



Civic Orchestra of Tucson Program Notes for March 14 & 15, 2020

by Music Director, Charles Bontrager

ACADEMIC FESTIVAL OVERTURE by Johannes Brahms

Brahms described this work as a “jolly potpourri of student songs a la Suppé.”

As the story goes, Brahms was awarded an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Breslau in 1879 (at age 45) and it was suggested that he might express his gratitude in musical form, something somber like “doktor-Symphonie” or “at least a solemn song.”

The result was this technically traditional work based upon first movement sonata-allegro form with an introduction and grand coda. Structurally normal. Thematically, it was something quite different. In fact, Brahms chose to use four traditional student (drinking?) songs concluding in the coda with the joy filled “Gaudeamus igitur” — “Let us now enjoy ourselves while we are still young; for when golden youth has fled, and in age our joys are dead, then the dust doth claim us.”

One might suspect that the premier on January 4, 1881, with the University Rector, Senate, and the Faculty of Philosophy in attendance, was humorous to Brahms, conductor for the occasion. Perhaps it produced at least a flicker of a grin to his normally stodgy aura.

CONCERTO FOR VIOLA (opus posthumous) by Béla Bartók

William Primrose, undoubtedly the most famous violist of his time, performed the world premiere of this work on December 2, 1949, with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Antal Dorati — more than four years after Bartók’s death!

The history of the concerto in the four years post-Bartók and pre-premiere is, of course, interesting. It is also complex. Suffice it to say that Mr. Primrose was a champion of the work as was Tibor Serly, the one responsible for the reconstruction of the manuscript sketches left by Bartok at the time of his death. Happily, Mr. Bartók, Tibor Serly, and William Primrose left the musical world more rich for their efforts. Today we are still more enriched by the musical mastery of our soloist, Tiezheng Shen.

The Bartók Viola Concerto is challenging for violist, conductor, orchestra, and perhaps audience. Be that as it may, the orchestration calls for piccolo and two flutes, pairs of oboe, clarinet and bassoon, three horns, three trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, small cymbal, bass drum, and reduced string section.

(continued on the next page)

SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN C MINOR, OPUS 67 by Ludwig van Beethoven

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HERR LUDWIG!! The Civic Orchestra of Tucson is most delighted to present what is undoubtedly Beethoven's most famous and widely known work in celebration of his 250th birthday. In the fall we shall continue our celebration with the Master's Triple Concerto, Opus 56 in C major (violin, cello and piano). We hope you will join us for that concert as well!

No introduction to the first movement is required. Perhaps only the reminder of the famous connection to the "V" or victory sign adopted during WW II. We hear the movement often and it is familiar.

The second movement, not so much.

Beethoven requests a tempo of *Andante con moto* (eighth note = 92 beats per minute). At that speed the movement takes about 7 minutes and 51 seconds. Bruno Walter preferred a tempo of about 56 beats per minute resulting in a performance time of eleven minutes and 29 seconds. (Boring!) We prefer something in-between, a casual walking tempo. Strolling is too slow.

The third movement features a brisk 3/4 tempo conducted one beat to the bar. It tends toward the dark and forbidding side of the musical spectrum, as does the first movement. After all, C minor is not a happy place. Fortunately, Beethoven gives us a brisk trio section, which is actually in C major. Happier by far.

When we approach movement IV, we are ushered mysteriously by solo timpani into one of the most stirring and triumphal moments in all of music. The best!

The finale of the symphony is stunning throughout and marked "Allegro." George Szell and his Cleveland Orchestra prefer a bit "piu [more] allegro." Regardless, Beethoven demands a brisk tempo and one cannot possibly give him less. The movement winds up to a fever pitch, returns briefly to the more somber third movement and hints of recapitulation from the first movement, and then crashes once again, head long, into the spectacular finale.

The coda revs up still further, the clouds part, the radiant sun streams down, and Beethoven shouts, "there, take that!"

The symphony is scored for paired woodwinds (add piccolo in the final movement), paired horns and trumpets (add two horns and three trombones in the finale), timpani, and as many strings as you can fit on stage.

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