Beethoven's Violin Concerto

This weekend, guest conductor Gemma New leads an eclectic program of music by Russian, French, and German composers. Ballet music of Stravinsky and Ravel comprises the first half, then Anthony Marwood plays one of the greatest violin concertos in the repertoire – Beethoven's Opus 61.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born 17 June 1882; Lomonosov, Russia
Died 6 April 1971; New York, New York

Danses concertantes for Chamber Orchestra

Composed: 1941-42
First performance: 8 February 1942; Los Angeles, California
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: flute; oboe; clarinet; bassoon; 2 horns; trumpet; trombone; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 19 minutes

Shortly after Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939, Stravinsky embarked for the United States on his fourth, and ultimately longest, visit to North America. In December of that year, he conducted concerts in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The California climate was to his liking, so he decided to settle in Hollywood.

Among Stravinsky's wartime commissions was *Danses concertantes*, the first large-scale piece he penned entirely in the United States. Commissioned by Werner Janssen Orchestra of Los Angeles, the composer himself was on the podium for the premiere, two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. On his handwritten manuscript, Stravinsky subtitled it "Concerto for Small Orchestra," but that moniker did not appear on the printed score. A danced version, choreographed by George Balanchine, was given by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in New York in 1944. (Balanchine had begun his collaboration with Stravinsky in Paris in the 1920s.) It is unclear whether Stravinsky intended for the work, from its inception, to be danced or whether Balanchine's participation brought this about.

Danses concertantes is cast in Stravinsky's piquant neo-classical style. The music is tonal, but added-note chords give extra spice to the harmonies and motoric, sometimes-biting rhythms contribute to its brittle wit. Since Balanchine stated that the plot of his ballet choreography is the plot of the score, he is quoted in the brief descriptions below. The five movements are played without a break.

The cheerful Marche – Introduction is, to state the obvious, built on a steady march rhythm. The cast of characters is presented, and there are solos throughout the orchestra. Balanchine choreographed the subsequent Pas d'action as a ballerina's solo. With comically strong cadences in unexpected places, it certainly is not without humor. "You get the impression that you might get from reading a lyric poem whose lines are sometimes truncated in the middle of words but nevertheless flow on to a graceful conclusion."

The following movement, Thème varié, is a theme and four variations. Stravinsky presents the theme in two parts, first solo woodwinds then solo strings. Each variation is a half-step higher in key than the one that preceded it. The music of the Pas de deux is, by turns, subdued and stately – then rowdier. The dancers are "almost personified in the music, which demands at first beauty in slowness, then a quiet, pointed wit that ascends to an elevated, noble manner, [to end on] a note of tenderness." The Marche – Conclusion is essentially a truncated reprise of the opening movement: "The music ends sharply and unexpectedly. All rush forward and bow low to the audience as the curtain falls behind them."

Recommended recording: Orpheus Chamber Orchestra (Deutsche Grammophon)

MAURICE RAVEL

Born 7 March 1875; Ciboure, France
Died 28 December 1937; Paris, France

Suite of Five Pieces from *Ma Mère l'Oye* [Mother Goose]

Composed: 1908-10 (piano duet); orchestrated in 1911
First performance: 20 April 1910, Paris, France (piano duet); 28 January 2012, Paris, France (ballet)
Last MSO performance: March 2016; Jun Märkl, conductor
Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes (2nd doubling English horn); 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons (2nd doubling contrabassoon); 2 horns; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, tam tam, triangle, xylophone); harp; celeste; strings
Approximate duration: 16 minutes

Ravel's *Mother Goose* Suite began its life as a set of "Five Children's Pieces for Piano Four Hands." Composed between 1908 and 1910, it was premiered by the child pianists Jeanne Leleu (aged six) and Geneviève Durony (a year older) on 20 April 1910. The following year, Ravel transcribed the five-movement suite for orchestra and also expanded the instrumental score into a ballet.

It's not uncommon to hear Ravel's music described as "exquisite," and this suite is no exception. Refined, colorful, exotic, radiant, moody, ecstatic might also accurately typify this music. The opening Pavane is only 20 measures long and entirely consonant, but its simplicity is evocative and powerful. From there, we travel to a forest, where various songbirds make a meal of Tom Thumb's trail of breadcrumbs. Laideronenette takes a bath while being serenaded with musical walnut shells and almond shells. Here, Ravel uses the pentatonic scale and bell-like timbres to depict the Chinese setting.

This Beauty and her Beast are no Disney version: Ravel acknowledged this movement's debt to Satie's *Trois Gymnopedies* (1888). Following the slow waltz that depicts Beauty, the basso-profundo growls of the contrabassoon characterize the Beast. He is transformed into a handsome prince, though, and this leads into a joyous, hymn-like paean to nature in the final movement. Its incandescent orchestration is Ravel at his most inspired.

Recommended recording: Jean Martinon, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (RCA Red Seal)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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

Concerto in D major for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 61

Composed: 1806
First performance: 23 December 1806; Vienna, Austria
Last MSO performance: October 2015; Edo de Waart, conductor; Augustin Hadelich, violin
Instrumentation: flute; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 2 horns; 2 trumpets; timpani; strings
Approximate duration: 42 minutes

Beethoven spent much of 1804-05 working on *Fidelio*, his only opera. He had also fallen in love with Josephine von Brunsvik, a young widow with four small children. These two distractions – and perhaps his slow adjustment to the fact that he was going deaf – may be the reason for the decline in his compositional output during these years. By the spring of 1806, however, he had hit his stride again. Among the works he completed that year were the three String Quartets, Opus 59 (dedicated to the Russian ambassador Count Razumovsky), the "Appassionata" Sonata, the Fourth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, and the 32 Variations on an Original Theme. The Violin Concerto, a work completed in short order, was written toward the year's end.

Franz Clement, artistic director of the Theater an der Wien and one of Europe's outstanding violinists, had asked Beethoven to write the concerto for him. It was set to be performed at a concert on 23 December 1806. Due to Beethoven's foot-dragging, the performance turned out to be virtually a read-through at sight. A.W. Thayer, in his *Life of Beethoven*, cites a contemporary account "that Clement played the solo *a vista*, without previous rehearsal." Even if it is a slight exaggeration to say that Clement sight-read his part – we don't know for certain – these are frightening conditions for the first performance of a demanding new work.

The 26-year-old Clement drew rave reviews for his playing, but the piece itself received at best a lukewarm reception. Beethoven did not give up on the Concerto: It was published in 1808 and dedicated to the composer's childhood friend Stephan von Breuning. (Beethoven later reworked the solo part for piano, and this was published as Opus 61a. This arrangement did not prove especially successful and is rarely heard today.)

Although there were occasional performances over the next few decades, the Concerto did not catch on. It had to wait until 1844 to come into its own, when a teenaged Joseph Joachim played the piece in London, with Felix Mendelssohn on the podium. Joachim, later a friend of Brahms and the dedicatee of his violin concerto, came essentially to own the work. It was through his persuasive advocacy that the Concerto took its rightful place in the canon. Today, it is one of the most often performed and recorded of all violin concertos.

The Allegro non troppo opens with five soft timpani strokes. On the fifth of those gently resonant beats, woodwinds begin a tranquil melody, marked *dolce* (sweetly) in the score. The violins' immediate imitation of the kettledrum notes on a strange pitch clues us in that the pattern of four knocks – sometimes with, sometimes without a resolving fifth note – is more than a colorful incident. This entire, immensely expansive movement will be saturated with it.

The Larghetto movement, set in G major, is a set of variations on a chorale-like theme. The orchestral strings are muted and the motion of the harmonies is minimal. Notice especially the fourth of these variations, a lyrical episode affectively ornamented and accompanied in striking simplicity by clarinets and bassoons. Now the violin seems lost in musing improvisations and sinks almost out of hearing. Finally, a *forte* statement by the orchestral strings says we have had enough introspection. The soloist responds, and we move into the good-natured finale.

The closing Rondo is back in the home key of D major, set in a lilting 6/8 meter. At times quiet, at other times boisterous, the movement allows time for relaxation – for us listeners, not for the soloist – and for dialogue between the soloist and full orchestra. There's room, too, for the soloist alone, and the brilliant close seems calculated to earn Clement the bravos history tells us greeted him that late-December evening in 1806.

Recommended recording: Anne-Sophie Mutter; Kurt Masur, New York Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon)

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.