

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

January 21-22-23, 2022

96th Season

Michael Allsen

This midwinter program opens with a bit of liveliness and fun from Dmitri Kabalevsky, the overture to his opera *Colas Breugnon*. We then welcome violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins, who is making her first appearance with the Madison Symphony Orchestra. She is featured in the eclectic 2015 *Concerto in D* by Wynton Marsalis. We close with the familiar and powerful *Organ Symphony* by Saint-Saëns, a showpiece for the orchestra and for organist Greg Zelek and the Overture Concert Organ.

The 1938 opera *Colas Breugnon* tells the story of a peasant looking back on a mischievous and enjoyable life. The opera's bubbly overture is a musical portrait of the irrepressible main character, filled with good humor and country dancing.

Dmitri Kabalevsky

Born: December 30, 1904, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Died: February 14, 1987, Moscow, Russia.

Colas Breugnon Overture, Op. 24

- **Composed:** 1936-1938.
- **Premiere:** The opera *Colas Breugnon* was first produced in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) on February 22, 1938.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 1987.
- **Duration:** 5:00.

Background

Dmitri Kabalevsky was one of the leading composers of the old Soviet Union, and worked comfortably for his entire career in the restrictive atmosphere of Soviet music. Kabalevsky's musical style was never even remotely "modernist" and perfectly suited the Soviet ideal that music should be uplifting and in service of the people. A loyal member of the Communist Party, he enthusiastically supported Soviet musical policies, and held several important political positions and editorships. Interested in the cause of education, Kabalevsky also helped to formulate the Soviet music education system, writing dozens of works for children's choir, and later in his career, influential books on teaching music. As a composer, he was also known for his six operas—rarely produced today, but nearly

all were very successful in the Soviet Union. His first opera, *Colas Breugnon*, was based upon a 1919 novel by Romaine Rolland written in the form of reminiscences of a 16th-century Burgundian peasant, looking back on a life well-lived, and mostly enjoyed. Rolland granted Kabalevsky the rights to use the novel, but was disappointed by how it was turned into a libretto. Kabalevsky worked over a span of three decades revising the opera, eventually premiering a new version in 1970 that won him the prestigious Lenin Prize, though its lively 1938 overture remained unchanged.

What You'll Hear

Though the opera is seldom heard in the west, the brief *Colas Breugnon Overture* has long been a favorite concert-opener. It is a musical portrait of the opera's irrepressible main character, beginning with a flourish and launching immediately into a manic, strongly-accented main theme. Kabalevsky introduces a second, more ponderous idea, and a slightly more serious central section. Towards the end, there is a wry little country dance episode before the brilliant coda.

This is our first performance of music by Wynton Marsalis. His violin concerto, completed in 2015, is both a virtuoso showpiece and a work that displays an amazingly eclectic range of musical influences across its four movements.

Wynton Marsalis

Born: October 18, 1961, New Orleans, Louisiana

Concerto in D for Violin and Orchestra

- **Composed:** 2014-15.
- **Premiere:** November 6, 2015, in Barbican Hall, London, with violinist Nicola Benedetti and the London Symphony Orchestra, James Gaffigan, conductor.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 44:00.

Background

Duke Ellington, one of America's great 20th-century musicians, was often frustrated when the music that he was creating was pigeonholed as "Jazz"—Ellington was fond of saying that good music and good musicians, whatever the style, were "beyond category." This may be the perfect description of Wynton Marsalis, one of America's great 21st-century musicians. Marsalis was born into a musical family in New Orleans and began playing trumpet as young child—he

apparently received his first trumpet at age six as a gift from the great New Orleans trumpeter Al Hirt. As a kid, he began performing in church and with traditional “second line” street bands, but also appeared as a soloist with the New Orleans Philharmonic at age 14. As a teenager, he studied at Tanglewood and the Juilliard School. At 19, Marsalis burst onto the nationwide Jazz scene as a member of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers...though just a year later, he also won a Grammy Award for his recording of trumpet concertos by Haydn, Hummel, and Leopold Mozart. Over the course of a long career he has continued to perform, touring with his own band, and beginning a particularly close partnership with New York’s Lincoln Center in 1987. Since 1996, Marsalis has served as the director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. Inspired in part by the role Art Blakey played as a mentor, Marsalis has fostered the careers of many younger musicians. He has also become a prominent media figure. Beginning with his 1995 PBS series *Marsalis on Music* and his prominent role as an interviewee in the huge Ken Burns documentary *Jazz* (2001), he has frequently appeared as a commentator on music and a wide range of social issues.

In the past 25 years, Marsalis has also emerged as a leading American composer. Perhaps the most striking thing about his compositions is the vast range of musical styles he is able to channel. Marsalis as a performer has mastery of the Western Classical tradition, but also the Blues and Jazz—and Jazz in a wide spectrum of styles, from Ragtime and early New Orleans styles through Bebop. He brings all of these to bear at various points in his compositions, but he is also able to access a huge variety of American roots music styles, African American traditions, and African traditional music.

Marsalis composed his *Concerto in D* for the Scottish violinist Nicola Benedetti. According to the composer: “Nicky asked me to ‘invite a diverse world of people into the experience of this piece.’” Successfully premiered by Benedetti in 2015, it was the result of close collaboration between composer and soloist. Benedetti later performed the work widely on tour, and recorded it with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2019. Kelly Hall-Tompkins, who performs the work here, is one of a few violinists who have since taken up the formidable challenge of this concerto.

What You’ll Hear

Marsalis has explained the concerto as a whole as a representation of a dream, with each of its four movements “revealing a different aspect of [the] dream, which becomes reality through the public storytelling that is virtuosic performance.” He describes the opening movement, *Rhapsody*, as a “complex dream that becomes a nightmare, progresses into peacefulness and dissolves into ancestral memory.”

Beginning with a lush, bluesy melody for the solo violin, it progresses freely though a series of ideas: first an easygoing episode with a Caribbean feel, and a middle section that is dominated by harsh orchestral textures and disjointed answers by the soloist. The mood eventually returns to the opening calm, though the movement ends with a brief Celtic dance that serves as a kind of hint what is to come at the end.

According to the composer, the *Rondo Burlesque* is “a syncopated, New Orleans jazz, calliope, circus clown, African gumbo, Mardi Gras party in odd meters.” Like a good pot of gumbo, this movement blends a huge range of flavors: furiously aggressive music, and a series of rhythmic grooves set up by the orchestra, and frequent flashes of humor. The second half of this movement is given almost entirely to the soloist. The solo violin line explores a series of ideas, sometimes in combination with percussion, until finally moving directly into the more relaxed *Blues*. Marsalis describes this movement as a “progression of flirtation, courtship, intimacy, sermonizing, final loss and abject loneliness that is out there to claim us all.” Filled with “blue notes” and working into a relaxed groove, this music is led by a soulful solo part throughout. In the second half of the movement violin begins a kind of call-and-response “sermon,” urged on by shouts and whoops from the orchestra, before a quiet closing passage.

The concerto ends with a wild *Hootenanny*. Marsalis calls this “a raucous, stomping and whimsical barnyard throw-down. [The soloist] excites us with all types of virtuosic chicanery and gets us intoxicated with revelry and then...goes on down the Good King’s highway to other places yet to be seen or even foretold.” Beginning with claps and foot stomps, it explodes into a hoedown of Celtic- and American-style fiddling. At the end, the solo line returns to the quirky dance tune introduced at the end of the first movement, this melody eventually fading away into nothing.

The grand *Symphony No. 3* of Saint-Saëns has clearly earned its place as the most popular of all works for organ and orchestra. Over the course of two extended movements, it works its way gradually from a nervous and dark opening to a triumphant conclusion.

Camille Saint-Saëns

Born: October 9, 1835, Paris, France.

Died: December 16, 1921, Algiers, Algeria

Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 78 (“Organ”)

- **Composed:** 1886
- **Premiere:** Saint-Saëns conducted the premiere in London, at St. James’s Hall, on May 19, 1886.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1958, 2004, and 2010.
- **Duration:** 36:00.

Background

By the late 1880s, Saint-Saëns was a thoroughly respected figure in French music: a prolific composer, journalist, pianist, and longtime organist at the Madleine church in Paris. However, his music was being played less and less often in his homeland, in favor of less conservative composers. While his reputation as a composer was declining in France, both Saint-Saëns and his music remained wildly popular in England and America. Many of the large-scale pieces he wrote in the last forty years of his long career were commissioned by English and American ensembles. (His very last completed orchestral work, for example, was a concert overture, *Hail! California*.) The “Organ” symphony was written for the London Philharmonic Society. Its premiere was a huge success, and it remains the most popular of his three published symphonies, and the single most popular work for the combination of organ and orchestra.

Saint-Saëns was always something of a conservative, writing works along “Classical” lines, but the *Symphony No.3* has several innovations, above and beyond its unusual orchestration. (In addition to the organ part, there is also a prominent role for piano, four hands.) Though it has the usual four-movement outlines of a classical symphony, Saint-Saëns has absorbed those sections into two large movements: the first combining a traditional, though incomplete sonata-form first movement and slow movement, and the second bringing together a kind of scherzo and majestic finale. The symphony is also highly unified, with close connections among its themes, and hints of the grand closing theme sprinkled

throughout the earlier sections. It was published with a dedication to one of the greatest Romantic innovators, Franz Liszt. Saint-Saëns met Liszt for the first time when he was a 10-year-old prodigy, and Liszt was already the preeminent pianist in Europe. They remained friends for forty years, until Liszt's death just a few months after the symphony's first performance.

What You'll Hear

After a short and dark *Adagio* introduction, the unsettled main theme enters (*Allegro*). There is a clear reference in this nervous melody to the *Dies irae*. This chant melody from the Latin funeral Mass had famously appeared some 56 years earlier in the *Symphonie Fantastique* of Hector Berlioz. However, where Berlioz quoted the melody quite clearly, as a prelude to his hellish Witches' Sabbath, Saint-Saëns used it more subtly, to create a sense of foreboding. The second theme is actually taken from the introduction. Both ideas are developed and combined, but where we expect a full recapitulation, the mood turns calmer, and the organ enters for the first time, as a quiet background to a lovely Romantic melody (*Poco adagio*) presented in a series of gentle variations. There is a brief moment of darkness when the main *Allegro* theme returns, but serenity wins out in the end, until a rather mysterious closing passage.

The second movement (*Allegro moderato*) begins with astringent music for strings and timpani, which is developed in intense counterpoint. The *Presto* that follows is in true scherzo style, with quick woodwind and string lines above rolling piano figures. This music is developed thoroughly, and there is a repeat of the second movement's opening theme. The scherzo returns briefly in combination with a solemn low brass theme. Then the organ, silent or in a supportive role so far in the symphony, suddenly takes control: a colossal C Major chord that sets up a transition to the final section. The majestic theme that closes the piece is a triumphant, transformed version of the dark *Allegro* melody of the first movement. This is developed in a great fugal finale that closes in joyous fury. Saint-Saëns reportedly said of this ending: "I have given everything that I had to give; what I have done here I shall never do again."