

DPO PROGRAM NOTES
NOVEMBER 14, 2014 "A TALE OF THREE SYMPHONIES"

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***Sinfonia concertante* in B-flat major for oboe, bassoon, violin, violoncello and orchestra, Hob. I:105**

Franz Joseph Haydn

Born 31 March, 1732 in Rohrau, Austria

Died 31 May 1809 in Vienna

About 22 minutes

- * Four soloists make this a multiple concerto, with links to the symphony
- * Watch the interaction among the four soloists: almost like chamber music

The *Sinfonia concertante* that opens this evening's program is one of a kind. When Haydn first traveled to London, arriving in January 1791, his agreement with the violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon was that he would write an opera, six symphonies; and unspecified further works. Haydn would also make concert appearances. The *Sinfonia concertante* appears to have been Salomon's idea. In February and March 1792, Haydn's former student Ignaz Pleyel caused a sensation with a new work for multiple soloists at the rival Professional Concert series. Not to be outdone, Salomon apparently urged Haydn to compose one as well.

According to Haydn's biographer H.C. Robbins Landon, the autograph score indicates that Haydn wrote it at great speed and probably under stressful circumstances. On March 2, 1792, presumably racing to finish the new composition, Haydn wrote to his friend Marianne von Genzinger in Vienna. His letter reflects both anxiety and the toll that the intense pace of work was taking.

[Pleyel] arrived here with a lot of new compositions, but they had been composed long ago; he therefore promised to present a new work every evening. As soon as I saw this . . . I announced publicly that I would likewise produce 12 different new pieces. In order to keep my word, and to support poor Salomon, I must be the victim and work the whole time. But I really do feel it. My eyes suffer the most, and I have many sleepless nights, though with God's help I shall overcome it all.

The *Sinfonia concertante* is Haydn's sole work for four soloists and orchestra. The unusual quartet of stars presumably reflects the strengths of players in Salomon's

London ensemble. The violin part, of course, would have been played by Salomon himself; numerous other concertmaster solos in the twelve "London" Symphonies were also intended for him. Only the other three soloists' surnames have come down to us through contemporary press reports: the oboist Mr. Harrington, the bassoonist Mr. Holmes, and the cellist Mr. Menel. Salomon and his cohorts introduced the new *Sinfonia concertante* at the fourth concert of his 1792 season, on March 7.

The music is a delightful synthesis of chamber music and symphony. Haydn writes wonderfully for his four soloists, giving each one several moments in the spotlight in each movement. The violin is first among equals, having a slight edge in virtuosity, presumably the composer's salute to Salomon. This dominance is most evident in the finale, where the solo violin has three brief recitatives that interrupt the proceedings.

Appealing and memorable themes abound. The elegant Andante has wonderful pizzicato string accompaniment; orchestral winds play only the most subtle supportive role, leaving rhythmic and linear intricacy to the quartet of soloists. Haydn is at his most playful in the finale, with stops and starts that will keep you guessing right to the end.

Haydn's score calls for flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, timpani, solo oboe, solo bassoon, solo violin, solo cello, and strings.

Sinfonia da Requiem

Benjamin Britten

Born 22 November 1913 in Lowestoft, Suffolk

Died 4 December 1976 in Aldeburgh

About 21 minutes

"BRITISH COUNCIL ASK IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN COMMISSION FOR FULL SCALE ORCHESTRAL WORK SYMPHONIC POEM SYMPHONY SUITE OVERTURE UNDERSTAND FEE SUBSTANTIAL EVEN HUNDREDS. I SAID YES PLEASE CONFIRM"

Benjamin Britten received this Western Union cablegram message from his publisher, Ralph Hawkes, on September 22, 1939.

The commission was welcome – particularly the generous fee, which turned out to exceed £500 – a princely sum at the time. Gradually details emerged: the commissioning entity was a foreign state that had contacted composers in several other western countries. They asked for a work that would honor a significant milestone anniversary for that country. The country turned out to be Japan, and the event was the 2600th Anniversary Celebration of the Japanese Emperor's dynasty. The new work was to be delivered to Tokyo by May 1940.

Clearly the assignment was politically charged. Hawkes warned Britten, "In the event of Great Britain and Japan falling out before May 1940, the British Council could not accept any responsibility and with this I quite agree."

War and memorial

Britten was adamant that he would write "no jingo" – his words to Hawkes – and proposed instead a *Sinfonia da Requiem* with pacifist overtones. In April 1940, he wrote to his sister Beth, "It is a Sinfonia da Requiem, combining my ideas on war & a memorial for Mum and Pop." Britten's father had died in 1934 and his mother in 1937. This work was a way to honor his parents' memory and express his grief. At the same time, he conceived the turbulent second movement, a *Dies Irae*, as an anti-war expression.

In retrospect, it seems astounding that the Japanese authorities accepted Britten's proposal for the piece. Britten's outer movements were somber; the central movement frenetic and at times violent, with no celebratory character. Although Britten received his commission fee, the Japanese committee ultimately decided his piece was inappropriate for the occasion, citing its failure to express congratulations for the 2600th anniversary and also observing that it was "purely a religious music of Christian nature." No Japanese performance would take place.

Their loss was western music's gain. The first performance took place in New York at Carnegie Hall on March 30, 1941, with Sir John Barbirolli conducting the New York Philharmonic. Serge Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony in the work's Boston premiere in January 1942.

About the music

The *Sinfonia's* three movements are performed without pause between sections. Thus

the opening *Lacrymosa* takes on the sense of a dark introduction, with its powerful timpani strokes suggesting the sounds of battle as much as they do a funeral procession. The atmosphere is ominous, hinting at the frenzied *Dies Irae* that follows. This whirlwind scherzo feels dangerous, almost unhinged, nightmarish. Only in the concluding *Requiem aeternam* do we hear hints of Britten's characteristic lyricism. In its harmonies and instrumental handling, this closing segment looks forward to some of the painfully lovely passages in his opera *Peter Grimes*. Powerful and focused, the *Sinfonia* is a stunning achievement for a composer still in his twenties.

Britten's score calls for three flutes (second doubling piccolo, third doubling alto flute), three oboes (two doubling English horns), three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet, one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (two doubling contrabassoon), six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, optional alto saxophone, timpani, percussion [xylophone, side drum, whip, tambourine, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, bass

Symphony No. 8 in G major, Op. 88

Symphony No. 8 in G major, Op. 88

Antonín Dvořák

Born 8 September, 1841 in Muhlhausen, Bohemia

Died 1 May, 1904 in Prague

About 34 minutes

- * The Eighth is Dvořák's "pastoral" Symphony
- * Bird calls and a wistful calm in the Adagio suggest the atmosphere of the composer's country house
- * Dvořák conducted this symphony at Cambridge when he was awarded an honorary doctorate

After the "New World" Symphony, the G major is the best loved of Dvořák's large orchestral works. While it shares with the "New World" an intensely Czech flavor and a wealth of melodies, the G major focuses on the transparent and wholesome simplicity of the Bohemian countryside. Part of the symphony's appeal is the folk-like character of the melodies in all four movements. Another asset is Dvořák's magnificent, imaginative writing for woodwinds. Virtually every instrument has its chance for solos. That stated, flute emerges as first among equals.

Most of the sketches for the G major symphony date from August 1889. Dvořák completed the orchestration by early November, and the premiere took place in Prague under the composer's direction in February 1890.

Childlike wonder and the appeal of rustic Bohemia

By allowing Bohemian songs and dance tunes to dominate, Dvořák gave the Eighth Symphony a celebratory, almost childlike spirit that permeates all four movements. The first and final movements both have themes based on a simple G major triad, which helps the consistency of mood. Dvořák relies on variation technique in both movements.

The inner two movements provide contrast and emotional depth. The rhapsodic Adagio, with its birdcalls and wistful character, could be a musical portrait of Vysoká, the composer's beloved summer home. Dvořák's biographer Alec Robertson calls this slow movement:

. . . completely original from start to finish. It could stand as a miniature tone-poem of Czech village life described by a highly sensitive man. There is a touch of pain in the opening harmonies that becomes pronounced later on.

The predominant atmosphere, nevertheless, remains resolutely positive. Czech conductor Rafael Kubelik, rehearsing the finale's opening fanfare, is said to have remarked to an orchestra, "Gentlemen, in Bohemia the trumpets never call to battle -- they always call to the dance." The characteristic, lighthearted rhythms invite foot-tapping and bright smiles. Essentially the finale is an introduction (the fanfare), theme and variations, and a coda. What you will remember are the blazing trumpet, the exuberant horn trills, and a spellbinding variation for solo flute.

Dvořák scored his Eighth Symphony for 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.