

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**February 17-18-19, 2023**  
**97th Season / Subscription Program 6**  
**J. Michael Allsen**

This program opens with our first performance of music by the prominent young American composer Jesse Montgomery, her wonderfully eclectic *Coincident Dances*. Another Madison Symphony Orchestra first at this program is the Overture Hall debut of the dynamic young pianist Benjamin Grosvenor, playing Beethoven's third piano concerto. Our final piece is the fine *Symphony No. 6* of Dvořák, one of the works that secured his international reputation as a composer.

One of America's finest young composers, Jessie Montgomery is a native New Yorker, and brings the multicultural musical heritage of her hometown to many of her works.

**Jessie Montgomery**

**Born:** December 8, 1981, New York City.

***Coincident Dances***

- **Composed:** 2017.
- **Premiere:** This work was commissioned by the Chicago Sinfonietta, and premiered by that group, conducted by Mei-Ann Chen, on September 16, 2017.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 12:00.

**Background**

Montgomery is also prominent as violinist and as an educator and advocate for broader representation of Black and Latinx musicians in classical music.

Composer and violinist Jessie Montgomery grew up on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and credits the neighborhood's unique artistic atmosphere and the musical, artistic, and activist activities of her own family for fostering a career that "merges composing, performance, education, and advocacy." After her musical studies at the Third Street Music School Settlement, the Juilliard School and Princeton University, Montgomery remains active both as a performer and composer. As a violinist, she has performed with the PUBLIQuartet, the Providence Quartet, the Catalyst Quartet, the Silkroad Ensemble, the Sphinx Virtuosi, and her own

ensemble. Since she was a teenager, Montgomery has been involved with the Sphinx Organization, devoted to fostering diversity in classical music performance, and which specifically promotes the development of young African American and Latinx string players. She has gained an equally impressive number of credits as a composer, with commissions for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Albany Symphony Orchestra, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and many others.

*Coincident Dances* is a driving, sometimes chaotic piece inspired by the mix of musical styles you might be hearing at the same time during a walk through Montgomery's neighborhood.

Montgomery frequently channels an eclectic range of styles in her music, and this is certainly the case with her 2017 *Coincident Dances*. She provides the following note on the piece:

“*Coincident Dances* is inspired by the sounds found in New York’s various cultures, capturing the frenetic energy and multicultural aural palette one hears even in a short walk through a New York City neighborhood. The work is a fusion of several different sound-worlds: English consort, samba, mbira dance music from Ghana, swing, and techno. My reason for choosing these styles sometimes stemmed from an actual experience of accidentally hearing a pair simultaneously, which happens most days of the week walking down the streets of New York, or one time when I heard a parked car playing Latin jazz while I had rhythm and blues in my headphones. Some of the pairings are merely experiments. Working in this mode, the orchestra takes on the role of a DJ of a multicultural dance track.”

Opening with an agitated bass solo, the work soon moves into an insistent jazzy groove, with a walking bass line from bass clarinet and bassoon. This only the first of many styles and combinations of styles that that pass by. Near the middle, motion briefly halts for a dramatic Spanish-flavored trumpet fanfare and the orchestra moves into a more aggressive rhythm, with even more abrupt changes in style, as if quickly changing channels while surfing the radio dial. There are occasional moments where much of the multilayered texture disappears to expose the underlying rhythmic background. The last of these, a quiet episode for the woodwinds, brings the piece to a close.

Beethoven the composer was an equally accomplished pianist, writing works that showcased his own powerful technique, including his five piano concertos.

### **Ludwig van Beethoven**

**Born:** December 17, 1770 (baptism date), Bonn, Germany.

**Died:** March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

#### ***Concerto No. 3 in C minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 37***

- **Composed:** Most of this concerto was written in 1799-1800, though Beethoven continued to revise the work through 1802-03.
- **Premiere:** April 3, 1803 in Vienna, with Beethoven as soloist.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** Previous performances have featured John Browning (1973), Yefim Bronfman (2003), and Olga Kern (2008).
- **Duration:** 37:00.

### **Background**

This work was first performed in 1803, during a concert in Vienna. There was relatively little rehearsal time for this program, which included over two and a half hours of music. Beethoven did not have time to finish copying the piano part for the concerto and played it from memory, quite likely improvising some of it on the spot!

When Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792 his greatest fame was as a pianist—there are astonished reports of his virtuosity and almost arrogant mastery of the instrument. Most of his piano works were of course written for his own performances, and he logically turned to the concerto as a showcase for his talents. There was an unfinished concerto in E-flat composed when he was only 16, but his first complete concerto was the work we now know as the *Piano Concerto No.2*, written in 1794-95. The *Concerto No.1* was completed in 1800. Though his third concerto was more or less finished by the spring of 1800, Beethoven set it aside before adding the finishing touches. The impetus for finishing the work seems to have been a benefit concert staged at the Theater an der Wein on April 3, 1803. This program, which included his first symphony, the premieres of his second symphony and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, would not have been complete without a new solo concerto. Preparation for this concert—a marathon by today's standards—was limited to a single long rehearsal, and Beethoven was actually obliged to drop a few additional(!) pieces because they could not be prepared in time. He was actually completing the oratorio on the morning of the concert, so an incident recounted by the conductor Ignaz von Seyfried should come

as no surprise. Beethoven conducted the concerto from the piano, and Seyfried, who was assigned to turn pages for Beethoven, later remembered:

“I saw almost nothing but empty leaves; at the most, on one page or another a few Egyptian hieroglyphs, wholly unintelligible to me were scribbled down to serve as clues for him; for he played nearly all of the solo part from memory since, as was so often the case, he had not had time to set it all down on paper. He gave me a secret glance whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages, and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly and he laughed heartily at the jovial supper which we ate afterwards.”

It is entirely possible in fact that Beethoven may have improvised some bits—and almost certainly the cadenza—during the concert, though he later wrote a cadenza that has become standard in performing the concerto.

### What You’ll Hear

The concerto is in three movements:

- A lengthy opening movement that develops two themes laid out by the orchestra.
- A lovely slow movement, with relaxed conversations between soloist and orchestra.
- A closing rondo, with a main theme alternating with contrasting music...with some surprising twists along the way.

The opening movement (*Allegro con brio*) begins with a lengthy orchestral introduction that lays out both main ideas: a tragic main idea and more *cantabile* theme played by the clarinet. The piano’s first entrance is with three bold runs that lead into the main theme. While the movement proceeds in rather conventional sonata form, with development of the primary theme at the forefront most of the way, the surprising ending seems to be a kind of tribute to Mozart’s C minor concerto (*No. 24, K. 491*), one of Beethoven’s favorite works. As in Mozart’s concerto, he dispenses with the usual Classical convention, which has the piano part rest after the closing cadenza to leave the orchestra alone for a brief coda. Here, the piano remains in control almost until the final chord.

The *Largo* begins with a whispered meditation by the solo piano that is picked up with hushed intensity by the orchestra. Orchestra and soloist exchange roles in the central section, with a lovely duet for bassoon and flute accompanied by piano

arpeggios. The opening music returns once more, lightly developed, and there is a short coda with a brief horn solo that closes the movement.

The final movement (*Rondo: Allegro*) also seems to have Mozart in mind. The piano introduces the main theme, which ties together a series of contrasting episodes. The central section serves almost as a development: after a delightful clarinet duet, the orchestra begins a brief but intense fugue that leads the piano into a Major-key version of the theme, and further developments of the main idea in the orchestra. There is a cadenza, and then Beethoven introduces a final surprise, a shift to 6/8, and furious C Major coda.

Dvořák's *Symphony No. 6* was the first of his symphonies to be published, and was important in establishing his international reputation. Like many of his works, it was deeply influenced by the music of his Bohemian homeland.

### **Antonín Dvořák**

**Born:** September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, Czech Republic.

**Died:** May 1, 1904, Prague, Czech Republic.

### ***Symphony No. 6 in D Major, Op. 60***

- **Composed:** August-October of 1880.
- **Premiere:** March 25, 1881, in Prague, with the Prague Philharmonic under Adolf Čech.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 2013.
- **Duration:** 41:00.

### **Background**

Composed in 1880 for the Vienna Philharmonic, this work's planned Vienna premiere seems to have fallen victim to Austrian musical nationalism. Nevertheless, it quickly became an international favorite.

By 1879, Dvořák was a household name in his native Bohemia, but was only just beginning to make a mark in the Imperial capital, Vienna, and beyond...despite the goodwill and help of his friend Johannes Brahms. Brahms had been on the panel that awarded Dvořák a prestigious Imperial composition award, the Stipendium, in 1875. He also introduced Dvořák to most of Vienna's musical notables, including his publisher Simrock, who would later publish much of Dvořák's music as well. In November 1879, Dvořák and Brahms attended the Vienna premiere of Dvořák's *Slavonic Rhapsody No. 3* by the Vienna Philharmonic. Afterwards, the conductor,

Hans Richter, congratulated the composer warmly, even hosting a banquet in his honor with the few Czech members of the orchestra. Richter invited him to write a symphony for the 1880-81 season. Dvořák complied in fairly short order, composing the new symphony in well under two months in the fall of 1880, dedicating the score to Richter. But soon after he received the score, Richter began making excuses for putting off the premiere, citing overwork and a whole series of illnesses and deaths in his family. In fact, Richter seems to have been covering for the real culprit: Viennese musical politics. The Austrian majority of the Philharmonic's players felt that they had already played enough music by this obscure foreigner, and put up stubborn resistance to playing the symphony. Dvořák, suspecting that anti-Czech sentiment might be at the root of Richter's foot-dragging, arranged for the premiere to take place safely back at home in Prague. (The Vienna Philharmonic did not actually play the symphony until 1942!)

The *Symphony No. 6* was the first of Dvořák's symphonies to be published and the first to be performed widely outside of Bohemia. It was published by Simrock as the *Symphony No. 1*, and known as such for many years. (In the 1950s, the numbering of Dvořák's nine symphonies was revised to include his early symphonies and the actual order of composition.) It was performed several times across Europe and, within a few years, in America. It was particularly popular in England. Richter finally conducted the work in London in 1882, and Dvořák himself was wildly received when he conducted the *Symphony No. 6* there in 1884—he was named an honorary member of the London Philharmonic Society, and given a commission for what would become his *Symphony No. 7* (1885).

### What You'll Hear

The symphony is in four movements:

- A broad opening movement based upon three distinct themes.
- A relaxed and beautiful slow movement.
- A lively scherzo based upon a vigorous Bohemian folk dance.
- A finale that develops two themes, leading to an exciting ending.

The *Symphony No. 6* is clearly a piece cast in the mold of Austrian symphonies, and has several similarities to Brahms's second symphony of 1877, but Dvořák also retains much of the Bohemian character of his earlier works. This is clear from the very opening of the first movement (*Allegro non tanto*), where strings set up an insistent, offbeat dance rhythm as the woodwinds play fragments of what will become the main theme. This main idea is finally laid out by the full orchestra after a short transition. Dvořák lays out two more ideas in quick succession: a lyrical line introduced the cellos and horns, and more pastoral idea from the solo oboe.

The development section begins with lovely passage for high strings, and only works its way into a storm at the end. After a recapitulation of the main ideas, the movement ends in robust, brassy coda.

The serene *Adagio* is based almost entirely upon a long melody laid out by the violins, with gentle comments from the solo woodwinds and horn. This is freely developed throughout, with one tense outburst near the center of the movement which only briefly disturbs the placid mood. In the end, the music seems to be working towards a grand conclusion, only to have most of the orchestra drop away and leave solo woodwinds alone for a gentle, pastoral ending. The main theme of the third movement (*Scherzo: Presto*) is based upon the furiant, a rough-edged and decidedly macho Czech dance that alternates duple and triple rhythms. Solo woodwinds and strings carry a more pastoral trio section before the furiant brusquely returns.

Like the opening movement, the finale (*Allegro con spirito*) takes a while to build up steam, with agitated strings leading to the flowing main theme. A second theme, danced by the solo clarinet, is later a focus of the development, where it is developed in fugal style. The long coda begins with a sudden acceleration and an outburst from the brass before the movement ends with a blistering passage from the strings and a stirring conclusion.