

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
February 16/17/18, 2018
Subscription Concert No.6
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Rossini's overture to *Semiramide* begins this February program—a deceptively cheerful overture to a rather dark and bloody opera! Cellist Alban Gerhardt then returns to Overture Hall to perform Walton's fine *Cello Concerto*. He has previously appeared with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 1999 (Strauss's *Don Quixote*), 2008 (Elgar's *Cello Concerto*), and 2013 (Prokofiev's *Sinfonia Concertante*). Brahms spent well over 20 years working on his first symphony—our closing work on this concert—and had one of the most successful symphonic debuts in history when the work was first performed in 1876. His *Symphony No.1* remains every bit as moving over 140 years later.

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)
Overture to “Semiramide”

Rossini's opera Semiramide was composed in Venice in January of 1823, and was first produced on February 3, at the Venetian theater La Fenice. The overture has been played twice before at these concerts, in 1987 and 2000. Duration 11:00.

Like most of Rossini's works, *Semiramide* was written very quickly—his contract allowed him forty days to complete the opera, but he finished the job in thirty-three! His standard operating procedure was to wait until the last minute to write the overture: as in most of his operas, *Semiramide's* overture is based almost entirely on what he considered to be the best tunes in the opera. Unlike the majority of his operas, however, *Semiramide* is thoroughly serious stuff—the opera was considered almost too dramatic and long-winded by a Venetian audience that was used to lighter *opere buffe*. *Semiramide* met with moderate success in its first run, however, and is still one of the works that still lurk on the outskirts of the standard operatic repertory today.

The legend of the evil Babylonian queen Semiramis was a fertile source of operatic inspiration: Rossini's *Semiramide* is one of over forty settings of the story that date from as early as 1648. In the libretto used by Rossini (which is at least partly based on an earlier stage play by Voltaire), *Semiramide* conspires with her lover Assur to murder her husband Nino and place Assur on the throne. In an Oedipus-like turn of the plot, *Semiramide* falls in love with a dashing young general, Arsace.

Unbeknownst to anyone but the high priest, Arsace is, in truth, Semiramide's own son, Prince Ninia. Nino's ghost appears, prophesying that Arsace will become king. When the priest informs him of his true identity, Ninia vows to revenge his father by killing Assur, but the dagger thrust intended for the usurper strikes the guilty Semiramide instead. When Ninia's identity is proclaimed Assur is condemned to die, and Ninia sadly ascends to the throne.

After the initial orchestral flourishes, the overture opens with an extended slow introduction. In this section the horns and woodwinds play a lyrical hymnlike melody—a chorus of praise for the queen heard in the first act. The opening flourishes return, announcing the beginning of the main *Allegro* portion of the overture. The first *Allegro* theme is taken from the orchestral introduction to the opera's tragic final scene at the tomb of King Nino—a tragedy that is belied by the happy, bouncy nature of this theme! The second theme is introduced by clarinet and bassoon and then by the piccolo—it is just as jovial, as the first theme, yet somewhat more martial. A long crescendo passage and a string interlude lead back to a repeat of the opening *Allegro* material.

William Walton (1902-1983) **Concerto for Cello and Orchestra**

Walton composed this concerto in 1955-56. Gregor Piatigorsky played the premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Charles Munch conducting, in January 25, 1957. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 30:00.

Walton composed three fine string concertos, written for reigning virtuosos, and all remain in the repertoire today. The *Viola Concerto* (1929) was written for Lionel Tertis, but Tertis rejected it for its “modernistic excesses”—composer and master violist Paul Hindemith later played the premiere. His *Violin Concerto* (1939) was written for Jascha Heifetz, and was an immediate success. But Walton later wrote that he thought his 1956 *Cello Concerto* to be the best of the three. By this time Walton was successful and comfortable, living in a villa on the island of Ischia, off the Sicilian coast. When Gregor Piatigorsky approached him about a cello concerto, Walton wryly wrote back: “Well, I’m a professional composer. I’ll write anything if they pay me. Naturally I write much better if I am paid in American dollars.” But all joking aside, Walton clearly took the commission seriously and devoted most of 1956 to the work. His wife Susana later recalled that he “thought of the cello as a melancholy instrument, full of soul; accordingly, he wrote a rather sad tune for the opening... He certainly had a special affection for the cello concerto as it had come very spontaneously, and he felt it was the closest to his

personality.” Piatigorsky was quite pleased with the concerto as a whole, though was always dissatisfied with what he considered to be a rather downbeat ending, and pressured Walton to rewrite the conclusion. In 1974, Walton finally relented and wrote the requested showy ending, but Piatigorsky died before he could perform it. Today, the concerto is almost invariably performed with the original ending—certainly a more profound conclusion to this deep and serious concerto.

As in his two early concertos, Walton upends traditional concerto form by casting the *Cello Concerto* as a pair of slow movements surrounding an interior fast movement. The opening *Moderato* begins with a tense string passage that resembles nothing so much as the ticking of a clock. The cello plays off of this music with more a more melancholy and lyrical idea. The cello is often in conversation with solo lines that rise up out of the orchestra. The movement develops this idea and second equally lush melody throughout. There is no grand cadenza, but near the end, the texture thins for a brief moment of musing by the solo cello. The next movement (*Allegro appassionato*) is a kind of very serious scherzo, with a quirky cello line darting above a simple accompaniment. This eventually becomes a crisply accented dialogue between the cello and orchestra and culminates in a short solo passage and a quick coda.

Walton described long last movement (*Lento*) as a “theme with improvisations” and this clearly fits the free nature of this form—not an orderly procession of variations, but more like a stream-of-consciousness reflection on a single idea. Solo cello in its high register introduces the theme, and there are four unhurried takes on this idea, including a long version for cello alone that serves as the concerto’s cadenza, a stormy orchestral passage, and a second more meditative passage for unaccompanied cello. The ending is a kind of epilogue, bringing back the music and the mood of the opening movement, now in combination with the main *Lento* theme. Walton’s original ending is a quiet meditation for the solo cello above *celestia* and *pizzicato* strings.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Symphony No.1 in C minor, Op.68

Brahms completed his Symphony No.1 in 1876. The first performance took place in Karlsruhe on November 4, 1876, with Otto Dessoff conducting. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has played the work on nine previous programs, beginning in 1939. Our most recent performance was in 2007. Duration 47:00.

“Writing a symphony is no laughing matter.”
- Johannes Brahms

When Brahms was only twenty, he met the composer and critic Robert Schumann for the first time. Schumann hailed Brahms’s appearance on the musical scene in an article in the journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, suggesting that Brahms was the long-awaited standard-bearer for one side in an ongoing aesthetic battle. Schumann saw the Classical lines of Brahms’s music as an antidote to the more radical ideas of the “New German School” headed by Franz Liszt. Brahms was held up as the successor to Beethoven, and Schumann suggested that “...if [Brahms] directs his magic wand where the massed power in chorus and orchestra might lend him their strength, we can look forward to even more wondrous glimpses into the secret world of the spirits.” The young composer had, up until then, composed only smaller works, and this challenge to write symphonies and other large works weighed heavily on Brahms’s mind. He imposed a long musical apprenticeship upon himself before he would bring out a symphony—the first symphony was not completed until 1876, when Brahms was 43.

In listening to the large works he completed prior to 1876, there is a steadily-increasing skill and self-confidence in the way in which Brahms composed for orchestra. He abandoned his first attempt at symphonic writing, a D minor symphony sketched out in 1856 (although he did recycle some of its music in later works). For his first published orchestral works, the Op.11 and Op.16 serenades (1857-59), Brahms chose a fairly simple form to practice orchestral writing, and he limited his performing forces to a relatively small chamber orchestra. The *German Requiem* of 1869 shows a much more confident control of orchestration, and the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* of 1873 is an even more adventuresome work, featuring some striking orchestral effects.

Early in 1873, when he sent a few small works to his publisher Simrock, the publisher sent a cranky reply: “Aren’t you going to do anything more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in 1873 either?” Indeed, it seems like everyone who knew Brahms was impatient for him to complete a symphony. In reviewing the first Vienna performance of Brahms’s *Symphony No.1*, Hanslick wrote that: “...seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer’s first symphony with such tense anticipation.” By 1873, Brahms had, in fact, already been working on the first symphony for a long time. The earliest sketches for this work date from the 1850s, and he had completed a draft of the first movement by 1862.

He finally completed the *Symphony No.1* in 1876, and it was first performed at Karlsruhe in November of that year. Those who had waited for so long for Brahms to continue the symphonic tradition of Beethoven were apparently well satisfied. The conductor Hans von Bülow declared that Schumann's prophecy had been fulfilled, and dubbed Brahms's symphony "The Tenth" (that is, the symphony Beethoven *would* have written after his ninth). Clearly, Brahms had this image in mind in composing the *Symphony No.1*—there are too many subtle and overt references to Beethoven to deny. However, the style, conception, and spirit are Brahms's own: his first symphonic masterpiece.

The *Symphony No.1* begins with a lengthy slow introduction marked *Un poco sostenuto*, which provides musical raw material for this entire work: from the stormy opening movement to the triumphant Finale. Tension builds towards the end of the introduction, and Brahms abruptly begins the exposition of his movement (*Allegro*), which is set in sonata form. The main theme, first heard in the violins, quickly gives way to a long transitional section, in which Brahms begins to explore the material outlined in his introduction. He reserves the second main theme—a powerful triplet melody—for the very end of the exposition. After a repeat of the exposition, there is another abrupt change of character, and the development begins with the first theme played above a hazy background. Gradually, the focus shifts to the triplet theme, which is combined and recombined with other material. A long pedal point in the timpani and a chromatic horn passage lead into the recapitulation. At the very end, just when it seems that the movement is concluding, Brahms inserts a rather mysterious passage in B-flat minor. The texture quickly thickens again, however, and the movement comes to a close with bright C Major chords.

Between the large opening and closing movements of the symphony, Brahms places two relatively quiet inner movements. The second movement (*Andante sostenuto*) begins as a conversation among the strings and solo woodwinds, singing a succession of lyrical melodies and countermelodies. The calm of this movement is threatened by a minor key passage in the center of the movement, and eventually by a brief reference to the stormy main theme of the first movement. This character subsides, however, and Brahms returns to the placid mood of the opening. In closing, the main themes are overlaid by a lovely violin and horn duet. The brief third movement (*Un poco allegretto e grazioso*) is also in a three-section form. The opening alternates two flowing melodies, presenting them in both strings and woodwinds. The more agitated middle section is set in 6/8, and moves from a major key to a minor, and back again. At the end, Brahms presents decorated versions of his opening melodies.

The immense finale is Brahms's clearest homage to Beethoven in this symphony—its length, complexity, and even its musical form have precedents in Beethoven's longest symphonic movement, the finale of his ninth symphony. As in Beethoven's masterpiece, Brahms's finale begins with a vast introduction (*Adagio*) which gradually builds from tangled themes towards a climax, leading inevitably towards the main section of the movement. Here we have a succession of intertwined string and woodwind melodies, which suddenly give way to a stately melody played by solo horn. Brahms brings this theme to a climax and breaks the texture with a solemn trombone chorale (the trombones' first appearance in this score). Then follows what is, for this writer, the most profoundly moving passage in the symphonic repertoire: the introduction of this movement's main theme in the strings. This broad melody bears an clear family resemblance to the famous "Ode to Joy" in Beethoven's *Symphony No.9* (When one unfortunate concertgoer remarked on this resemblance to Brahms, the composer acidly remarked "Any ass could see that."). It is presented a second time by the woodwinds and is then developed in a turbulent transitional passage. The second main theme, a more playful offbeat melody in the strings is touched upon briefly before Brahms brings the exposition to a close in a Beethovenian storm. The development begins with a clear statement of the main theme, but this quickly spirals off into a minor key. The development section moves towards a contrapuntal climax, and the horn theme from the introduction appears to usher in the recapitulation. Here, Brahms focuses on the playful second theme, allowing it a much more extensive treatment than in the exposition. For the coda, there is a shift to a fast duple rhythm, which reaches its peak with a *fortissimo* reappearance of the chorale, and a brilliant conclusion.