

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
September 15/16/17, 2017
Subscription Concert No.1
Michael Allsen

This Madison Symphony Orchestra season begins with a concert showcasing the orchestra itself. Our opening work is the Bach/Stokowski *Toccat* and *Fugue in D minor*, a masterpiece of orchestration featuring every section of the orchestra. We continue with Mendelsson's deeply spiritual "Reformation" symphony—a standard work that the MSO is performing for the very first time in its 92-year history. Rounding off the program is a huge programmatic symphony by Berlioz, *Harold in Italy*, featuring our principal violist Chris Dozoryst in the lead role, as Byron's hero.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Toccat and **Fugue in D minor, BWV 565 (orchestrated by Leopold Stokowski)**

The original date of this work is uncertain, and there are in fact some doubts about whether or not this is in fact an authentic work by Bach. Stokowski's orchestration dates from 1926, and he conducted it for the first time in Philadelphia on February 8, 1926. We have played it once previously, in 1982. Duration 9:00.

Bach was known in his day primarily as one of Germany's great organists—as a keyboard composer and a powerful improviser. It is ironic then, that there is some doubt that *the* organ work by Bach that nearly everyone knows—the famous *Toccat* and *Fugue in D minor* heard here—is in fact by Bach. A little background... There is no original copy of the work in Bach's handwriting, and the earliest version was copied by another organist, probably after Bach's death. This in itself is hardly unusual—most of Bach's keyboard music survives in copies by his sons or other musicians. Most biographers have assumed that this *bravura* work was one the showy pieces a very young Bach wrote for his first important professional position, as church organist in Arnstadt, 1703-06. However, since the 1980s others have challenged the attribution of the work to Bach, noting that there are some technical crudities and other details that are inconsistent with Bach's undisputedly authentic works—even suggesting that this later copy was an organ arrangement of a violin work. Biographers such as Christoph Wolff have countered that some of the unusual features in the work may in fact have been ingenious adaptations to the limitations of the organ Bach used at Arnstadt.

One of the most colorful figures in 20th-century music, Leopold Stokowski (1882-1977) was one of the century's great conductors, transforming the Philadelphia Orchestra into a world-class ensemble in the 1920 and 1930s, and leading many other groups, including the American Symphony Orchestra, which he founded in 1962. Famed for his distinctive conducting style, Stokowski played himself in the animated Disney movie *Fantasia* in 1940—and was also parodied hilariously by Bugs Bunny shortly afterwards. An unabashed “popularizer” of Classical music, Stokowski pioneered elements of the musical scene we take for granted today: radio broadcasts, comments from the podium, and orchestral “pops” concerts. Less well-known today is Stokowski's role as a champion of *avant garde* music, often in the face of strong disapproval from his audiences. These days, we tend to be carefully “authentic” in performances of 18th-century music, but Stokowski came from a different age: it was common practice to double parts freely, reorchestrate, reharmonize, and even to rewrite works by Baroque composers. Stokowski particularly loved Bach, and produced several orchestral transcriptions of Bach's vocal and organ works. In some cases, he transformed them into massive orchestral works, like the *Toccatina and Fugue in D minor*. For many audiences in the early 20th century, their first introduction to Bach was through these widely-programmed arrangements.

Stokowski's orchestral transcription of the work was an immediate hit when he issued a 78 RPM recording in 1927. But is probably most familiar today through its inclusion in the innovative Disney film *Fantasia*, where stylized live action shots of Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra are combined with increasingly abstract animated images. The work begins with a free-form *Toccatina*—an improvisatory-style piece used as prelude. Stokowski's arrangement uses the various sections of the orchestra in the way an organist uses various combinations of manuals and pedals, to create a constantly-changing series of musical colors. After a crashing conclusion, the *Fugue* begins with strings alone. A master orchestrator, Stokowski carefully restrains the palette of colors of over the entire length of the fugue, gradually introducing woodwinds, and withholding the brass until a grand dramatic passage near the end.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op.107 (“Reformation”)

Mendelssohn composed this symphony in 1829-30, and he conducted its premiere, at the Berlin Singakademie, on November 15, 1832. This is our first complete performance of the work. Duration 30:00.

Mendelssohn’s “Reformation” symphony was written during the fertile years of his “Grand Tour,” travelling through Europe while he was in his early 20s. Like the “Scottish” symphony (*No.3*) and the *Hebrides Overture*, inspiration for the *Symphony No.5* came during an extended visit to the British Isles. According to one early biographer, Mendelssohn worked out most of the details in the fall of 1829, while he spent weeks in London convalescing from a leg wound suffered in a nasty carriage accident. The symphony was completed in April 1830, after he had returned to Berlin.

Mendelssohn originally planned the symphony for a celebration in Berlin in July 1830—the 300-year anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. The Confession, written by Philip Melanchthon, with Martin Luther’s support, outlined the basic creed of the Lutheran Church, and was one of the central documents of the 16th-century Reformation. What was to have been an enormous civic festival, however, was scaled back to a rather modest celebration at the University, and Mendelssohn’s symphony was not performed. (It seems, in fact, that he never had a formal commission for the work, but he still had it completed months in advance.) He tried but failed to have it performed in both Leipzig and Munich in the next few months, and eventually sent it to François-Antoine Habaneck, conductor of the famous orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire. Habaneck gave it a read-through, but rejected it, probably under pressure from members of the orchestra. One of the orchestra’s violinists later described the symphony as “much too academic—too much *fugato* and too little melody.” Though he was stung by this setback, Mendelssohn apparently had faith enough in the symphony to arrange for a performance in Berlin in November 1832. When it received a fairly tepid response there, Mendelssohn quietly set it aside with some resignation. He later dismissed it as a youthful work that “I can no longer stand,” and never published it. It remained on the shelf until years after his death, and was published in 1868 as the *Symphony No.5*.

To hear this as a programmatic work is almost irresistible—and both the occasion for which it was composed and Mendelssohn’s insistent quotation of religious tunes suggest that the program was a spiritual one. Later 19th-century critics saw

the progression from the “Palestrina-style” counterpoint of the first movement to the triumphant statement of Luther’s *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (“A Mighty Fortress is Our God”) in the finale as a progression from Catholicism to Lutheranism. Mendelssohn seems to have seen the symphony as a personal tribute to Luther. The Mendelssohns had been among the most prominent Jewish families in late 18th-century Germany, but his father Abraham converted to Christianity and had both Felix and his sister Fanny baptized in the Lutheran Church in 1822. Abraham changed the family name to Bartholdy, though Felix always retained the older surname. Mendelssohn later affirmed his Lutheranism, and produced a series of fine cantatas and other works that set German Protestant texts, including the choral *Lobgesang* (“Song of Praise” — published as *Symphony No.2*).

The intensely contrapuntal introduction to the first movement (*Andante*) is based on a four-note figure (D-E-G-F-sharp) that is also heard in the finale of Mozart’s last symphony—the *Symphony No.41* “Jupiter”—though in this case, Mendelssohn may also have been referring to the intonation to the Roman Catholic *Magnificat*. The music grows gradually more intense until he introduces a new idea: a rising six-note figure known as the “Dresden Amen.” This little melodic formula was familiar in both Catholic and Lutheran churches in Mendelssohn’s time, and immediately makes the sacred intent of this symphony apparent. (Wagner later used the Dresden Amen as the “Grail motive” in *Parsifal*.) There are two quiet statements of the Amen before the body of the movement (*Allegro con fuoco*) begins with a stormy fanfare figure. Again, it seems that he may be referring to a well-known symphony of the past— in this case the opening of Haydn’s final symphony (*No.104*), but both this theme and the gentler second theme are also derived from the Dresden Amen. The development section is a lengthy and fiercely fugal exploration of the main ideas, but it is brought to an end by a quiet statement of the Dresden Amen. On the heels of this motive, the recapitulation is rather hushed and understated, but some of the original intensity returns in the coda.

The two central movements are much shorter, and lack the programmatic references of the opening and finale. The scherzo (*Allegro vivace*) is based on a dancelike idea heard in the full orchestra. Statements of this theme surround a central trio that features a lilting oboe duet. The *Andante* that follows seems to be more a prelude than an independent movement, dominated by a pair of warmly lyrical violin melodies played above a simple accompaniment. The *Andante* closes quietly with a sustained pitch in the basses, and leads directly into the fourth movement.

The finale begins with a reverent statement of *Ein feste Burg* by the solo flute, marked *Andante con moto*, gradually augmented by the full orchestra. The tempo quickens and the body of the movement (*Allegro maestoso*) is dominated by fugal texture throughout. Luther's hymn is there almost constantly, whether in themes derived from it, or emerging briefly in fragments. The coda is a grand statement of the chorale by full orchestra.

Hector Berlioz 1803-1869) **Harold in Italy, Op.16**

Berlioz completed this work in 1834, and it was first performed in Paris on November 23 of that year. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has performed it on two previous occasions, in 1954 (with violist Ernest Stanke) and 1980 (with Richard Blum). Duration 42:00.

The early 1830s were very good years for Berlioz. In 1830 he finally won the prestigious Prix de Rome—the seal of approval from the French musical establishment. The prize included a five-year stipend, and a year's residency in Rome (1831-32). 1830 also saw the premiere of his immense programmatic *Symphonie Fantastique*, a career-making moment in the life of the young Romantic composer. Both events are in the background of his second symphony, *Harold in Italy*, but the direct incentive was a commission by one of the early 19th century's great virtuosos, violinist Nicolò Paganini, who attended a 1833 performances of the *Symphonie Fantastique*. The composer described their encounter with a bit of typical Berliozian hyperbole:

“Lastly, my happiness was crowned when the public had all gone and a man stopped me in the passage—a man with long hair and piercing eyes and a strange and haggard face—a genius, a Titan among giants, whom I had never seen before, the first sight of whom stirred me to the depths; this man pressed my hand, and overwhelmed me with burning eulogies that set both my heart and brain on fire. *It was Paganini.*”

Paganini had recently acquired a Stradivarius viola, and wanted Berlioz to compose a piece to feature that instrument. Berlioz toyed with a few concepts before settling on large four-movement programmatic symphony, very much a successor to the *Symphonie Fantastique*, in which the viola soloist plays the role of protagonist. According to Berlioz's memoirs, when Paganini saw a draft of the score, he rejected it: the composer had written a symphony with a prominent, emotionally challenging viola part, rather than a flashy viola concerto. According

to Paganini, there were just “too many rests!” Undeterred, Berlioz completed the symphony according to his own plan: “a series of orchestral scenes in which the solo viola would be involved, to a greater or lesser extent, like an actual person, retaining the same character throughout.”

In many ways, *Harold in Italy* is the most conventional of Berlioz’s four symphonies, with four movements in relatively traditional classical forms. It is also an autobiographical work, but unlike the rather sinister *Symphonie Fantastique*, which details his obsessive love for the English actress Harriet Smithson, *Harold in Italy* draws on his intense and generally happy experiences in Italy in 1831-32. The association with Lord Byron’s epic *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* came after the work was largely completed, so Berlioz’s program in the symphony has relatively little to do with Byron’s poem. But Berlioz clearly identified closely with Byron—describing in his memoirs how, while living in Rome, he would sit in Saint Peter’s Basilica for hours reading the poet’s works. He also clearly identified with Byron’s own autobiographical hero in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*—a sensitive and rather world-weary young man who escapes by never-ending travels throughout Europe.

Harold in Italy was premiered in November 1834—a disaster, plagued by poor conducting (at least according to Berlioz’s rather snarky reminiscences), and both critics and audience were savage in their disapproval. However Berlioz had a certain amount of vindication four years later, when Paganini finally heard the work for the first time. By then Paganini had retired from performing and was deeply ill, but according to Berlioz, the “Titan among giants” knelt and kissed the composer’s hand following the concert. A few days later, Paganini sent a letter of congratulations and—even more welcome—a check for 20,000 francs.

Harold in Italy has four movements, each with a descriptive title. The first is *Harold in the Mountains. Scenes of Melancholy, Happiness, and Joy*—a musical remembrance of time spent happily tramping around the Abruzzi mountains during Berlioz’s sojourn in Italy. It begins with a dour fugue, and a raucous introduction to the viola’s first entrance. Like the famous motive representing the beloved in the *Symphonie Fantastique*, the lyrical viola theme representing Byron’s Harold—and probably Berlioz himself—will appear in all four movements. Harold’s melancholy idea gives way to a much more optimistic mood in the second half of the movement. Much of this music, which has the viola brilliantly winding its way through blustery passages from the orchestra, was recycled from an earlier concert overture, *Rob-Roy*.

The second movement, *March of the Pilgrims Singing the Evening Prayer*, also drew on one of Berlioz's Italian recollections. It is a rather solemn procession, and Harold soon makes an appearance, walking in step with the pilgrims, before the viola begins to wind a countermelody above the orchestra. In the middle, there is a quiet chant, decorated by the viola. (Here, Berlioz directs the soloist to play *sul ponticello*—near the bridge of the instrument—which produces a thin, eerie sound.) The ending is hushed as the pilgrims recede in the distance

Berlioz returns to the mountains in the third movement, *Serenade of an Abruzzi Mountain-Dweller to his Mistress*. After a spritely opening, the English horn introduces the lyrical main theme, and Harold's motive is woven together with this lush romantic music. The opening scherzo clearly pays tribute to Beethoven, and Berlioz also works in references to the Italian country music he heard in the Abruzzi.

In another nod to Beethoven—in this case the *Symphony No. 9*—Berlioz begins the finale (*Orgy of Brigands. Memories of Scenes Past*) with a series of reminiscences of passages from the preceding movements, separated by brusque orchestral outbursts. Much of the movement is taken up with the “orgy”—a wild scene at the encampment of a group of mountain bandits. Near the end just as the festivities seemed to be reaching a frenzied peak, the mood suddenly breaks, and Harold makes one last appearance. But the viola quickly begins to pick up some of the orgy's frantic character, and the movement ends with a crashing coda.