Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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J. Michael Allsen

This program begins with the evocative *Sea Interludes* from Britten's dark and disturbing opera *Peter Grimes*. The dynamic young Canadian violinist Blake Pouliot played a memorable performance of the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto* at these concerts in early 2020. Here he returns to play another romantic masterwork, the *Violin Concerto No. 3* by Saint-Saëns. We close with the *Symphony No. 2* by Brahms—the brightest and most optimistic of his symphonies.

Peter Grimes, was Britten's second opera. He extracted the orchestral *Sea Interludes* heard here as the opera was being prepared for its premiere.

Benjamin Britten
Born: November 22, 1913, Lowestoft, United Kingdom.
Died: December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, United Kingdom.

Four Sea Interludes from "Peter Grimes," Op. 33a

- **Composed**: 1944-45.
- **Premiere**: The opera *Peter Grimes* opened on June 7, 1945 in London. Britten directed the London Philharmonic Orchestra in the premiere of the *Sea Interludes* less than a week later, on June 13, 1945 at the Cheltenham Music Festival.
- **Previous MSO Performances**:1970 and 1995.
- **Duration**: 16:00.

"In ceaseless motion comes and goes the tide.
Flowing, it fills the channel broad and wide.
Then back to sea with strong majestic sweep,
it rolls in ebb yet terrible and deep."
- *Peter Grimes*, close of Act III (after George Crabbe)

Background

Britten has often been cited as the first really great English opera composer since Henry Purcell in the late 17th century. His dark, psychological study of the fisherman Peter Grimes is one of his finest works.

Peter Grimes, Britten's first full-length opera, was a partly product of the years he spent in America during World War II. While browsing in a Los Angeles bookstore in 1941, Britten came across a copy of *The Borough* by the English pastor and poet George Crabbe (1754-1832). Britten was attracted by this picture of hard life in an English fishing village, and particularly drawn to the tragic story of Peter Grimes. Britten and librettist Montagu Slater expanded this story into an opera for a commission by the Koussevitsky Foundation, and he completed *Peter Grimes* in 1945. Since its 1945 premiere, *Peter Grimes* has been recognized as one of Britten's best works, and it has remained a part of the standard operatic repertory.

The title character is a bitter, reclusive fisherman who lives near The Borough. The villagers suspect that Grimes may have been responsible for the death of his apprentice, mistrust that only increases Grimes's isolation. A sympathetic widow, Ellen, and a retired sailor named Balstrode try to help him, but he rebuffs Balstrode's friendship and ultimately refuses Ellen's love. When a second apprentice dies under suspicious circumstances, the villagers become a mob, howling for Grimes's blood. In what is certainly one of the most effective "mad scenes" ever written, Grimes descends into insanity as the angry crowd approaches. In the end, Ellen and Balstrode help Grimes set sail, and he sinks his boat far out at sea. The closing words of the opera (given above) are sung by the inhabitants of The Borough on the morning after Grime's suicide, as they continue life as if nothing had happened.

It is often said about Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* that the chorus is one of the single most important "characters" in the drama. Much the same might be said about the sea, which provides a constantly-changing background for the entire story, and, in the end, it is means of Grimes's suicide. In describing his opera, Britten wrote:

> "For most of my life, I have lived closely in touch with the sea. My parents' house in Lowestoft directly faced the sea, and my life as a child was coloured by the fierce storms that sometimes drove ships on to our coast and ate away whole stretches of neighbouring cliffs. In writing *Peter Grimes*, I

wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea..."

What You'll Hear

There is a long tradition of depicting the sea in musical works. Britten's *Sea Interludes* captures the sea in four remarkably different moods.

There are six brief orchestral interludes in *Peter Grimes*, one at the beginning of each act, and one between the two scenes of each act. In *Sea Interludes*, Britten created a concert suite from four of these passages. *Dawn* originally appeared after the opera's Prologue and before Act I, and paints a picture of the seashore at sunrise. You can hear the swirl of waves in the woodwinds, and low brass chords evoke the hidden depths of the sea. Near the end, one great wave washes the shore before the sea calms again. In *Sunday Morning*, from the beginning of Act II, the villagers are entering church. Horn chords play the part of church bells, but a chattering disquiet overlays what should be a tranquil scene. Alternating with the bell music is a more lyrical melody, which will be sung by Ellen as the curtain rises ("Glitter of waves and glitter of sunlight…"). *Moonlight* sets the stage for Act III. Britten's moonlight glitters briefly on the sea, but the reigning mood of this section is brooding and lonely. The last of the *Sea Interludes*, *Storm*, is drawn from the middle of Act I. Gale-force winds are pictured by brass, in violent competition with the strings. The tempest Britten has in mind seems not only to be a storm at sea, but also the storm in the mind and soul of Grimes.

One of the balances that many 19th-century composers tried to strike was to compose solo works that had the virtuoso thrills demanded by audiences and which also had real musical substance. This fine concerto by Saint-Saëns is one of the works that manages to do both!

Camille Saint-Saëns
Born: October 9, 1835, Paris, France.
Died: December 16, 1921, Algiers, Algeria.

Concerto No. 3 in B minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61

- **Composed**: 1880.
- **Premiere**: It is dedicated to Pablo de Sarasate, who was the soloist in the premiere in Paris, on January 2, 1881.

- **Previous MSO Performances**: 1927 (Gilbert Ross) and 1996 (Hilary Hahn).
- **Duration**: 29:00.

Background

Saint-Saëns had a long association with the Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908), and this concerto is the most important of the works that came out of their friendship.

The third violin concerto by Saint-Saëns is tied to his long friendship and working relationship with one of the 19th century's greatest violin virtuosos, Pablo de Sarasate. They met for the first time when Sarasate was a 15-year-old prodigy and Saint-Saëns was a 24-year-old composer/organist who already had a formidable reputation. Sarasate had always been disappointed by the trivial nature of much of the virtuoso music he was called upon to play, and met with Saint-Saëns to ask for a more weighty work. In his memoir, Saint-Saëns recalled this first meeting: "Flattered and charmed to the highest degree, I promised I would, and kept my word with the Concerto in A Major." This work, composed in 1859 and published as the *Violin Concerto No.1*, was never a great success, and is only rarely heard today. However, in 1863 Saint-Saëns composed a second work for his young friend, the *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*. This lightweight, Spanish-flavored showpiece became of the mainstays of the 19th-century violin repertoire, and was performed countless times by Sarasate and other soloists. Their friendship continued as both Sarasate and Saint-Saëns matured, and some 17 years later, Saint-Saëns wrote his *Violin Concerto No. 3* for his friend. Unlike his early works for Sarasate, this concerto is the work of a master composer at the peak of his form, and one who knew how to exploit all of the violin's capabilities. Saint-Saëns tells of many pleasant "musical evenings" spent at his home with Sarasate, and this experience was put to good use in the *Concerto No.3*.

What You'll Hear

The concerto is in three movements:

- An opening movement, featuring the violin throughout, develops two contrasting themes.
- A lyrical movement in the form of a *barcarolle*, a gently rocking song in 6/8.
- A third movement beginning with a dramatic introduction, and continues as a rondo, dominated by a fiery main theme.

During the course of the opening movement (*Allegro non troppo*) Saint-Saëns was able to use the whole expressive and tonal range of the violin. The movement opens with an energetic and passionate theme, stated in the lowest range of the violin, and set above quiet string tremolos. There is a transitional passage featuring spectacular double and triple stops from the soloist and a restatement of the opening theme by full orchestra. The soloist then introduces the second main theme, a lovely major-key melody marked "sweetly expressive." The development focuses on the opening theme, now overlaid with ornamentation from the violin. The short recapitulation begins with the second theme, and closes with a reference to the first theme, played as the violin rises to stratospheric heights above the orchestra.

The second movement (*Andantino quasi allegretto*) is a dramatic contrast to the first. Its opening theme is a lilting *barcarolle*-style melody, sung by the violin above sparsely-scored woodwinds, who echo the violin's phrases. The contrasting middle section is also led by the violin. After restatement of the opening theme, the movement ends with a wonderful passage in which Saint-Saëns displayed both his knowledge of the violin and his mastery of orchestration. Here, the violin outlines a series of harmonies in its highest register, set against a clarinet playing at the very bottom of its register, some three octaves lower. In this ethereal atmosphere, the oboe closes the movement with a final statement of the *barcarolle*.

The closing movement begins with an agitated introduction (*Molto moderato e maestoso*), a dialogue between the soloist and orchestra. The tempo quickens for the main body of the movement (*Allegro non troppo*), which is constructed as a rondo, its reoccurring main theme containing two contrasting ideas: a brilliant theme outlined by the violin, which dominates the entire movement, and a more subdued transition. The first contrasting section is a much more lyrical idea, sung again by the soloist. The central passage is a chorale melody introduced by muted strings and later picked up by the violin. This chorale melody also reappears, now fleshed out by the brass, in a substantial coda filled with virtuoso fireworks.

Brahms composed his second symphony less than a year after completing his first, but they have entirely different characters. The first was a profoundly serious work in which Brahms was clearly aware of the expectations of supporters who had been waiting a *long* time for him to write a symphony. The second is much more relaxed and upbeat, the work of a composer who had proven himself.

Johannes Brahms
Born: May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.
Died: April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

- **Composed**: Summer 1877.
- **Premiere**: December 30, 1877 by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, under the direction of Hans Richter.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: 1943, 1956, 1965 1978, 1987, 1997, and 2009.
- **Duration**: 42:00.

Background

Brahms composed this work with uncharacteristic speed while he was spending the summer in a particularly lovely part of Austria. His relaxation and the natural beauty clearly seem to come through in the symphony's bright music.

Brahms finished his second symphony directly on the heels of his first, but hard to find two symphonies by the same composer more different from one another. The first symphony was the result of almost two decades of sometimes agonizing composition and recomposition, while the second was the work of a single summer holiday spent at his favorite summer retreat, the lakeside resort town of Pörtschach in southern Austria. The *Symphony No.2*, was of a much happier and lighter nature than the *Symphony No.1*, and it was an immediate success.

The decade of the 1870s was a generally happy and productive period in Brahms's life. After the premiere of his *German Requiem* in 1868, his international reputation was secure, and honors, commissions, and job offers came in an ever-increasing stream. The completion of his *Symphony No. 1* in 1876 marked the end of a long self-imposed apprenticeship in symphonic writing—a period of intense study and self-criticism that had produced works such as his two orchestral serenades, his first piano concerto, and the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*. In some sense, the happy nature of the *Symphony No. 2* must have reflected Brahms's own happiness over the end of this intensely self-critical period. It is occasionally referred to as his "Pastoral" symphony: according to his own accounts, Brahms composed it as a reaction to the beauty of the countryside surrounding Pörtschach.

What You'll Hear

It is in four movements:

- An opening movement that spins all of its material from the music heard in the opening bars...including a second theme you are sure to recognize!
- A slow movement that works with four distinct musical ideas.
- A scherzo-style movement linked together by a Haydnesque country dance.
- A large finale that develops two contrasting ideas before ending with a formidable coda.

The opening movement (*Allegro non troppo*) of the *Symphony No.2* is quiet and peaceful, a horn and woodwind melody above hushed cellos and basses. The importance of this introduction goes beyond setting a mood, however—the motives of this opening passage are the basis for all of the melodic material of the movement. This quiet opening section gives way to a flowing melody played by the violins. After a transitional section, the cellos and violas play a lovely *cantabile* melody that is probably Brahms's most familiar orchestral theme. The development is dense and contrapuntal, building in intensity until a dissonant proclamation from the trombones begins a long passage of harmonic tension. The recapitulation brings back all of the opening material and is rounded off with beautifully lyrical horn solo. The coda ends with a gentle parody of a Viennese waltz.

Beneath the calm surface of the second movement (*Adagio non troppo*) lies one of Brahms's most complex and original forms. Brahms bases this movement upon four distinct groups of melodic material and an exceedingly complicated harmonic plan. The opening theme, stated by the cellos, sounds simple enough, but is notated in such a way that it is offset from the barlines. (This may not be apparent to the listener, but sets up an underlying rhythmic tension.) A contrasting episode in 12/8 is set in syncopation above a background of *pizzicato* strings. Another 12/8 theme, first in the violins, and then in woodwinds and solo horn, is more placid, but no less complex. A forceful passage from the full orchestra introduces new material, based on the opening theme, and the movement comes to an understated conclusion.

The third movement (*Allegretto grazioso*) begins with a brief Ländler, an echo of Austrian country dances that sounds like a tribute to Haydn. Brahms then gives a nod to Beethoven in the scherzo that follows. The Ländler returns again, but is quickly overshadowed by more forceful minor-key music. Again, the texture lightens, now for a fast-paced new episode. The movement closes with a densely contrapuntal passage that fades away after a sustained chord from the strings.

The finale (*Allegro con spirito*) opens quietly, with a subdued theme stated in the strings and answered by the bassoon. This theme is subtly related to the main theme of the opening movement, tying the entire symphony together. This hushed opening gives no hint of what is to follow: a forceful transition section that develops this opening theme. A brief clarinet flourish leads into the second them, a broad syncopated melody stated by the strings. Near the end of the development section, the storm is broken by a brief *tranquillo* episode that blends elements of the two main themes. The recapitulation is cut short by the trombones, with a dissonant statement of the second theme's syncopated rhythm. The movement concludes with a long and powerful coda.

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