Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 13 Notes

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born 25 March 1881; Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania)
Died 26 September 1945; New York, New York

Violin Concerto No. 2

Composed: 1937-38
First performance: 23 March 1939; Amsterdam, Netherlands

Béla Bartók wrote his second violin concerto in 1937-38. A passionate anti-fascist, the composer was under attack from the Hungarian and Romanian newspapers at this time for his firm political stance. It wouldn't be long before he left his native land, ultimately spending his last years in the United States.

The concerto was premiered by Zoltán Székely, who had requested the work from Bartók, in Amsterdam on 23 March 1939. Willem Mengelberg conducted the Concertgebouw Orchestra. The master had wanted to write merely a set of variations, but Székely insisted on a three-movement work. Bartók figured out a way to please both himself and his friend: the slow movement is a formal set of variations.

The opening theme of the concerto conveys a distinctly Hungarian tone. In an early manuscript, Bartók headed it "tempo di verbunkos," referring to an 18th-century Hungarian dance that derives its rhythmic vitality from the brilliant performing style of gypsy violinists. The second theme of this expansive movement is a 12-tone row, repeated in ever-changing permutations. "I wanted to show Schoenberg that one could use all 12 tones and still remain tonal," Bartók reportedly told violinist Yehudi Menuhin in 1943.

The Andante tranquillo is hauntingly atmospheric. After the statement of its serenely placid G major theme, there follow six variations, perhaps the most formal set of variations the composer ever set down. The movement abounds in orchestral colorings and shadings; its coda ends in quiet dissolution, only to be interrupted by the animated opening of the Finale.

The final Allegro molto begins like a stalwart dance, its principal melody a rhythmically remodeled version of the first movement's main theme. Originally, Bartók had the soloist drop out 26 bars before the end. Székely was having none of that, saying he wanted the piece to finish "like a concerto, not like a symphony." Bartók acquiesced, rescoring the work so that everyone plays together to the final bar.

PIERRE JALBERT

Born 15 November 1967; Manchester, New Hampshire

Violin Concerto

Composed: 2016
First performance: 9 June 2017; Saint Paul, Minnesota

The American composer Pierre Jalbert (pronounced "JAL-bert") grew up in Vermont (his family was originally from Quebec), where he began piano lessons at age five. In addition to his intense classical training, he often heard English and French folksongs and Catholic liturgical music – in other words, the sort of music that speaks cogently to the listener with an economy of means. Jalbert writes in a tonal idiom that also utilizes modal, and sometimes quite dissonant, harmonies. His instrumental timbres are vivid yet refined, and driving rhythms are frequently juxtaposed with slow-moving, time-suspended sections.

His impressive catalog includes orchestral works, chamber music, string quartets, solo piano music, and vocal music (most notably, a song cycle written for mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, *From Dusk to Starry Night*). Jalbert is professor of composition and theory at Rice University in Houston.

Jalbert's Violin Concerto was a co-commission by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, intended for their respective concertmasters to play the solo part. Composed in late 2016, Steven Copes gave the world premiere with the SPCO in June 2017. Following Frank Almond's MSO performances in February 2018, the LACO's Margaret Batjer gave the West Coast premiere the following month. The composer has provided the following commentary:

> My Violin Concerto is in two movements of contrasting character…
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> The second movement moves freely back and forth between frenetic, pulse-oriented music and freely slow, non-pulsed music. These slower sections contain lyrical quarter-tone pitch-bending in the violin, and this serves as the primary motive in this section. Eventually, the fast music takes over and leads to a fiery cadenza.

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born 11 June 1864; Munich, Germany
Died 8 September 1949; Garmisch-Partenkirche, Germany

Four Last Songs

Composed: 1948
Premiere: 22 May 1950; London, England

> I may not be a first-rate composer, but I am a first-class second-rate composer.
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> –Richard Strauss, 1947

In the summer of 1887, the 23-year-old Richard Strauss first made the acquaintance of Pauline de Ahna, a gifted soprano and the daughter of a Wagner-loving general. A few years later, he conducted Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, with Pauline as Isolde. When he came to write his first opera, *Guntram* (1894), he tailored the part of the heroine Freihild for her. Four months after its premiere, they were married – on 10 September 1894. His wedding present to her was the four marvelous songs that comprise his Opus 27: "Morgen," "Cäcilie," "Ruhe, meine Seele," and "Heimliche Aufforderung."

Though Pauline retired from the stage in her early 40s, Strauss considered her the foremost interpreter of his lieder. We probably wouldn't be too far off the mark to presume that his superb understanding of the female voice was something he learned from her. And it was with the royalties from one of his earliest operas, *Salome* (1905) – a singularly demanding soprano role – the he built the villa at Garmisch in which he and Pauline lived from 1908 to the end of their lives.

Fast forward four eventful decades that included half-a-lifetime's successful work as a composer and conductor – and two World Wars. His final pieces, the *Four Last Songs*, embraced both Pauline and the soprano voice. Strauss died without hearing these achingly beautiful lieder in concert, and left no indication of their sequence of presentation. His publishers, Boosey and Hawkes, decided they formed a cycle and decided to call them *Vier letzte Lieder* ("Four Last Songs"). Kirsten Flagstad sang the premiere, with Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Philharmonia Orchestra.

The first three songs are to texts by Herman Hesse (1877-1962), the German-born Swiss novelist and poet. Joseph Eichendorff (1788-1857), whose poetry was a favorite of Schumann and Wolf, penned "Im Abendrot" (At Sunset). The first song, "Frühling" (Spring) is a nostalgic tribute to that season of the year; in its arching, transported vocal phrases, one senses keen anticipation following a bitter winter. In "September," the text and musical affect become more autumnal as the poet starts to accept the inevitable end of summer – and of all things. The world-weary "Beim Schlafengehn" (At Bedtime) continues the mood of the previous song, but soon a rapturous violin solo, depicting the soul's upward flight, wings us heavenward.

"At Sunset" perfectly reflects Richard and Pauline's situation. An elderly couple holds hands and gazes into the sunset. Trilling flutes limn a loving pair of larks. "Can this, perhaps, be death?" the soprano sings, and we hear the "transfiguration" theme from *Death and Transfiguration*, a tone poem Strauss wrote in his mid-20s. As he lay on his deathbed, the composer remarked, characteristically, to his daughter-in-law Alice, "Dying is just as I composed it in *Death and Transfiguration*." His beloved Pauline died less than a year later, nine days before the first performance of the *Four Last Songs*.

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.