

Subscription Concert II: Classical Forces

November 19, 2011

Conductor's CD Choices

Grieg – *Triumphal March* from *Sigurd Jorsalfar*

Gothenburg Symphony/ Neeme Jarvi, conductor

DG IMPORTS 477543

Ellisor – *Blackberry Winter*

Stephen Seifert, mountain dulcimer

Nashville Chamber Orchestra/Paul Gambil, conductor

WARNER BROTHERS

Brahms – Symphony No. 2

Cleveland Orchestra /George Szell, conductor

SONY

Brevard Symphony Orchestra (2011-12) Subscription Series II:

Notes provided by: David R. Glerum, Music Director – WMFE-FM/NPR, Orlando, FL. (1990-2009); Music Director – WXXI-FM/NPR, Rochester, N.Y. (1980-1990)

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) – Triumphal March from *Sigurd Jorsalfar* (Side-by-Side w/ BSYO):

Edvard Grieg remains Norway's greatest composer and continues to impress and move modern audiences through his superb craftsmanship and superlative melodic gifts. Following his graduation from the Leipzig Conservatory in 1863, Grieg moved to Copenhagen to develop his career as a composer and pianist. It was there that he was encouraged by colleagues to explore the distinctive musical folk traditions of his native country. Out of this commitment to Norwegian folk lore and music came several nationalistic orchestral suites, among them the *Peer Gynt Suites* (1875), the *Holberg Suite* (1884), and the *Sigurd Jorsalfar Suite* (1872; revised 1892).

In 1872, Grieg wrote incidental music for Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's historical play *Sigurd Jorsalfar* (Sigurd the Crusader). The play was written in celebration of King Sigurd I of Norway whose rule extended from 1103 to 1130. Historians have regarded his reign as a golden age for the medieval Kingdom of Norway. He is also renowned

for leading a crusade to the Holy Land as the first European king, beginning in 1107 and running for several years, and affording him his eponym "the Crusader." From this incidental music, Grieg fashioned a nine part orchestral suite, which was performed in Oslo on November 5, 1892. Three sections, however, are more successful than the others: 1.) "In the King's Hall"; 2.) "Borghild's Dream"; and 3.) "Triumphal March."

The concluding *Triumphal March* is easily the best-known movement from Grieg's incidental music, owing to its thrilling celebratory effect. It opens with blazing trumpet fanfares before announcing the March theme – in striking contrast – introduced by four cellos. The spacious middle section is a trio, featuring a noble melody given to the first violins; the work concludes with a recapitulation of the movement's first section. The *Triumphal March* is captivating for the way it builds to an exultant and powerful climax.

Conni Ellisor (b. 1957) – *Blackberry Winter* (for Mountain Dulcimer and String Orchestra):

"She can take materials out of diverse non-classical traditions and marry them with classical ideas and methods so that each tradition retains its distinctiveness within a whole greater than the sum of its parts."

Marcell Smith, *The Nashville Scene*

"It is this marrying of traditions and ostensibly dissimilar genres that is the hallmark of Conni Ellisor's work. Her critically acclaimed compositions are the beneficiaries of a brilliantly varied career. She has used her journey – formal training at Juilliard, early success in the classical world as a member of the Denver Symphony, concertmaster of the Boulder Philharmonic, first violin in the Athena Quartet (now the Colorado Quartet), and eventually as assistant concertmaster and soloist with the Nashville Chamber Orchestra, along with extensive work in the commercial world as a top-call session violinist and arranger – to inform her current musical statements.

"Ellisor's contributions to orchestral repertoire include such uniquely American works as *Blackberry Winter* for mountain dulcimer and strings, *Whiskey Before Breakfast – Partita for Bluegrass Band and Strings*, and *Nuages de la Nuit* for jazz quartet and strings. *Blackberry Winter* has generated widespread NPR airplay and was featured on *All Things Considered*. [Dave Glerum – formerly Music Director of WMFE-FM (NPR), Orlando – recalls playing *Blackberry Winter* on numerous occasions over the years for central Florida listeners to consistently enthusiastic and positive reviews.]

- Conni Ellisor,
composer

- Retrieved July 31, 2011 from www.ellisormusic.com

The composer – Conni Ellisor – offers her own notes on *Blackberry Winter*:

"When first asked if I would be interested in writing a concerto for dulcimer and strings, I happily agreed because the challenge of juxtaposing and blending musical styles and idioms has always been of interest to me. In this case the peculiar

beauty and eccentricities of the mountain dulcimer, with its diatonic tuning and drone strings, and the rich heritage of the classical concerto with string orchestra seemed particularly compelling.

“Because my knowledge of the particulars of the dulcimer was limited at best, it was arranged that I meet with master dulcimerist and intended artist, David Schnauffer. [Unfortunately, circumstances prevented David from performing its premiere (at Vanderbilt University, on November 30, 1996). Stephen Seifert, his protégé, stood in at the last minute and is here with us today as soloist with the Brevard Symphony Orchestra.] On the second or third meeting with David, he played a lovely song called *Blackberry Blossom*, one of many handed down in the Appalachian folk tradition. I could hear immediately how the harmonies underneath could be shifted and changed and that it was a perfect melody to adapt to the “classical” tradition I wanted to bring to the concerto. The title reminded me of a book that had a profound influence on me years earlier, and I asked David if he had heard of Margaret Mead’s autobiography, “Blackberry Winter.” His eyes lit up when he told me that NCO conductor Paul Gambill had called to tell him that the grant was secured on a spring morning a few months earlier, when a late frost had come without warning, coating all the new buds with a thin coat of ice – a Blackberry Winter. And so the piece was named.

“I felt compelled to work within the folk idiom, utilizing folk and folk-like melodies that are true to the nature and heritage of the dulcimer, yet I wanted the piece to have the basic infrastructure of the classical concerto. So I borrowed from a number of idioms: the Baroque tradition of introducing a theme slowly before moving into an allegro tempo (first movement), a rough interpretation of sonata-allegro form (first and third movements), and the time-tested use of theme and variation (second movement).”

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) – Symphony No. 2 in D Major:

Allegro non troppo

Adagio non troppo

Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino) - Presto ma non troppo

Allegro con spirito

Although the German composer Johannes Brahms wrote music imbued with intense passion, expressivity, and the fervor associated with late nineteenth century Romanticism, he often felt like a man who lived in an era after his own time. Not only did Brahms have a penchant for the forms and styles of the Classical and Baroque traditions, he actually felt rooted in them. When you think “Brahms,” what often comes to mind is music that goes so far as to epitomize the Romantic spirit. But never does Brahms drift afar from the discipline and structure of a Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven.

German music in the nineteenth century was basically split into two antagonistic factions. One side – the so called “progressive” – was headed by Richard Wagner, who endeavored to join art forms together into one unified roof under the name, “music drama.” The story provided the driving force behind how the music

should be executed. The other camp – the so called “conservative” – was typified by Brahms, who adhered to established traditions and who had no desire to forge significantly new directions in music.

Wagner it could be argued was self-aggrandizing about his music, writing propaganda on where he thought music should be headed and interested in the past only in so far as it advanced his own agenda. Brahms, on the other hand, would just as soon talk about something else and let his music speak for itself. By so doing he reasoned that his musical aesthetic would be most convincingly argued. Wagner wrote almost exclusively for the musical stage while Brahms produced works almost entirely in the chamber and symphonic realms. The division is useful as a means of illuminating the two composers’ antithetical approaches to music.

Although Brahms never asked for it, he became anointed heir to Beethoven as the champion of “absolute music.” Brahms’ goal was to follow the concepts of the classicist while at the same time moving forward with music rich in lyricism and the personal expressiveness of his time. However, he strongly rejected ultra emotional and overtly programmatic paths and to some extent was daunted by the shadow of Beethoven. That it took him until his mid-forties to complete his First Symphony, a work with a very long gestation, demonstrates that he accepted Beethoven’s mantle with tremendous seriousness. In his words, “You don’t know what it’s like to be dogged by *his* footsteps.”

Brahms First Symphony turned out to be a sensational creation and he went on to write three more symphonic masterpieces, establishing him as the greatest symphonist not only of his time, but possibly *the* greatest of all since Beethoven. Characterized by deep lyrical beauty, impeccable craftsmanship, emotional gravity, and remarkable staying power, who has written more convincing and moving symphonies since Beethoven?

Having taken over twenty years for Brahms’ Symphony No. 1 to come to fruition, the following year saw a relieved composer who must have felt as though a gargantuan monkey had been taken off his back. In the summer of 1887, Brahms retreated to the village of Pörschach in the Carinthian hills of southern Austria. He wrote to a Viennese friend, “Pörschach is an exquisite spot, and I have found a lovely and apparently pleasant abode in the Castle! You may tell everybody this: it will impress them....The place is replete with Austrian coziness and kindheartedness.” The beauty and peace of these country surroundings so inspired Brahms that he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, “So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them.” In contrast to the long and painful birth of the First Symphony, thanks to the melody rich breezes of this setting the Symphony No. 2 took only four months to complete.

Not surprisingly, the Second is as sunny and warmly lyrical as his First had been stormy and dramatic. After its premiere in December of 1887 at a concert given by the Vienna Philharmonic under Hans Richter, listeners heard in it “a glimpse of Nature, a spring day amid soft mosses, springing woods, birds’ notes, and the bloom of flowers.” Richard Specht, the composer’s biographer, found it “suffused with the sunshine and warm winds playing on the waters.” It became only natural, then, that the symphony

would find comparison with Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, *Pastoral*. Critics were quick to point out the similarities and dubbed the Symphony No. 2 as the *Pastoral* of Brahms' four symphonies.

Different in mood as Brahms' first two symphonies are, however, both are equals in technical mastery. Each is rich in its own emotional vein and they share an inevitable structural logic driving the music forward. Remarkably sophisticated, much of Brahms Second Symphony's thematic content is based on the three-note motive (D, C sharp, D) heard at the beginning of the *Allegro non troppo* in the low strings. This brief figure serves as the germ seed for what is to follow, manifesting itself in various guises in all of the symphony's four movements. While the symphony is indeed leisurely in pace and relaxed in mood, it is interesting to observe that the Second is as tightly constructed as anything Brahms wrote and is a masterful integrated and concentrated symphony.

Following the several statements of the melodic kernel that begin the first movement, the French horns gently sing the principal theme. After a striking transition theme played by the violins, the violas and cellos then introduce the second theme. This theme bears some resemblance to the much-loved Brahms' "Wiegenlied" ("Lullaby"). After both themes are developed and worked out, Brahms brings them back for the recapitulation. The movement ends placidly and largely undisturbed.

The second movement, *Adagio non troppo*, is the symphony's most profound section and plumbs the deepest emotions. Although rich and complex in musical content, the movement is structured in simple three-part (ABA) form, with an interior section that softens the gravity of the outer two parts.

The third movement, *Allegretto grazioso*, is a delightful and lilting joining-together of a casual and laid-back intermezzo with a spry and mischievous scherzo. The form is organized in five parts as: intermezzo; scherzo (beginning as an accelerated version of the intermezzo); abbreviated repeat of the intermezzo; new scherzo cousin; intermezzo and coda.

Beginning in a hushed and dramatic fashion, the concluding *Allegro con spirito* overflows with the rhythmic energy and high spirits of a Haydn symphony. The melodies are new and distinctive, but with the same motto heard in previous movements appearing here as well, the symphony sounds satisfyingly unified and complete. While still preserving the work's overall lyrical character, this *Allegro* is dynamic and joyous and serves as a wonderful climax to an extraordinary symphony.

Brahms' Symphony No. 2 has had no shortage of champions over the years. The conductor Felix Weingartner pronounced it the finest of the four symphonies: "The stream of invention has never flowed so fresh and spontaneous in other works of Brahms, and nowhere else has he colored his orchestration so successfully." Equally enthusiastic was the critic Olin Downes: "In his own way, and sometimes with long sentences, he formulates his thought, and the music has the rich chromaticism, depth of shadow and significance of detail that characterizes a Rembrandt portrait."