent quality of the music, as Tchaikovsky's lack of self-confidence as a conductor. Apparently, in rehearsal, if musicians seemed to him to be reacting negatively, he would rush apologetically through the remainder of the session, following this up with a public performance lacking in conviction. But success under his direction did finally come with a performance in Hamburg, one so vibrant that he was able to write to his nephew: "The Fifth Symphony was magnificently played and I like it far better now, after having had a bad opinion of it for some time."

Tchaikovsky's Fifth, like Beethoven's, is a "fate" symphony, carrying us from darkness to light, from feeling the victim to feeling the victor. It begins with a sense of foreboding as unison clarinets in the low chalumeau register intone the fate theme, with telling changes in harmony as phrases repeat. What follows in this first movement is a fiery Allegro, which gradually morphs into a memorable waltz theme filled with yearning. The development section brings a sense of tension as strings, winds, and brass battle it out, conflicting rhythms thrown into the mix. Following the recapitulation, the coda suggests a resignation to fate as the music loses momentum and we descend to the darkest reaches of the orchestra.

The second movement features perhaps the most beloved opening French horn solo in the symphonic repertoire. It is used as a refrain and is contrasted with two themes introduced by the oboe and clarinet respectively. But the fate theme makes its menacing appearance twice. With its second appearance, the sense of serenity now shattered, the movement ends in a series of plummeting phrases; the struggle is not yet over. The ensuing waltz movement is charming, though tinged with melancholy. According to a homesick letter that Tchaikovsky wrote from Florence some ten years earlier, the seed for the melody came from a song he had heard sung by a boy on the street. The movement closes with a statement of the fate theme.

The beginning of the finale, with a shift from minor to major and the strings in a warm low register, suggests a quiet confidence that all will turn out well. This feeling intensifies as the woodwind choir picks up the theme, energized by the triplet rhythm in the strings. The final Allegro vivace adds to the momentum with a richly scored orchestral palette; the development section and recapitulation heighten the drama, building to a coda where light triumphs over darkness.

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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 agelessmindproject.org.*