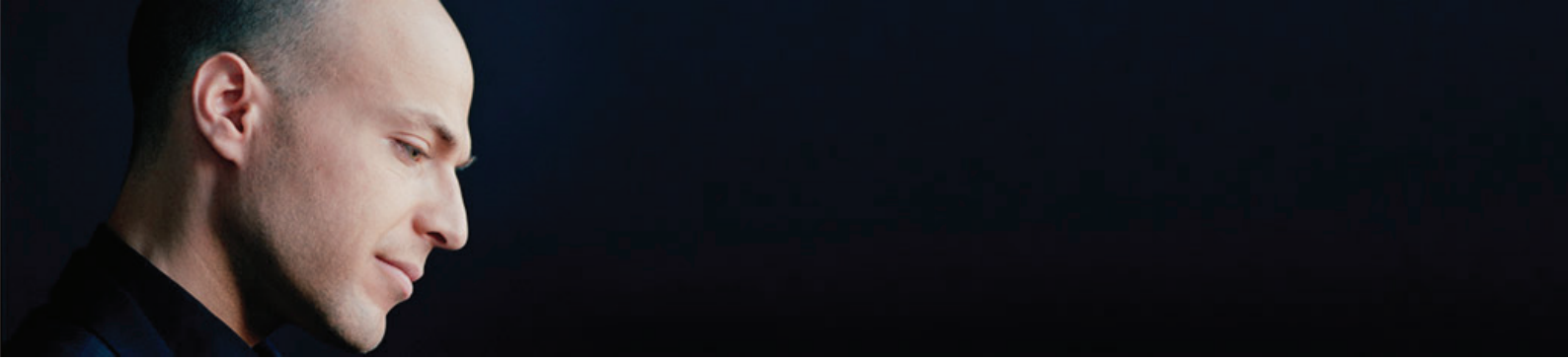

Masur Conducts Mendelssohn

The music of Mendelssohn bookends today's concert, opening with his youthful "Trumpet" Overture and concluding with the ever-popular "Italian" Symphony. In between, pianist Orion Weiss plays Beethoven's Mozart-influenced Piano Concerto No. 2, then joins the string section for Dall'Ongaro's evocation of springtime. Brass music tailored for Venice's Basilica of St. Mark rounds out the program.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born 3 February 1809; Hamburg, Germany
Died 4 November 1847; Leipzig Germany

Overture in C major, Opus 101, "Trumpet"

Composed: 1826; revised 1833
First performance: Unknown
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 8 minutes

Felix Mendelssohn's Overture in C Major dates from his teenage years. It follows such early successes as the 13 string sinfonias, the Octet for Strings, Opus 20, and the String Quintet in A major, Opus 18. Just a few months after its composition, he penned his most popular work, the overture to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It is unclear why the Opus 101 acquired the "Trumpet" moniker. (Sidebar: In Mendelssohn's case, numberings indicate the order of publication, not the order in which they were composed.) Though trumpets are included in the scoring, they are shown no special favor, either singly or as a section. And in terms of brass, it's the horn section that has the more interesting passages. Set in sonata form, the work is marked Allegro vivace and the music is unrelentingly boisterous – always energetic and always vital. In other words, it is an ideal concert opener.

Recommended recording: Kurt Masur, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Berlin Classics)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Baptized 17 December 1770; Bonn, Germany
Died 26 March 1827; Vienna, Austria

Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 19

Composed: 1787-95; revised 1798
First performance: 29 March 1795; Vienna, Austria
Last MSO performance: October 2010; Edo de Waart, conductor; Joseph Kalichstein, piano
Instrumentation: flute; 2 oboes; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; strings
Approximate duration: 28 minutes

At age 21, Beethoven left his native city of Bonn – never once to return – to study in Vienna. As a teenager, he had begun work on a piano concerto in B-flat major that he himself planned to perform with the Bonn Hofkapelle. First drafted between 1787 and 1789, across the years it would undergo any number of revisions before eventually becoming his Opus 19. The Piano Concerto No. 2 was his first major orchestral work, predating both the First Symphony and the First Piano Concerto. (Composed in 1795, the C major piano concerto was published before the B-flat major. In one sense, the B-flat concerto actually is his second, because, at age 13, Beethoven penned an E-flat major work; only the piano part, with orchestral cues penciled in, survives.)

In his B-flat major piano concerto, Beethoven took Mozart's late works in the genre as his model. Indeed, there is a Mozartian – some might say Haydnesque – flavor about it. At the same time, however, we sense the young Rhinelander beginning to flex his own compositional muscles. It was the vehicle for the 24-year-old composer's public debut in Vienna, at the Burgtheater. Previously, he had been heard only in the nobility's private salons. Before long, notes scholar Lewis Lockwood, "Beethoven took center stage as virtuoso and the leading composer of piano concertos."

The opening Allegro con brio is cast in sonata form, with an orchestral introduction, à la Mozart. And, as in the Austrian master's late piano concertos, the soloist's role is that of first among equals. Beethoven employs the main theme's bouncy dotted rhythm again in the solo cadenza – one that he wrote out, but probably years after the premiere. Beautifully tuneful, but somewhat somber, the Adagio is a three-part form (ABA) set in the subdominant key of E-flat major. As the movement progresses, the pianist's filigree-like passagework becomes increasingly more elaborate, giving us a glimpse of Beethoven's gift for improvisation: Apparently, he had not written out the piano part prior to the first performance.

A short-long rhythmic figure, called a "Scotch snap," lends a distinctive, irresistible quality to the main refrain of the final Molto allegro. Set in rondo form (ABACABA) and in a rollicking 6/8 meter, the movement's interludes provide engaging contrast to the opening refrain. The work was first published in Leipzig in 1801, just shortly after his C major concerto was printed in Vienna. In a letter to the Leipzig publisher F.A. Hoffmeister, Beethoven said of the B-flat concerto, somewhat coquettishly, "I do not consider it one of my best. Still, it will not disgrace you to print it."

Recommended recording: Murray Perahia; Bernard Haitink, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (Sony)

GIOVANNI GABRIELI

Born c 1553-56; Venice, Italy
Died August 1612; Venice, Italy

Canzon Septimi Toni à 8 (No. 2)
Canzon Primi Toni
Canzona per sonare No. 2

Composed: late 1500s, early 1600s
First performance: Venice, Italy
Last MSO performance: MSO Premiere
Instrumentation: 2 horns; 4 trumpets; 2 trombones
Approximate duration: 10 minutes

Giovanni Gabrieli was born in Venice and spent most of his life there. His music represents the apex of the High Renaissance Venetian School. Gabrieli's fame and influence were far-reaching and significant, especially in northern Europe; the great early-Baroque composer Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) was among his many pupils.

In his early 30s, Gabrieli became the organist at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, a post he held for the rest of his life. Much of his sacred ceremonial music exploits the architecture of that noble edifice, using contrasting groups of singers and players in its two facing balconies to create *cori spezzati* ("broken choir") effects. His compositional output includes motets and mass movements, instrumental ensemble music and organ works, as well as *c*30 madrigals.

The term *canzon* is adapted from the French word *chanson* ("song") and referenced an instrumental arrangement of a polyphonic choral piece. Gabrieli's canzoni are original compositions, however. They typically commence with a long-short-short (dactylic) rhythm and are contrapuntal in texture. Both the Canzon Septimi Toni No. 2 and the Canzon Primi Toni are from a collection of pieces called *Sacrae symphoniae* (1597) and are scored for eight brass instruments (two groups of four players). Since they predate our regular use of the terms "major" and "minor," their titles tell us the old church mode in which they are set: septimi toni ("seventh mode") is the Mixolydian mode, or the white keys on the piano from G to G; primi toni ("first mode") is the Dorian mode, the piano's white keys from D to D.

The Canzona per sonare No. 2 is taken from the 1608 collection *Canzoni per sonare* ("songs to play"), and probably is the most popular of Gabrieli's works in the genre. The score calls for only four musicians, but as an added treat, all eight players join together on today's concert.

Recommended recording: Philadelphia Brass Ensemble; Cleveland Brass Ensemble; Chicago Brass Ensemble (Sony)

MICHELE DALL'ONGARO

Born 16 November 1957; Rome, Italy

La primavera [Spring]

Composed: 2003
First performance: 20 January 2004; Bari, Italy
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: strings
Approximate duration: 5 minutes

Italian composer, musicologist, and conductor Michele Dall'Ongaro was born in Rome, where he studied at the Conservatory of Santa Cecilia. Since 2015, he has served as the president and superintendent of that venerable institution. Much of his career has been devoted to teaching, conducting, and promoting new music.

In 2003, the Collegium Musicum di Bari, a chamber orchestra, commissioned four Italian composers to create sound pictures of the four seasons. These included Giovanni Fabi (Summer), Franco Tamponi (Autumn), and Andrea Marena (Winter). To Dall'Ongaro fell the assignment for Spring. It is dedicated to the ensemble's conductor, Rino Marrone, who led the premiere on a concert that also included Astor Piazzolla's *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*.

La primavera is set for solo piano and string orchestra. At its outset, pizzicato strings and pointillistic interjections from the piano seem to evoke raindrops, which become ever more frequent. The rain stirs nature to awaken, with perpetual motion from the plucked strings and colorful piano chords and figuration across the whole of the keyboard. Streams of 16th notes from both piano and strings ensue, then portamento strings and more pointillistic pianism tell us that the whole of nature is quivering with new life. Before we even realize it, this delightfully exuberant work seems to end before it even began.

Recommended recording: Aldo Arvieto; Marco Angius, Orchestra di Padova e del Veneto (Stradivarius)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Symphony No. 4 in A major, Opus 90, "Italian"

Composed: 1832-33
First performance: 13 March 1833; London, England
Last MSO performance: September 2012; Gilbert Varga, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; 2 trumpets; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 27 minutes

Felix Mendelssohn was fortunate to have grown up in a family that was well-educated and financially secure. His paternal grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was one of the best-known philosophers of the Enlightenment era; young Felix's education was significantly influenced by Moses's erudition. Abraham Mendelssohn, Felix's father, was a banker whose upper-middle-class home provided an environment steeped in the arts and in learning.

At age 20, encouraged by his parents, Mendelssohn embarked on travels across Europe. His first destinations, in 1829, were England and Scotland. The following year, at the suggestion of his friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, he set out on an Italian adventure. He journeyed via Vienna and Graz to Venice, then by way of Florence to Rome. It was there that he began work on the "Italian" symphony. From Rome, he traveled to Naples and Pompeii, then back to Florence on his way to Genoa and Milan. After departing Italy, he spent two months in Switzerland, finally arriving back in Germany in October of 1831.

Work on the "Italian" Symphony – Mendelssohn's most popular work in the genre – was completed in Berlin in the winter of 1832. By the composer's own reckoning, a broad assortment of impressions and feelings were brought to bear in it, not only from the great works of art and the beautiful scenery he encountered, but also from his pleasant interaction with the Italian people and the vigor with which they embraced life.

In its layout, the "Italian" Symphony adheres to the sequence of movements established by the Viennese classicists. Likewise, its themes are largely symmetrical, and the way they are developed tells us that Mendelssohn knew his Beethoven. The opening movement – a sonata form in 6/8 meter – launches with a vivacious and succinct main theme, stated by the violins above pulsing woodwinds. A solo clarinet introduces the more relaxed second theme; the third theme, tinged with the minor mode, is treated contrapuntally.

Bittersweet and solemn, the D-minor Andante con moto begins with two-voice counterpoint, as the strings and winds play above a walking bass line. According to Mendelssohn's friend, the Bohemian composer and virtuoso pianist Ignaz Moscheles, the composer used the theme of a Czech pilgrim song in this movement. That seems an odd choice for an "Italian" symphony. Others maintain that Mendelssohn was influenced by the religious processions he witnessed in Naples and elsewhere.

Though Mendelssohn never labeled it as such, the Con moto moderato is, in form, a minuet and trio. Its mood is one of gracefulness and serenity. The horn passages in the trio seem to presage the Nocturne from his incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Finale is a *saltarello*, a Neapolitan dance form in 6/8 meter. Though we would be hard-pressed to cite a major-key symphony whose finale is set in a minor key, here's one. If ever an example were needed to disprove the hackneyed notion that major equals happy and minor equals sad, this is it. The Italian verb *saltare* means "to jump." Hearing this vigorous music, it's easy to imagine dancers doing just that.

Recommended recording: Kurt Masur, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Eurodisc)

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.