

PROGRAM NOTES
by Michael Manning (MM) & Pamela Dellal (PD)

It's tempting, especially in the context of a concert program such as this, to speak of the foundations of Western music as though there were some bedrock upon which the whole edifice rested, in much the same way as we can coherently discuss mathematics as proceeding in a fairly orderly way from the pre-Socratic Greeks. But the course of mathematics, and science generally, really is cumulative in ways peculiar to their methodologies, and methodology in art is something that is always identified looking back, often from the outside. Better perhaps to think of the edifice itself and consider the scaffolding which gives it its distinctive shape. In this analogy, the skeleton supports a web of interconnected chambers that flow naturally one into the next but which have markedly different interiors. Its load-bearing joints are the great geniuses of history who simultaneously assimilate their own times and create and explore new tangent spaces that will become legacy and provide context for future art. Some of these nodes are more structurally important than others, and none are more robust than those represented by the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms. Of Gustav Mahler and Sergei Prokofiev, it would not be unkind to posit that they are somewhat cowed by that more august company, their own incomparable contributions to music notwithstanding and their own statures in the top rank of composers not in question. But the German school comes as close to that bedrock analogy as any tradition in Western music, and is far from complete in those tetrarchs (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Schoenberg also belong to that supra-elite).

The great lexicographer, Nicholas Slonimsky, whose gift for pithy summary was unparalleled, began his entry for Bach in Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians by declaring him "the supreme arbiter and lawgiver of music", "...comparable in greatness of stature with Aristotle in philosophy and Leonardo da Vinci in art." Of Handel, it may be necessary and sufficient to note that *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* and *Messiah* are arguably the greatest choral works written in the English language (not Handel's native tongue). Robert Schumann holds a special place in the history of music: a composer of unique imagination (his music is still radical today), he was as well the most perspicacious of all the critics of his time, proclaiming the ascendancy of his exact contemporary, the twenty-year-old Frederic Chopin ("Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!") and foreseeing the greatness of his junior of twenty-three years, Johannes Brahms. The early 19th Century was brimming with genius (Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, Verdi and Wagner were all born between 1803 and 1813), and we are incredibly fortunate that the greatest music journalist of that era was himself a musical genius. Brahms succeeded exactly where Schumann had failed, which is to say in long form composition – the legacy of Haydn, Mozart and, especially, Beethoven was both an intimidating impediment and a natural backboard against which a new aesthetic could rebound. Where Schumann excelled was in the Romantic miniature, nowhere more brilliantly realized than in the song cycle, *Liederkreis*, on tonight's program. But he struggled with traditional forms like symphony, sonata, theme and variations, and chamber music with strings, genres in which Brahms excelled as no one had since Beethoven (Brahms's first symphony was hailed as "The Tenth", linking it to the canon of the nine Beethoven symphonies).

Gustav Mahler and Sergei Prokofiev ironically represent attitudes contrary to one another and to their own times. Mahler, the archetype of the post-Romantic composer whose symphonies engage forces tantamount to decent-sized villages, was among the first composers to concern himself with distinctly modernist philosophical obsessions – alienation, nihilistic despair, and above all, the most sublime contemplation of existential solitude. Prokofiev, on the other hand, worked in a distinctly modern melodic and harmonic idiom but wrote in a style more akin to Romantic and even classical-era music. His bigger works for piano, the sonatas and concerti, are unadulterated Russian virtuoso music in the same tradition as Rachmaninov and Scriabin.

Tonight's program is offered as a sampler from that edifice analogized above, representative of both the major elements comprised in the Western canon since the common practice era and the less illustrious though no less lustrous works of many of the most important creators in that critically important and fertile span of time.

(MM)

Handel's Deutsche Arien - #4, *Süsse Stille*

The nine German arias are an anomaly in Handel's output – composed in 1727, while Handel was already an established opera composer in London, they do not resemble his youthful cantata output from Italy, his experiments with German oratorio, or his mature dramatic compositions. Rather, they are modest, independent *da capo* 'songs' set to spiritual texts by Barthold Heinrich Brockes, known for Passion libretti and poetry designed for religious contemplation. All nine of these pieces are set for soprano voice, a single obbligato instrument and continuo. *Süsse Stille*, published as the fourth aria, is the simplest and most exquisite. The gentle, wafting figuration in the flute evokes a breeze or a murmuring brook, and the overall impression is of a sensuous respite in a worldly paradise, rather than the afterlife. (PD)

Bach – Sonata in C Major BWV 1032 transcribed for Treble Recorder and Keyboard

The sonata is an exact transposition of the Sonata BWV 1032 for Flute and Harpsichord, originally in A Major. It's the third in the catalog of Bach's works for flute with keyboard or continuo, of which there are at least six extant authentic works, and was almost certainly written no later than 1737. The manuscript, in Bach's hand, is appended to the Concerto for Two Keyboards in c minor, and is missing the last 45 measures of the keyboard part in the first movement. The current completion is by Siegfried Petrenz, who edited the entire sonata for the performance edition being played tonight. The piece is light in character, though as is typical of Bach, without a hint of triviality. The first movement begins almost as a sinfonia in the keyboard alone, which then retrenches to two-part counterpoint against a third part in the solo. The dazzling interplay of the two instruments in the first and third movements is characteristic of the consummate virtuosity of its composer, in whom unencumbered mastery of counterpoint reaches its absolute zenith. The poignant, levitated slow movement in the tonic minor is an object lesson in how sophisticated abject simplicity can be. (MM)

Schumann – Liederkreis, op. 39

This set of twelve songs was written in 1840 during Robert Schumann's triumphant "year of song" – the year he was finally permitted to marry Clara Wieck. Eichendorff's poetry is strikingly different from the poems generally associated with Schumann – Heine, Kerner, and other intense, passionate, and sometimes sardonic lyrics. In contrast, these twelve poems evoke rather than declare; instead of a narrative in time, the songs are linked by states of alienation, awakened memory, longing, and wonder. The rustling woods appear in nearly every piece. Schumann integrates the cycle very closely through key relationships and tight joins between songs. The sympathy and interrelatedness of nature with the human soul is the essence of the Romantic movement, and this song cycle is regarded as Schumann's most Romantic work. Nature communicates to the poet, comforts him, confounds him, and overpowers him. Mankind is a part of nature, but can be tragically deaf to its real messages; therefore he can be as alienated from the world as embraced by it.

The cycle begins with a brooding, profound utterance of loneliness and separateness in *In der Fremde*. A song of passionate intimacy follows; *Intermezzo* expresses delight in love with impetuous syncopations. Distance is cancelled by swiftly winging songs of the heart. The third piece is a startling departure: *Waldesgespräch* reimagines the old legend of the Lorelai by placing an encounter, not at the Rhine river, but in a forest at twilight. Instead of a narrative 'I,' two characters speak to each other, weaving deception, desire, and domination into their communication. One main theme of the cycle – things being not what they seem in nature – is fundamental to this cinematic scene.

A charming miniature follows (*Die Stille*), which makes the female gender of the speaker evident – another shift of voice. Here the concealment of feelings is transformed into mute joy, the more delicious for being private. Schumann paints the portrait with great delicacy. (Could she be the recipient of the heart's song from *Intermezzo*?) *Mondnacht* begins with a bold metaphor: the sky and earth as lovers. The shimmering stillness and clarity of the moonlight becomes an atmosphere charged with sexual tension and potency; when the narrator inserts himself into the scene, unfolding his soul's wings for a mental journey, the latent desire is revealed as yearning for oneness with home. This transforms itself directly into the excitement and urgency of *Schöne*

Fremde; meaning and messages are everywhere in the night landscape, all promising fulfillment to the one who listens.

This scene ends. Suddenly we stare at a stone fortress, bleak against the landscape (*Auf einer Burg*). With cool detachment, we observe a watchman asleep in the tower; or is he a stone carving, crumbling with age? The mystery is enhanced by the brilliant archaic music evoking the language of a Renaissance motet. Juxtaposed to this deep time is the wedding party passing below; life and music contrast with the sad silence above. But the focal point of the merry party, the bride, is weeping; we are left in suspense.

The mood of the cycle has shifted. In the next song, also titled *In der Fremde*, we are back in the forest again. Now the messages on the wind cannot be trusted; they speak of other times and places, joyous unions and beloved people who are out of reach. Nature is not there to comfort or help the lonely man, but rather is a disorienting and disturbing force. *Wehmut* takes us briefly into the poet's soul as he confesses the painful source of his art – his pretty songs are born of deep sorrow. The pervasive melancholy slips into paranoia in the next vignette. The unreality of twilight (*Zwielicht*) engenders specters of horrid violence, betrayal and loss, while the sinuous chromatic counterpoint weaves a trap around the listener and dissolves any sense of firm foundation.

In the penultimate song, *Im Walde*, we are back in the forest. Now hyper-alert to everything, the narrator internalizes every passing sound and stimulus, but is left empty by the coming of night. This mercurial song is perhaps the most peculiar in the entire set, and is highly unsettling in its erratic tempo variations. The final song, *Frühlingsnacht*, seems like a conventional, happy conclusion after these forest hallucinations – the rustling of the spring evening once again speaking of love and happiness. But Eichendorff's pervasive ambiguity will not be silenced; a closer look at the text reveals that the dawning joy might only be an illusion. (PD)

Bach – Praeludium from Partita BWV 1006 in E Major for Solo Violin (transcribed for solo recorder)

Bach's six works - three sonatas and three partitas - for unaccompanied violin are, like so much of Bach's music, part of the canon of Western art. They are unique, supremely challenging works for violin, and indeed for any of the many instruments for which they have been transcribed since their "discovery" by the great violinist Joseph Joachim well into the 19th century (completed before 1720, they weren't even published until 1802). The opening movement of the E Major Partita is surely among Bach's most recognizable pieces, and is a declaration of unrestrained joyfulness delivered in a terrifyingly difficult and complex fabric of perpetual melodic and harmonic movement and the most ingenious rhythmic *trompe l'oreille* diversions. (MM)

Brahms duets – #1 and # 5 from op. 66

The five duets for two female voices that comprise op. 66 were written in 1875. Although this set is varied in choice of poet, mood, and musical character, the interest that Brahms held in folk music and folk poetry is evident in his settings. The first song, one of two titled *Klänge*, has a proverb-like text drawing parallels between natural phenomena and love. The simplicity and inevitability of a heart opening up to love is portrayed by homophonic text delivery in the first verse; the disappointment of life and love fading is reflected with a more complex counterpoint between the voices in the second verse. The final duet in the set, *Hüt du dich!*, is a text from the massive collection of folk poems, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, compiled by Von Arnim and Brentano. The light-hearted, teasing poem elicits a playful response from Brahms, who treats his vocal lines as if they were actual folk melodies and varies the verses only in the piano accompaniment, to great effect. (PD)

Mahler – Four Rückert Songs

In 1901-02 Mahler wrote ten songs setting the poetry of Friedrich Rückert, five of which became the song cycle *Kindertotenlieder* and the other five becoming the miscellaneous collection known simply as *Rückert Lieder* from which we'll hear four tonight. Each of these four songs presents a unique compositional solution to the setting of the poem. In the original, they're scored with full orchestra, and while the version with piano unavoidably robs us of Mahler's distinctively colorful orchestration, it retains the essential character of each song. It also magnifies the intimacy, particularly in the sublime ode to worldlessness, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden*

gekommen, one of Mahler's greatest songs and a precursor to his masterpiece *Abschied* which concludes the symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*. The most clearly strophic of the poems, *Liebst du um Schönheit*, receives the simplest setting while in *Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder* Mahler selects the poem's image of bees to generate the busy character that dominates the accompaniment. *Ich atmet' einen linden Duft* is nothing less than an effort to convey fragrance through music. (MM)

Prokofiev – Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat Major, Op. 83

Prokofiev's nine sonatas for solo piano span the entire course of his creative life, starting in his teen years with the Sonata No.1 and ending with the reflective, uncharacteristically relaxed Sonata No. 9 completed only a few years before his death. By far, the most often played are the three sonatas conceived and executed more-or-less simultaneously between 1939 and 1944. These sonatas, numbers 6, 7 and 8, are generally referred to as the "War Sonatas" because of this, but it has been emphasized repeatedly, even by Prokofiev himself, that one is not to impute a war narrative to these pieces. Yet with the Sonata No. 7 it's virtually impossible *not* to assign meaning to the unprecedented dissonance and violence of the work. The first movement is an angry, martial, insistent tour de force whose fanaticism is interrupted by two interludes of disturbing night visions, all but stripped of the anchor of tonality.

The second movement is where the war narrative is most irresistible. Opening with a deliberately naive tune in E Major, reputedly based on Schumann's song *Wehmut* heard earlier tonight, it gradually degenerates into an increasingly chaotic hellscape. One gets the unmistakable impression of pitiless artillery barrages, frantic and disorganized attempts to regroup and survive under withering assault, moments of respite followed by the continuation of merciless bombardment. There appear late in this movement peals of bells, doleful and insistent but not really human, as if with the sound of war momentarily abated the wind were tolling from the broken steeples in an unearthly valedictory to what is humane. This is the most violent music I know, and its violence is not just about the exterior symptoms of war but rather the psychology that transforms humans from being terrified to becoming terrifying. When the little E Major tune reemerges at the movement's end it is both heartbreakingly nostalgic and soul-shatteringly uncompassionate, as if it had persisted all this time, a kind of earworm looping unresolvably beneath the din.

The finale is one of the most notorious pieces in the virtuoso piano repertoire. A relentless chordal toccata in 7/8 meter, it builds in intensity and drives inexorably to a massive climax from which both the performer and listener are released in a last mighty éclat.

(MM)