

Program Notes

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Duo for Violin and Viola in G Major, K. 423 WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born: 1756

Died: 1791

Composed: 1783

- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio
- III. Rondeau. Allegro

There is a wonderful story behind Mozart's two duos for violin and viola—perhaps true, perhaps not, but in any case worth re-telling. In the summer of 1783, Mozart returned to Salzburg for the first time since his rupture with Archbishop Colloredo. It was a nervous visit for the composer. Mozart was bringing his new wife Constanze to meet his father for the first time (the couple left behind in Vienna their first child, a baby boy who died in their absence), and he was worried that the archbishop might have him arrested. While in Salzburg, Mozart renewed his friendship with Joseph Haydn's younger brother Michael, who had been music director for the archbishop since 1762, when Mozart was 6. Mozart found Michael Haydn in bad condition. He was sick, and—having been commissioned by the archbishop to provide six duos for violin and viola—had been able to complete only four. As the story has it, the enraged archbishop ordered Haydn's salary cut off until the remaining two duos were complete. Hearing this, Mozart returned the next day with two duos and gave them to Haydn to pass off as his own.

This story sounds a little too good to be true, and it has the earmarks of a tale created to make the archbishop sound like even more of an ogre than he apparently was. But there is enough truth in the story to make it more than plausible. Haydn never published his set of six sonatas, and that fall—after he had returned to

Vienna—Mozart wrote to his father in Salzburg, asking that the manuscripts to his duos be returned to him.

This was a very rich period for Mozart as composer. Just before he left for Salzburg, he had completed two of the great string quartets dedicated to Joseph Haydn and had written most of the Mass in C minor; on the way home to Vienna, he quickly dashed off the "Linz" Symphony. The two duos, the only ones Mozart ever wrote, are masterly in their handling of the two instruments in what might seem a fairly limited form. Mozart played both violin and viola, but he preferred to play the viola, and he makes the two instruments equal partners in this music rather than relegating the viola to its more familiar role as accompanying voice. In fact, the writing for viola is one of the most remarkable aspects of this music, for Mozart fully exploits its distinctively rich and expressive sound.

The Duo in G Major is in three movements: a sonata-form first movement, a lyric slow movement, and a rondo-finale. The extended opening movement, by turns extroverted and melodic, features a brilliant interchange between the two voices and at one point a graceful little canon. The slow movement is built on an aria-like main idea; here the violin introduces the theme and has most of the interest. The bustling finale makes sharp dynamic contrasts; Mozart nicely varies the rhythmic pulse with extended passages in triplets.

Program note by Eric Bromberger.

Pantomime

BENJAMIN SCHEER

Born: 1993

Composed: 2026

I've always been incredibly drawn to dramatic works that tell a story. Operas, ballets, and tone poems have served as endless inspiration for my music, and I find that some of the most profound moments occur during pantomimes, when the dialogue and explicit nature of the works temporarily subside, and the music, combined with vivid gesture, takes over. Opera and ballet pantomimes particularly contain some of the most imaginative music, filled with a full range of emotions, from lighthearted spirit to the deepest expression of raw anguish. In Pantomimes, I treat the violin and viola as two characters and seek to incorporate the wildly expressive, yet at times lighthearted, character of these pantomimes. One might hear imitation, moments of suspension, and perhaps even a programmatic narrative. Even if there isn't a clearly defined plot, I invite listeners to let their imagination roam free and partake in this ode to unspoken drama.

Program note by Benjamin Scheer.

Three Madrigals. H. 313

BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ

Born: 1890

Died: 1959

Composed: 1947

- I. Poco allegro — Poco vivo
- II. Poco andante — Andante moderato
- III. Allegro — Moderato

We remember Bohuslav Martinů as one of the greatest Czech composers of the twentieth century, yet Martinů spent very little time in his Czech homeland, choosing instead to live as an exile in Paris, the United States, Italy, and Switzerland. Martinů had his early training in Prague, and he became a good enough violinist to join the Czech Philharmonic. But he sought a richer environment, and in 1923 he moved

to Paris, which would be his home for the next seventeen years. The Nazi occupation drove Martinů to flee to the United States, where he spent the next decade. Martinů found life in the United States alien, but he was welcomed here as a composer: he taught at leading music schools, and the symphonies he composed in the United States were premiered by the Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, and Philadelphia Orchestra. At the end of World War II Martinů hoped to return to Czechoslovakia, but the communist takeover there eventually made that impossible. In the meantime, he suffered a catastrophic accident.

Invited by Koussevitzky to teach at Tanglewood in 1946, Martinů was enjoying his summer there when on the evening of July 25 he stepped off an unrailed balcony in the dark and fell a story to the concrete driveway below, crushing part of his skull and spinal cord. He was unconscious for two days and in the hospital for five weeks. His recovery was slow: he suffered from headaches and dizziness, and he had to re-learn to walk. He could not travel, so could not return to Prague. Instead, he moved to New York, where he tried to recover his strength and his health. Martinů was usually the fastest of workers, but now his pace slowed, and over the next several years he composed primarily for chamber ensembles. Perhaps the smaller scale and more personal nature of chamber music offered the composer the best avenue of expression during these difficult years.

While he was recovering, Martinů heard the brother-and-sister duo Lillian and Joseph Fuchs perform Mozart's Duos for Violin and Viola, and—inspired by their playing and by Mozart's writing for those two instruments—he composed his Three Madrigals for Violin and Viola in December 1947 in New York City. The title "madrigal" may seem a strange one for purely instrumental music, but Martinů was particularly fond of English madrigals and their polyphonic writing, and he used that title for some of his choral works and for a number of instrumental pieces as well. But listeners should

not expect Martinů's Three Madrigals to sound like Mozart or like English madrigals. This is very much Martinů's own music, full of driving energy and requiring two first-class performers who must master such challenges as complex double-stops, wide skips across the range of their instruments, and rapid exchanges.

The opening *Poco allegro* is a sonata-form movement based on its firm propulsive opening and a falling second subject. The development is extremely animated, and the movement drives to its close on a coda marked *Poco vivo*. The sound-world of this music changes completely in the second movement. Martinů mutes both instruments here, and they produce a shimmering sonority, full of trills and swirling motion. Mutes come off for the second half of the movement, marked *Andante moderato*; this lovely slow section draws the movement to a quiet conclusion. The brilliant finale, marked simply *Allegro*, is full of busy energy. Along the way, Martinů generates a huge sound with both instruments playing double-stops and pressing forward dramatically. A brief *Moderato* episode brings a measure of calm before the opening tempo resumes, and the movement races to its close on ever-quicker tempos.

Martinů completed the Three Madrigals in December 1947, and the Fuchs duo had to learn it very quickly: they gave the premiere in New York City on December 22.

CONCERT

Symphonic Dances for Two Pianos, Op. 45 **SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

Born: 1873

Died: 1943

Composed: 1940

- I. Non allegro
- II. Andante con moto (Tempo di valse)
- III. Lento assai — Allegro vivace

Rachmaninoff spent the summer of 1940 at Orchard Point, a seventeen-acre estate on Long Island that had groves, orchards, and a secluded studio where he could work in peace. There, very near the East and West Egg of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Rachmaninoff set to work on what would be his final complete work, a set of dances for orchestra. By August, he had the score complete in a version for two pianos, and—because he regarded this as a dance score—he consulted with choreographer Mikhail Fokine, a neighbor that summer. Rachmaninoff tentatively titled the piece *Fantastic Dances* and gave its three movements names—Noon, Twilight, and Midnight—that might suggest a possible scenario. Fokine liked the music when Rachmaninoff played it for him, and they began to look ahead to a ballet production, but Fokine's death shortly thereafter ended any thought of that. Even by the end of the summer, though, Rachmaninoff appears to have rethought the character of this music. By the time he completed the orchestration on October 29, he had changed its name to *Symphonic Dances* and dropped the descriptive movement titles, and when Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra gave the premiere on January 3, 1941, it was as a purely orchestral composition. Rachmaninoff himself seemed surprised by what he had created, and when friends congratulated him on the energy of this music, he said, "I don't know how it happened—it must have been my last spark." Two years later he was dead.

The orchestral version of the Symphonic Dances has become one of the most popular of Rachmaninoff's late works. This concert, however, offers the unusual opportunity to hear this music in the form in which Rachmaninoff originally composed it—for two pianos; this was the version Fokine heard during the summer of 1941 and planned to choreograph. The orchestral version is remarkable for the opulence of its instrumental color (it includes the rarely-heard alto saxophone) and the verve of Rachmaninoff's writing; it is one of his most exciting scores—and one of his loudest. Two pianos cannot pretend to match the variety of color produced by symphonic instruments, nor can they match the sonic punch of a one-hundred piece orchestra. But the version for two virtuoso pianists offers an appeal all its own, in the excitement of a more intimate performance and in the black-and-white clarity it brings to Rachmaninoff's sometimes thick orchestral textures.

The Symphonic Dances are remarkable for Rachmaninoff's subtle compositional method. Rather than relying on the Big Tune, he evolves this music from the most economical of materials—rhythmic fragments, bits of theme, simple patterns—which are then built up into powerful movements that almost overflow with rhythmic energy. Rachmaninoff may have been 67 and in declining strength in 1940, but that summer he wrote with the hand of a master.

The music opens with some of these fragments, just bits of sound, and over them is heard the three-note pattern that will permeate the Symphonic Dances, reappearing in endless forms across the span of this score. Rachmaninoff plays it up here into a great climax, which subsides as the opening fragments lead to the wistful central episode; this slow interlude gradually makes its way back to the explosive gestures of the beginning section. In the closing moments, Rachmaninoff rounds matters off with a grand chorale (here finally is the Big Tune), and the movement winks into silence on the fragments with which it began.

The second movement is marked *Tempo di valse*, the only explicit dance indication in the score. Fokine himself warned Rachmaninoff not to feel bound to “dance” music (and specifically to waltz music) when writing music for dancing—if the music had vitality and character, Fokine felt that he could find a way to make it work as a ballet. Rachmaninoff may call for a waltz tempo here, but he avoids the traditional meter of 3/4, setting the music instead in 6/8 and 9/8. This waltz evolves through several episodes—some soaring, some powerful—before the movement subsides to a sudden, almost breathless close.

The slow introduction to the final movement is enlivened by interjections of the three-note pattern. Gradually these anneal into the *Allegro vivace*, and off the movement goes, full of rhythmic energy and the sound of ringing bells. A central episode in the tempo of the introduction sings darkly (Rachmaninoff marks it *lamentoso*), and finally the *Allegro vivace* returns to rush the Symphonic Dances to the close. Out of this rush, some unexpected features emerge: a quotation from Rachmaninoff's First Symphony (composed nearly fifty years earlier), the liturgical chant “Blessed Be the Lord,” and—finally—that old Rachmaninoff obsession, the *Dies Irae*. At first this is only hinted at, but gradually it takes shape amid the blazing rush and finally is shouted out in all its glory as this music dances furiously to a close guaranteed to rip the top off a concert hall.

As he finished each of his symphonies, Joseph Haydn would write *Laus Deo*—“Praise God”—at the end of the manuscript. At the end of the manuscript of *Symphonic Dances*, Rachmaninoff—perhaps aware that this would be his last work—wrote (in Russian) the simple phrase: “I thank Thee, Lord.”

Octet in E-flat Major, Op. 20

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born: 1809

Died: 1847

Composed: 1825

- I. Allegro moderato ma con fuoco
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo. Allegro leggierissimo
- IV. Presto

It has become a cliché with a certain kind of critic to say that Mendelssohn never fulfilled the promise of his youth. Such a charge is a pretty tough thing to say about someone who died at 38—most of us would think Mendelssohn never made it out of his youth. And such a charge overlooks the great works Mendelssohn completed in the years just before his death: the Violin Concerto, the complete incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Elijah*. But there can be no gainsaying the fact that the young Mendelssohn was a composer whose gifts and promise rivaled—perhaps even surpassed—the young Mozart's. The child of an educated family that fully supported his talent, Mendelssohn had by age 9 written works that were performed by professional groups in Berlin. At 12 he became close friends with the 72-year-old Goethe, at 17 he composed the magnificent overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and at 20 he led the performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* that was probably the key event in the revival of interest in Bach's music.

Mendelssohn completed his Octet in October 1825, when he was 16. One of the finest of his early works, the Octet is remarkable for its polished technique, its sweep, and for its sheer exhilaration. Mendelssohn's decision to write for a string octet is an interesting one, for such an ensemble approaches chamber-orchestra size, and a composer must steer a careful course between orchestral sonority and true chamber music. Mendelssohn handles this problem easily. At times this music can sound orchestral, as he sets different groups of instruments against each other, but the Octet remains true chamber music—each of the eight voices is distinct and important, and even at its most dazzling and extroverted the Octet preserves the equal participation of independent voices so crucial to chamber music.

Mendelssohn marked the first movement Allegro moderato ma con fuoco, and certainly there is fire in the very beginning, where the first violin rises and falls back through a range of three octaves. Longest by far of the movements, the first is marked by energy, sweep, and an easy exchange between all eight voices before rising to a grand climax derived from the opening theme. By contrast, the Andante is based on the simple melody announced by the lower strings and quickly taken up by the four violins. This gentle melodic line becomes more animated as it develops, with accompanying voices that grow particularly restless.

The Scherzo is the most famous part of the Octet. Mendelssohn said that it was inspired by the closing lines of the *Walpurgisnacht* section near the end of Part I of Goethe's *Faust*, where Faust and Mephistopheles descend into the underworld. He apparently had in mind the final lines of the description of the marriage of Oberon and Titania:

Clouds go by and mists recede,
Bathed in the dawn and blended;
Sighs the wind in leaf and reed,
And all our tale is ended.

This music zips along brilliantly. Mendelssohn marked it Allegro leggierissimo—"as light as possible"—and it does seem like goblin music, sparkling, trilling, and swirling right up to the end, where it vanishes into thin air.

Featuring an eight-part fugato, the energetic Presto demonstrates the young composer's contrapuntal skill. There are many wonderful touches here. At one point sharp-eared listeners may detect a quotation, perhaps unconscious, of "And He Shall Reign" from the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's *Messiah*, and near the end Mendelssohn skillfully brings back the main theme of the Scherzo as a countermelody to the finale's polyphonic complexity. It is a masterstroke in a piece of music that would be a brilliant achievement by a composer of any age.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.