

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**April 13/14/15, 2018**  
**Subscription Concert No.7**  
**Michael Allsen**

This program begins with the *Sinfonia da Requiem* by Benjamin Britten—a powerful antiwar statement composed just as World War II was beginning. Violinist Augustin Hadelich returns to Overture Hall to perform one of the finest of all Romantic violin works, Dvorák’s *Violin Concerto*. Mr. Hadelich previously appeared with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2012 (Prokofiev’s *Violin Concerto No.2*) and 2013 (Lalo’s *Symphonie espagnole*). This springtime concert closes—appropriately!—with Schumann’s joyful “Spring” symphony.

**Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)**  
***Sinfonia da Requiem*, Op.20**

*Britten composed this work in 1940. It was premiered by the New York Philharmonic, under John Barbirolli, on March 30, 1941. The only previous Madison Symphony Orchestra performance of the work was in 1977. Duration 20:00.*

In April 1939, Britten and his partner, tenor Peter Pears left England for the United States—part of a wave of European composers who emigrated to the United States to escape the Political instability of the 1930s and World War II. A pacifist, Britten came to this country as a conscientious objector. He spent over two years in America before returning to England in early 1942, shortly after the United States joined the war as well. (While he expressed some fear that he would be thrown into prison should he return to England, both Britten and Pears were able to secure official positions in the BBC as an alternative to military service.) His sojourn in America was busy and productive: Britten and Pears had a large circle of friends, both Americans and European expatriates, and there were several successful concert tours across the country. Britten was also productive as a composer, completing his first string quartet and several works written for Pears, but by far the largest of his American works was the powerful *Sinfonia da Requiem*.

The *Sinfonia da Requiem* is a case where a failed commission produced a truly great work. Shortly after arriving in United States, Britten was approached by an official from the British consulate with a rather vague request: would he be interested in composing a symphony for a festivity sponsored by a foreign power? Though he needed the money, Britten was cautious, and replied that he was indeed

interested if the work was to be purely celebratory rather than jingoistic. The foreign power, as it turned out, was Japan, where the government was organizing a festival celebrating the 2600th anniversary of the ascension of the first Emperor. Britten provided a fairly detailed description of the piece he had in mind, noting that the movement titles would be drawn from the Latin *Requiem* (Mass for the Dead). When Britten described the commission to a newspaper reporter, he noted that the piece would be dedicated to the memory of his parents, and that it would express his strong antiwar stance. When he finally delivered the *Sinfonia da Requiem* to two Japanese officials, he quickly received a haughty response, rejecting the score as “an insult to a friendly power,” accusing Britten of “providing a Christian work where Christianity was unacceptable,” and complaining of its “gloomy” character. This rejection turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as the massive concert in Tokyo in December 1940 was a thoroughly jingoistic celebration of Japanese militarism and the Axis Alliance. Britten’s reputation would have been deeply damaged had he been associated with it in any way. (And if you’re curious, the Japanese never requested their money back, so Britten was also able to pocket a rather substantial commission fee!) He was quickly able to secure performances in United States and Britain, where the *Sinfonia da Requiem* was thoroughly successful, and understood as a powerful expression of its time, when the entire world was descending into war.

This is powerful, expressive music it is challenging for the orchestra. Britten biographer Eric Roseberry calls it “...Britten’s untitled Concerto for Orchestra, an extraordinary display-piece for orchestra that reaches its apogee in the terrifying *Dies irae*...” The composer provided the following musical outline of the piece:

“I. *Lacrymosa*. A slow marching lament in a persistent 6/8 rhythm with a strong tonal center on D. There are three main motives: 1) a syncopated, sequential theme announced by the cellos and answered by a solo bassoon; 2) a broad theme, based on the interval of a major seventh; 3) alternating chords on flute and trombones, outlined by piano, harps and trombones. The first section of the movement is quietly pulsating; the second is a long crescendo leading to a climax based on the first cello theme. There is no pause before:

“II. *Die irae*. A form of Dance of Death, with occasional moments of quiet marching rhythm. The dominating motif of this movement is announced at the start by the flutes and includes an important *tremolando* figure. Other motives are a triplet repeated-note figure in the trumpets, a slow, smooth tune on the saxophone, and a livelier syncopated one in the brass. The

scheme of the movement is a series of climaxes of which the last is the most powerful, causing the music to disintegrate and to lead directly to:

“III. *Requiem aeternam*. Very quietly, over a background of solo strings and harps, the flutes announce the quiet D-major tune, the principal motive of the movement. There is a middle section in which the strings play a flowing melody. This grows to a short climax, but the opening tune is soon resumed, and the work ends quietly in a long sustained clarinet note.”

Britten’s rather laconic note does little to describe the emotional impact of the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, however. The movements take their cues from the emotional arc of the *Requiem* mass, beginning with the devastating *Lacrymosa* (“That day is one of weeping...”), unrelentingly dark music framed by death-knells from the timpani. *Dies irae* (“The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes...”) begins quietly, but builds inexorably towards a peak of frenzy, before disintegrating at the end. Only in the final movement, *Requiem aeternam* (“Grant them eternal rest, O Lord”) is there a note of consolation and hope.

### **Antonín Dvorák (1841-1904)** **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 53**

*Dvorák composed this concerto in the summer of 1879, and made substantial revisions in 1880 and 1882. The premiere took place in Prague on October 14, 1883, with violin soloist Frantisek Ondricék. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has played the work twice previously, in 1982 with violinist Miriam Fried, and in 2004 with Sarah Chang/. Duration 33:00.*

In the 1870s, the young Czech composer Antonín Dvorák was just beginning to make his mark beyond his native Bohemia. Dvorák had won a series of important Viennese composition prizes in the middle 1870s and his *Slavonic Dances* of 1878 were widely admired. With advice and support from Johannes Brahms and the influential critic Eduard Hanslick, his star was rising in 1879, and he was approached with dozens of commissions for new works. On New Year’s Day in 1879, the great Viennese virtuoso Joseph Joachim played the first performance of Brahms’s *Violin Concerto*, and Dvorák’s publisher Simrock promptly suggested that he should also write a concerto for Joachim. Dvorák set to work that summer, and mailed a copy to Joachim in September. Joachim had worked closely with both Bruch and Brahms in fine-tuning the solo parts of their violin concertos, and Dvorák was clearly looking for the same kind of assistance. Joachim was not apparently impressed by the concerto at this stage, and suggested many

improvements. Dvorák returned to the work the next summer, and by his own description “completely transformed” the work, still hoping to please Joachim.

The score remained in limbo for the next two years, until Joachim considered it once more, writing a rather critical note to the composer, that concluded with: “Speaking with the utmost sincerity, may I say, without the danger of being misunderstood, that I still do not think that the *Violin Concerto* in its present form is ready for public presentation...” Dvorák met with Joachim in Berlin during the fall of 1882, and heard a run-through performance. He made several more changes at Joachim’s suggestion, and Joachim himself made several revisions to the solo part. Although Dvorák later wrote to Simrock that Joachim “liked it very much,” at some point he seems to have given up on having Joachim play the premiere. Joachim, in fact, never played a public performance, but the work was enthusiastically picked up by other soloists, and quickly assumed a place as one of the most popular concertos of the late 19th century.

Though it has the usual three movements, the concerto was a fairly radical formal experiment—this may have been part of what troubled the highly conservative Joachim. The opening movement (*Allegro ma non troppo*) dispenses of the traditional orchestral introduction in a brief fanfare that is answered by a rhapsodic phrase from the violin. The body of the movement is in sonata form, but after an extended exposition and development, the recapitulation is very brief. In place of the usual solo cadenza, the violin plays a brief phrase at the end, which slows the tempo and leads directly into the second movement (*Adagio ma non troppo*). This movement has a three-part form, beginning with a calm and lyrical solo melody. The middle section is more turbulent, allowing for some of the showiest passages in the solo part. In the end, the horn plays a reprise of the opening theme, while the violin weaves a countermelody above it. The finale (*Allegro moderato*) has clear ties to Dvorák’s successful *Slavonic Dances*: it works as a kind of rondo, bringing together a whole series of good Bohemian dance tunes. The opening theme has the syncopated rhythm of the *furiant*, and the spirited movement that follows has flamboyant violin writing throughout. There is a melancholy episode in the middle, based on the Czech *dumka*, but in the end the good humor persists, and the movement ends with a blazing coda.

**Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**  
**Symphony No.1 in B-flat Major, Op.38 (“Spring”)**

*Schumann completed this symphony in early 1841, and Felix Mendelssohn conducted the premiere in Leipzig on March 31, 1841. This is the first performance of the work Madison Symphony Orchestra. Duration 30:00.*

Schumann described 1841 as his year of “symphonic fire.” He had spent most of his energy in the 1830s on piano music, and devoted much of 1840-41 to the composition of songs—many of which seem to be love-letters to his fiancée and soon-to-be wife Clara Wieck. By 1841, happily married and confident, was ready to tackle the largest of instrumental genres, the symphony. (He had worked on two different symphonies in the early 1830s, but neither was finished.) Clara seems to have been one of his greatest sources of encouragement. In 1839, she had written in her diary: “...his imagination cannot find sufficient scope on the piano...My highest wish is that he should compose for orchestra—that is his true calling! May I succeed in bringing him to it.”

Schumann threw himself into orchestral composition with almost manic energy. He sketched out his *Symphony No.1* in four sleepless days in January, and refined it over the first few months of 1841. In the spring, Schumann turned to the work that eventually became his *Overture, Scherzo and Finale*, Op.52. He also produced an early version of the first movement of his piano concerto—written for Clara, a piano virtuoso and a fine composer in her own right. He began work on the D minor symphony—revised ten years later and published as his *Symphony No.4*—in the early summer, and completed it in September. Almost without a break, he then began work on a symphony in C minor, but this was never completed. By the end of the year, his “symphonic fire” had cooled, but he then worked in other genres with the same concentration, focussing on chamber music in 1842, and then spending much of 1843 at work on the oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri*.

His *Symphony No.1* is a startlingly innovative work with intense thematic development. Schumann was responsible for the “Spring” symphony’s title, which drew its inspiration from the concluding lines of a poem by his friend Adolph Böttger. Böttger’s poem, mostly about a gloomy, cloud-shaded landscape, ends with the poet looking into a valley with the lines *O wende, wende deinen Lauf—im Tale blüht der Frühling auf!* (“O turn, turn aside from your course—for in the valley, spring is blossoming forth!”) Schumann may in fact have used the rhythm of the last line in the brass fanfare that begins the symphony. In the original score, he prefaced each of the movements with descriptive titles: 1. *Frühlingsbeginn*

(“The coming of spring”), 2. *Abend* (“Evening”), 3. *Frohe Gespielen* (“Merry play”), and 4. *Voller Frühling* (“The fullness of spring”). Though he removed these titles before publishing the symphony in 1843, probably because he wanted to avoid a completely programmatic interpretation of the work, the description “Spring” remains perfectly appropriate. In 1842, he wrote to the composer Louis Spohr: “I composed the symphony in that flush of springtime that carries a man away even in his old age, and comes over him anew every year. Description and painting were not part of my intention, but I believe that the time at which it came into existence may have influenced its shape and made it what it is.”

The opening movement begins with a brass fanfare and a long slow introduction (*Andante un poco maestoso*). Schumann later wrote to the conductor Wilhelm Taubert: “In what follows [after the fanfare] there might be a suggestion of the gradual greening of everything, even of a butterfly flying up, and in the subsequent *Allegro* of the gradual assembling of all that belongs to spring.” The body of the movement (*Allegro molto vivace*) begins with a main theme that is derived from the fanfare. A quieter second theme is carried by the woodwinds. Schumann’s long development concentrates mostly on the first theme, though woodwinds slyly introduce a new minor-key idea that surfaces a few times during this section. Brass fanfares announce a full recapitulation. Strings introduce a serene new melody during the coda, but the movement ends with the abrupt return of the brass and a brilliant conclusion.

The two middle movements, though of very different characters, are clearly linked. The *Larghetto*’s main theme, heard at the beginning, is a beautifully wandering Romantic melody. There is a moment of contrast, a short conversation between woodwinds and strings, before the main theme returns, now sung by the cellos. Another contrasting episode interjects a note of tension, but the theme returns once more, now played by oboes and horn. At the very end, the trombones introduce a rather mysterious chorale theme. The mystery is quickly solved, however—the music proceeds without a pause into third movement (*Molto più vivace*), and this trombone chorale becomes the scherzo’s main theme. Though this unrelentingly serious melody hardly seems like “merry play,” Schumann inserts several playful episodes, and there is a long frolicsome trio section that plays with the main theme in a mischievous way. After the main idea returns briefly, there is a second trio, a sprightly dance. The movement ends with one more repeat of the main idea, and a coda that seems to leave the music waiting in anticipation.

The finale (*Allegro animato e grazioso*) begins with a forceful statement, but then continues with a lighthearted main theme. The second theme is a mock-serious

idea passed between woodwinds and strings. There are allusions to the symphony's opening fanfare throughout the development, but Schumann interjects a lovely little pastoral moment for horns and solo flute as a bridge to the recapitulation. The coda begins with a sudden quickening of tempo and the "Spring" symphony ends in jubilant mood.

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