

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**March 10-11-12, 2017**  
**91st Season / Subscription Concert No.6**  
**Michael Allsen**

Our guest conductor for this program is Carl St. Clair, a favorite of both the audience and the members of the orchestra. Maestro St. Clair previously led programs here in 2005, 2007, and 2012. The performance opens with a pair of early 19th-century works, beginning with Beethoven's stormy *Egmont Overture*. The young Norwegian trumpet soloist Tine Thing Helseth first performed with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in early 2014, with stunning performances of the Haydn and Arutiunian concertos. We are delighted to welcome her back to Overture Hall to perform the Hummel *Trumpet Concerto* at these concerts. After intermission we turn to the last and largest of Strauss's symphonic poems. His *Alpine Symphony*, calling for a gargantuan orchestra, is a musical picture of a climber scaling the peak of a great summit—and the spiritual ascent that accompanies his climb.

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**  
**Overture to *Egmont*, Op.84**

*The overture was composed in 1810, and first played at a performance of Egmont at the Burgtheater in Vienna in June, 1810. The work has appeared five times previously on our subscription concerts between 1939 and 1999. Duration 9:00.*

Beethoven upheld the ideals of human dignity and freedom in his music and writings, and much the same can be said for the work of contemporary poet and playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). In his play *Egmont*, first published in 1786, Goethe freely adapts the story of the 16th-century Flemish nobleman Lamoral van Egmont, who was betrayed by his Spanish overlords. Egmont served the Spanish king well, defeating the French in battle and ruling as a provincial governor. However, his challenge to the Spanish persecution of Protestants in their conquered territories angered the king. Egmont was sentenced to be beheaded, and his stirring speech from the scaffold touched off a rebellion against Spanish tyranny.

The personal relationship between Beethoven and Goethe dates from 1810, when Beethoven was commissioned to write incidental music for a new production of *Egmont*. At first, their correspondence went through a mutual friend, Bettina von

Arnim, but they eventually met in person, at Teplitz in July of 1812. Although they had long been mutual admirers, it is evident from their own descriptions of the meeting that their personalities clashed. In a letter to a friend written a few months later, Goethe states: “His talent amazed me. However, unfortunately, he is an utterly untamed personality; he is not altogether wrong in holding the world detestable, but surely does not make it more enjoyable for himself or others by his attitude.” Beethoven's own impressions were no more complimentary. In a letter to his publisher, he notes that: “Goethe delights far too much in the court atmosphere, far more than is becoming in a poet.”

The overture is set in sonata form. It sets the scene with a solemn introduction, in which strident dotted figures alternate with lighter music in the woodwinds. The end of this introduction leads smoothly into the body of the movement, a triple-meter *Allegro*. The stormy main theme is characterized by an offbeat accent in the upper strings and a descending line. An agitated transition leads to the second theme, a transformation of the introduction's opening material. The brief development section is entirely concerned with the main theme. In the recapitulation that follows, the Beethoven extends the second theme with a short section of development. Rather than a conventional coda, Beethoven ends a grand dramatic pause, and entirely new material. This exhilarating music is used again at the end of the drama, as Egmont climbs the scaffold to his death. In commissioning the music for *Egmont*, Goethe specified that this moment should not be a lament, but rather, a “Symphony of Victory.”

### **Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837)** **Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra**

*This piece was written in December of 1803, and was premiered in Vienna on New Year's Day in 1804 with Anton Weidinger as soloist. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 21:00.*

Though he is known today primarily for his concertos—particularly the trumpet concerto heard here—and a few of his solo piano works, Hummel was among the most respected and influential musicians of his time. Much of his early career was spent in Vienna, where he worked as a pianist and composer. As a piano virtuoso, he was second only to Beethoven, and though the two were clearly rivals, they also respected one another deeply, and remained lifelong friends. Hummel visited Beethoven in 1827, as Beethoven was on his deathbed—at Beethoven's request, Hummel later performed on a grand memorial concert. Hummel succeeded Joseph Haydn as *Kapellmeister* to the Esterházy family in 1804, and later served the

courts at Stuttgart and Weimar. Though his music fell out of popularity after his death, Hummel remained a familiar name all through the 19th century, through an influential treatise on piano technique he published in 1828.

Hummel's trumpet concerto was written for the Viennese virtuoso Anton Weidinger and his keyed trumpet. Weidinger was a member of the Imperial court orchestra, and invented the instrument in about 1793. The keyed trumpet—controlled by pads on the side of the instrument similar to those on a saxophone—allowed the player to play stepwise in the low register of the instrument, and chromatically through much of its range, impossible on the older valveless natural trumpets of the 18th century. Though it was soon supplanted by the valve trumpet, Weidinger's keyed instrument enjoyed a brief popularity in the first decade of the 19th century, and two of the works written for the instrument remain the most enduringly popular concertos for trumpet: Haydn's concerto of 1796 (also for Weidinger), and Hummel's, written seven years later. Like the keyed trumpet itself, however, Hummel's concerto lapsed into obscurity soon after it was composed, and was not rediscovered until the beginning of the twentieth century. Its first American performance was by Armando Ghitalla in 1960 at Carnegie Hall. It has since become a staple of the trumpet repertoire.

The concerto is set the traditional three movements, beginning with a broad movement in sonata form (*Allegro con spirito*). The orchestra begins with an exposition of the main themes, a bright fanfare, a more lyrical contrasting idea. The soloist then picks up these ideas in decorated form. A short orchestral passage leads to a compact development section, which focuses mainly on the fanfare. There is no solo cadenza at the end as would have been usual, but instead an extended coda with particularly showy passages and new material from the soloist. The brief *Andante* is a kind of operatic aria for the trumpet, which lays out two lovely Romantic themes above gently pulsing strings. True to form, the last movement is a fast-paced Rondo (*Allegro*). The main theme is a frisky fanfare idea tossed out by the trumpet in the opening bars, and this alternates with contrasting episodes: a second fanfare, a brief excursion into the minor key, and a playful dancelike episode overlaid brilliant passages from the trumpet.

### **Richard Strauss (1864-1949)**

#### **Eine Alpensinfonie (“An Alpine Symphony”), Op.64**

*Strauss composed this symphonic poem in 1911-1915. He conducted its premiere in Dresden on October 28, 1915. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 52:00.*

Many late Romantic composers composed symphonic poems (a.k.a. tone poems)—large programmatic orchestral works that depicted a scene, a story, or a character in purely musical terms—after Liszt introduced the genre was introduced in the 1850s. But it is a series of symphonic poems by a young Richard Strauss that remain the best known works in this form. Strauss would eventually compose ten of these works while he was in his 20s, 30s, and 40s, from *Aus Italien* (“From Italy” – 1886) through *Eine Alpensinfonie*, and his early reputation as a composer rested on the series of eight that culminated in *Ein Heldenleben* (“A Hero’s Life” – 1899). By 1911, when he started work on *Eine Alpensinfonie* his career had transformed entirely: he was increasingly busy as a conductor, and as a composer, he had turned almost entirely to opera. (Though Strauss did write some chamber orchestra music and extracts from his stage works later in his career, *Eine Alpensinfonie* would be his last—and largest—full-scale symphonic work.) Strauss seems to have viewed the composition of the work at least partly as something to occupy his time between operas: his phenomenally successful *Der Rosenkavalier* had premiered in January 1911, and his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal was working with frustrating slowness on the early drafts of their two next operatic projects, *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. In mid-May 1911, he wrote to Hofmannsthal that, to keep himself occupied, he was “torturing myself with a symphony—a job when all’s said and done that amuses me even less than chasing maybugs.” He would fit work on the piece into breaks in operatic composition over the next few years. The final score recycled material from a pair of unfinished works from several years earlier, *An Artist’s Tragedy* and *The Alps*.

Composing *Eine Alpensinfonie* was clearly more than just something to pass the time, however, and there were several sources of inspiration for the symphonic poem. The first was his love of the Bavarian Alps, which he had hiked since boyhood. (As a 15-year-old, he had once spent most of a day stranded on a mountainside during a ferocious thunderstorm.) In 1908, Strauss used his earnings from the opera *Salome* to build a home in the Bavarian town of Garmisch, where his studio afforded a magnificent view of the Alps. The direct spur to start work seems to have been the death of Gustav Mahler on May 18, 1911. Strauss was deeply saddened, writing in his diary that “The death of this aspiring, idealistic, energetic artist is a grave loss.” In its final form, *Alpensinfonie* bears a clear resemblance to several of Mahler’s works, including the massive *Symphony No. 3*. *Eine Alpensinfonie* is also a reflection the same fascination with the work of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche that had inspired both his *Also sprach Zarathustra* (“Thus spoke Zarathustra” – 1896) and *Ein Heldenleben*—particularly the idea of transcending traditional Christianity to achieve a more pure spirituality. In his

diary, he wrote: I shall call my alpine symphony: *Der Antichrist*, since it represents: moral purification through one's own strength, liberation through work, worship of eternal, magnificent nature.” *Antichrist* is a reference to a Nietzsche essay, and though he dropped the name in the final work, the Nietzschean ideals remain.

This was an age of colossal orchestras—Strauss’s own *Ein Heldenleben*, Mahler’s *Symphony No.8* (the “Symphony of a Thousand”), and Schoenberg’s *Gurre-Lieder*, all employ enormous forces—but *Eine Alpensinfonie* is surely one of the very largest of all regularly-performed symphonic works. Strauss’s score calls for an orchestra of about 140 players: an expanded string section, two harps, quadrupled woodwinds (including the rarely-used Heckelphone, a baritone oboe), organ, and a large percussion section that includes two timpanists and curiosities like cowbells, and wind and thunder machines. The brass section is particularly lavish: if performed as specified in the score, onstage and offstage brass include twenty(!) horns, five of them doubling on Wagner tubas, six trumpets, six trombones, and two tubas—though with a little judicious doubling, it can be played by as few as seventeen players...still a lot of brass. This entire ensemble is unleashed at just a few points in the score, but this vast orchestra gave Strauss a huge palette of musical colors to use: he joked during rehearsals for the Dresden premiere that, after all those years, he had finally learned to orchestrate.

*Eine Alpensinfonie* is a single-movement work that follows an entire day spent on the mountain. There are 23 tableaux noted in the score that follow this journey, beginning with the misty descending lines and solemn chorale of “Night.” After a few increasingly insistent hints from the brass, “Sunrise” breaks out, followed by the music of “The ascent”—culminating in a grand passage for the entire orchestra, including an entire regiment of offstage hunting horns. “Entry into the forest” conveys a sense of mystery and reverence for nature, as Strauss’s climber wanders through a majestic wood. The next few episodes, “Wandering by the brook,” “At the waterfall,” “Apparition,” and “On flowering meadows” pass by descriptively, but briefly, and the climber takes a brief break “On the alpine pasture”—a lovely melody accompanied by twittering birds and cowbells. The next few sections contain a bit of danger: “Through thickets and undergrowth on the wrong path” is a perfect musical description of wandering down blind paths with just a hint of rising panic. The organ underlies a nervous journey “On the glacier” followed by a series of tense musical fragments representing “Dangerous moments.” The pinnacle is reached in “On the summit”—a pastoral oboe solo that leads to a magnificent brass passage. While the summit music is the great musical climax of *Eine*

*Alpensinfonie*, the next section, “Vision,” is its emotional peak: exalted music dominated by the high brass.

The remainder of the piece paints a picture of a brief thunderstorm at the summit—probably inspired by Strauss’s own memories from his teenage mountaineering—and the climber’s descent. There are hints of the coming storm in “Mists rise” and “The sun gradually becomes obscured,” but there is a pause in action for a brief, sad “Elegy” led by the strings. There are occasional dark rumblings from the tubas and trombones. and the tension grows in the “Calm before the storm” with wandering woodwind lines, and approaching lightning and thunder from the piccolos and timpani. There are many great symphonic storm scenes, but *Eine Alpensinfonie*’s “Tempest and storm,” however brief, is certainly one of the most titanic. The actual “Descent” goes by very quickly—a solemn trombone chorale, that leads into dignified music for “Sunset.” A hushed moment for organ, solo horn and solo trumpet signals the approaching end of the piece—“Quiet settles”—a peaceful passage that rises to a powerful, but hushed climax. The work ends with a reprise of the hushed “Night” music of the opening.

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