

Any time Joshua Bell makes an appearance, it's guaranteed to be impressive! I can't wait to hear him perform the monumental Brahms Violin Concerto alongside some fireworks for the orchestra. It's a don't-miss evening!

EMILY GLOVER, NCS VIOLIN

Le Corsaire Overture, Op. 21

HECTOR BERLIOZ

BORN December 11, 1803, in Côte-Saint-André, France; died March 8, 1869, in Paris

PREMIERE Composed 1844, revised before 1852; first performance January 19, 1845, in Paris, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

The Random House Dictionary defines “corsair” both as “a pirate” and as “a ship used for piracy.” Berlioz encountered one of the former on a wild, stormy sea voyage in 1831 from Marseilles to Livorno, on his way to install himself in Rome as winner of the *Prix de Rome*. The grizzled old buccaneer claimed to be a Venetian seaman who had piloted the ship of Lord Byron during the poet’s adventures in the Adriatic and the Greek archipelago, and his fantastic tales helped the young composer keep his mind off the danger aboard the tossing vessel. They landed safely, but the experience of that storm and the image of Lord Byron painted by the corsair stayed with him.

When Berlioz arrived in Rome, he immersed himself in Byron’s poem *The Corsair*, reading much of it in, of all places, St. Peter’s Basilica. “During the fierce summer heat I spent whole days there ... drinking in that burning poetry,” he wrote in his *Memoirs*. It was also at that time that word reached him that his fiancée in Paris, Camille Moke, had thrown him over in favor of another suitor. Revenge, he vowed, must be done. He fled

by stage from Rome (disguised as a serving maid!) and got as far as Nice, where he threw himself into the ocean in an attempted suicide. After being “yanked out like a fish,” his rage completely drowned, and he spent the next three weeks recovering (“the happiest twenty days of my existence”). He was put up in a room with a view of an ancient, ruined tower, and, while gazing upon this Romantic sight, the idea of a musical work was born. He sketched some ideas, a few while actually sitting in the crumbling old structure, but did not complete the score at that time.

Thirteen years later, in 1844, his doctor ordered him to take a rest cure from the hectic pace of his life in Paris. He returned to the site of his earlier convalescence in Nice and completed the sketches that he conceived there in 1831 as an overture named “The Tower of Nice.” The work was first played in Paris early the next year under that title. Berlioz was not satisfied with what he heard, however, and made revisions during a concert trip to London in 1851-1852, one of which was to change the title to “Le Corsaire rouge” after James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Red Rover*, another of his literary favorites. The word “red” was dropped from the title so as not to seem too derivative, but all this did was further cloud the issue about the provenance of the idea for this Overture. Rather than being inspired by the writings of a single author, the music seems to have whipped together many of the passions of Berlioz’s Romantic soul: the fascinating characters in the literature of Cooper and Byron, the indelible impression of his threatening ocean voyage and the yarns of the ancient sailor who was his temporary mate, his impassioned resolution when he left Rome to revenge a lost love, and the vision of long-forgotten deeds in the shadow of a crumbling ruin. There is also another association, more prosaic. Berlioz’s first criticisms were published by a Parisian journal titled “Le Corsaire.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Le Corsaire opens with dashing introductory string scales answered by a bracing response from the woodwinds. Shortly thereafter, a lyrical section appears, with one of Berlioz's characteristic long-breathed melodies sounded by the violins. The quick pace resumes with some anticipatory measures, before the rushing scales of the introduction return to initiate the main body of the work. A complementary theme — a vigorous marching melody — is presented by the low strings and bassoons, and becomes the subject of much of the rest of the overture, recurring in close-order canon, in various rhythmic and instrumental guises, and in other elaborations. A lyrical but still vigorous interlude precedes the recapitulation of the rushing scales, and a further grand treatment of the marching theme brings this stirring work to a close.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, strings

Les Préludes, S. 97

FRANZ LISZT

BORN October 22, 1811, in Doborján, Hungary (now Raiding, Austria); died July 31, 1886, in Bayreuth, Germany

PREMIERE Composed 1844-1854; first performance February 23, 1854, in Weimar, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

Les Préludes had its beginning in 1844, when Liszt met the French poet Joseph Autran in Marseilles at a banquet in the composer-pianist's honor. Within days, Liszt set one of

Autran's poems, *Les Aquilons (The Winds)*, for mixed chorus and piano; that work was performed by a local chorus almost before the ink had dried. Liszt set three more of Autran's poems — *Les Flots (The Oceans)*, *Les Astres (The Stars)*, and *La Terre (The Earth)* — while on tour in Spain the following year. In 1848, Liszt, having made a study of orchestration during the intervening years, tried his newly-acquired skill in an overture called *The Four Elements* to preface the quartet of vocal compositions set to Autran's verses. Three years later (by which time the overture had been rechristened *Symphonic Meditations*), Autran sent Liszt his *Poèmes de la Mer*. Reading these verses recalled to Liszt his earlier pieces inspired by the poet and, referring to the overture and four choruses, he replied, "We will do something with it one fine day." Between 1852 and 1854, Liszt, indeed, did something with it — he completely recomposed the overture as a symphonic poem, and presented it in 1854 under the title *Les Préludes*.

During the revision process, Liszt discovered that a long, meditative poem by the French writer and statesman Alphonse de Lamartine evoked emotions similar to those he envisioned in his music. It was from the title of Lamartine's poem — *Les Préludes* from the collection entitled *Nouvelles méditations poétiques* — that Liszt derived the name for his new work. Though the words have little more in common with the music than a general sharing of contrasting sentiments (love—war), Liszt chose to preface the published score with his prose interpretation of the original poem:

"What else is life but a series of preludes to that unknown hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death? Love is the enchanted dawn of all existence; but what fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm, whose fine illusions are not dissipated by some mortal blast, consuming its altar as though by a stroke of lightning? And what cruelly wounded soul, issuing from one of these tempests, does not endeavor to solace its memories in the calm serenity of rural life? Nevertheless, man does not resign himself for long to the enjoyment of that beneficent warmth which he first

enjoyed in Nature's bosom, and when the 'trumpet sounds the alarm' he takes up his perilous post, no matter what struggle calls him to its ranks, that he may recover in combat the full consciousness of himself and the entire possession of his powers."

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Liszt was the originator of the "symphonic poem," a one-movement orchestral composition whose music bears a relationship to a literary work, painting, historical event, legend, topographical feature or some other extra-musical stimulation. The symphonic poem, a genre later enthusiastically adopted by many other composers, is sectional in design, with frequent borrowing from such traditional forms as the sonata and rondo. *Les Préludes* loosely resembles a sonata form. It opens with a slow introduction that presents the work's principal theme, and much of the music that follows grows from transformations of this germinal melody. The theme is presented in a bold, vigorous version by trombones to begin the sonata form proper and is soon joined by a swaying, complementary melody in the horns. The "development" section contains sentiments first martial, then loving, and finally pastoral. The "recapitulation" is devoted mostly to the lyrical complementary theme. A heroic transformation of the main theme brings *Les Préludes* to a stirring close.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

Capriccio espagnol, Op. 34

NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

BORN March 18, 1844, in Tikhvin, near Novgorod; died June 21, 1908, in St. Petersburg

PREMIERE Composed 1887; first performance October 31, 1887, in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

Rimsky-Korsakov visited Spain only once: while on a training cruise around the world as a naval cadet, he spent three days in the Mediterranean port of Cádiz in December 1864. The sun and sweet scents of Iberia left a lasting impression on him, however, just as they had on the earlier Russian composer Mikhail Glinka, who was inspired to compose the *Jota aragonesa* and *A Night in Madrid* on Spanish themes. Both of those colorful works by his Russian predecessor were strong influences on Rimsky-Korsakov when he came to compose his own Spanish piece in 1887.

Rimsky-Korsakov's principal project during the summer of 1887 was the orchestration of the opera *Prince Igor* by his compatriot Alexander Borodin, who had died the preceding winter. Rimsky-Korsakov installed himself at Nikolskoe on the shore of Lake Nelai in a rented villa, and made good progress with the opera, one of many completions and revisions he undertook of the music of his fellow Russian composers. Things went well enough that he felt able to interrupt this project for several weeks to work on a composition of his own, a piece on Spanish themes that was originally intended for solo violin and orchestra but which he re-cast for full orchestra as the brilliant *Capriccio espagnol*.

He took the new score home with him to St. Petersburg that fall to prepare its premiere with the Russian Concert Society for October. In his autobiography, he recounted the events surrounding the first performance of the work: "At the rehearsal, the first movement had hardly been finished when the whole orchestra began to

applaud. Similar applause followed all the other parts whenever the pauses permitted. I asked the orchestra for the privilege of dedicating the composition to them. General delight was the answer. The *Capriccio* went without difficulties and sounded brilliant. At the concert itself, it was played with a perfection and enthusiasm the like of which it never possessed subsequently, even when led by [the distinguished conductor Arthur] Nikisch himself [later music director of the Boston, Berlin, Leipzig and Budapest orchestras]. Despite its length, the audience insistently called for an encore.” The composer made good on his promise to dedicate the work to the Russian Musical Society Orchestra, inscribing the names of all 67 players on the score’s title page.

It was Rimsky-Korsakov’s dazzling orchestral technique which drew the greatest praise for the new *Capriccio*. Tchaikovsky, for instance, wrote to him that he had produced “a colossal masterpiece of instrumentation” and he should regard himself as “the greatest master of the present day.” The composer, however, insisted that the orchestration was integral to the structure of the music, and not just a finishing cosmetic touch. “The opinion formed by both critics and public that the *Capriccio* is a *magnificently orchestrated piece* is wrong,” he wrote. “It is a brilliant composition for orchestra. The change of timbres, the felicitous choice of melodic designs and figuration patterns, exactly suiting each kind of instrument, brief virtuoso cadenzas for solo instruments, the rhythm of the percussion instruments, etc., constitute here the very *essence* of the composition and not its garb.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The *Capriccio espagnol* comprises five brief, attached movements. It opens with a rousing *Alborada* or “morning-song,” marked *vivo e strepitoso* — “lively and noisy.” The solo violin figures prominently here and throughout the work, a reminder of the virtuosic origin of the work as a concerted piece for that instrument. A tiny set of variations on a languid theme presented by the horns follows. The *Alborada* returns in

new instrumental coloring that features a sparkling solo by the clarinet. The fourth movement, *Scena e canto gitano* (“Scene and Gypsy Song”), begins with a string of cadenzas: horns and trumpets, violin, flute, clarinet, and harp. The swaying *Gypsy Song* gathers up the instruments of the orchestra to build to a dazzling climax leading without pause to the finale, *Fandango asturiano*. The trombones present the theme of this section, based on the rhythm of a traditional dance of Andalusia. The final pages of the *Capriccio espagnol* recall the *Alborada* theme, to bring this brilliant orchestral showpiece to an exhilarating close.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 77

JOHANNES BRAHMS

BORN May 7, 1833, in Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, in Vienna

PREMIERE Composed 1878; first performance New Year’s Day, 1879, in Leipzig, conducted by the composer with Joseph Joachim as soloist

OVERVIEW

“The healthy and ruddy colors of his skin indicated a love of nature and a habit of being in the open air in all kinds of weather; his thick straight hair of brownish color came nearly down to his shoulders. His clothes and boots were not of exactly the latest pattern, nor did they fit particularly well, but his linen was spotless.... [There was a] kindness in his eyes ... with now and then a roguish twinkle in them which corresponded to a quality in his nature which would perhaps be best described as good-

natured sarcasm.” So wrote Sir George Henschel, the singer and conductor who became the first Music Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, of his friend Johannes Brahms at the time of the composition of his Violin Concerto — when Brahms, at 45, was coming into the full realization of his talent and fame.

The 20-year gestation of the First Symphony had finally ended in 1876, and the Second Symphony came easily only a year later. He was occupied with many songs and important chamber works during the mid-1870s, and the two greatest of his concertos, the B-flat major for piano and the D major for violin, were both conceived in 1878 after the delicious experience of his first trip to Italy in April, though the Piano Concerto was soon laid aside when the Violin Concerto became his main focus during the following summer. After the Italian trip, he returned to the idyllic Austrian village of Pörtlach (site of the composition of the Second Symphony the previous year), where, he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, “the air so bristles with melodies that one has to be careful not to tread on them.”

The Violin Concerto was written at Pörtlach for Brahms’ old friend and musical ally, Joseph Joachim. In August, when the sketches for the new work were almost completed, Brahms sent a draft of the solo part to Joachim for his advice on the technical aspects of the violin writing with the following note: “I wanted you to correct it — and I didn’t want you to have any excuse of any kind: either that the music is too good [to be changed] or that the whole score isn’t worth the trouble. But I shall be satisfied if you just write me a word or two, and perhaps write a word here and there in the music, like ‘difficult,’ ‘awkward,’ ‘impossible,’ etc.” Joachim took great pains in examining the score (his notated copy is still in the State Library in Berlin), and passed his advice on to Brahms who, rather obstinately, ignored most of it. Brahms, whose instrument was the piano rather than the violin, made a few changes in the musical aspects of the score, but left the sometimes-ambiguous string notation largely

untouched, a circumstance that has caused considerable interpretative difficulties for other violinists.

Brahms originally envisioned the Violin Concerto as a four-movement work. He composed a scherzo and a slow movement for it, but decided to jettison them for reasons he never revealed. "The middle movements have gone, and of course they were the best!" he wrote. He was probably being facetious about the quality of the discarded music because he continued, "But I have written a poor *Adagio* for it instead," referring to one of the most beautiful slow movements in the orchestral literature. The fate of the unused movements has never been exactly determined. The scherzo may have ended up as material for the Second Piano Concerto; the *Adagio* may have been the basis of the present one in the Violin Concerto; or both movements may have been lost amid the aborted plans for a second violin concerto. (Brahms was rigidly systematic in destroying sketches he did not want others to see.) His revisions proved effective, and after the concerto was launched, he wrote to his publisher, Simrock, "It is well to be doubted whether I could write a better concerto."

The concerto made its way slowly onto the world's concert stages. Joachim programmed the work regularly as part of his tours, but others were reluctant to take on the imposing technical and musical challenges of the score. Hans von Bülow, a sensitive pianist and conductor who should have known better, dubbed this "a concerto not for the violin, but *against* the violin." There is no question about the difficulties of the score, especially those that its double-stops and wide skips impose on the left-hand technique of the soloist, but, with familiarity, the rigors of the work were not only conquered but relished by virtuosos. As with many of Brahms' large works, audiences considered this one somewhat dry and pedantic at first, and even the composer's staunch advocate, Eduard Hanslick, found little to praise in it. The integration of violinist and orchestra into a virtual "symphony with solo instrument" did not allow the empty pyrotechnics that listeners expected from a Romantic concerto, and the Violin Concerto

took some getting used to. Get used to it listeners did, however, and today Brahms' Violin Concerto is regarded as one of the two greatest works in the form ever written, matched only by that of Beethoven.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

English musicologist Hubert Foss wrote of the style of the Violin Concerto, "Of all Brahms' major works, this is the one that shows in the highest degree of perfection the reconciling of the two opposites of his creative mind — the lyrical and the constructive: Brahms the song writer and Brahms the symphonist." Though the wealth of formal detail is an inexhaustible treasure that is best appreciated only after many hearings, the work's sonorous beauty, opulent harmony and rich lyricism make an immediate appeal to the listener. The first movement is constructed in classical concerto form, with an orchestral introduction presenting much of the movement's main thematic material before the entry of the soloist. The group of themes comprises several ideas that are knitted to each other by the rich contrapuntal flow. They are stately in rhythm and dignified in character, and allow for considerable elaboration when they are treated on their return by the soloist. The last theme, a dramatic strain in stern dotted rhythms, ushers in the soloist, who plays an extended passage as transition to the second exposition of the themes. This initial solo entry is anxious in mood and serves to heighten the serene majesty of the main theme when it is sung by the soloist upon its reappearance.

A melody not heard in the orchestral introduction, limpid and almost a waltz, is given out by the soloist to serve as the second theme. The vigorous dotted-rhythm figure returns to close the exposition, with the development continuing the agitated mood of this closing theme. The recapitulation begins on a heroic wave of sound spread throughout the entire orchestra. After the return of the themes, the bridge to the coda is made by the soloist's cadenza. (Curiously, Brahms did not write his own cadenza for

this movement but allowed the soloist to devise one. Joachim provided a cadenza, as have more than a dozen others — including Kreisler, Heifetz, Busoni and Tovey — and it is his that is most often heard in performance. Joshua Bell performs the work with cadenzas of his own devising.) With another traversal of the main theme and a series of dignified cadential figures, this grand movement comes to an end.

The rapturous *Adagio* is based on a theme that the German composer Max Bruch said was derived from a Bohemian folk song. The melody, intoned by the oboe, is initially presented in the colorful sonorities of wind choir without strings. After the violin's entry, the soloist is seldom confined to the exact notes of the theme, but rather weaves a rich embroidery around their melodic shape. The central section of the movement is cast in darker hues, and employs the full range of the violin in its sweet arpeggios. The opening melody returns in the plangent tones of the oboe accompanied by the continuing widely spaced chords of the violinist.

The finale is an invigorating dance whose Gypsy character pays tribute to the two Hungarian-born violinists who played such important roles in Brahms' life: Eduard Reményi, who discovered the talented Brahms playing piano in the bars of Hamburg and first presented him to the European musical community; and Joseph Joachim. The movement is cast in rondo form, with a scintillating tune in double stops as the recurring theme. This movement, the only one in this concerto given to overtly virtuosic display, forms a memorable capstone to one of the greatest concert pieces of the 19th century.

John Horton wrote, "That Brahms should have ventured upon a Violin Concerto in D with the sound of Beethoven's, as interpreted by Joachim, in his ears was in itself an act of faith and courage; that he should have produced one of such originality, sturdily independent of its mighty predecessor yet worthy to stand beside it, is one of the triumphs of Brahms' genius."

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo violin, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings

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