

Program notes by Matthew Oberstein

Hungarian Dance No. 5 Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Throughout his life, Brahms had a special affection for Gypsy fiddlers. We find their music in the finale of his Violin Concerto, the closing movement of the G minor Piano Quartet (Op. 25), the Zigeunerlieder ("Gypsy Songs"), and, especially, the Hungarian Dances (1869). Brahms compiled the set of twenty-one dances, written for four-hand piano, in four books: Books I and II, containing five dances each, were published in 1869, the rest in 1880.

The themes of most of these Dances were not original, but rather arrangements; he collected them, thinking — as did almost everyone else at that time — that the melodies were folk tunes, and he clearly stated that they were arrangements. In naming these pieces “Hungarian Dances,” however, Brahms may have fallen to the common practice of the time of “discovering” nationalistic styles that turned out actually to be the popular tunes in the Coffee houses. In fact, the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi accused Brahms of plagiarism, that in fact, he had written the tunes himself. That notion was easily debunked, but Brahms was forced to defend his compositions nonetheless.

Brahms himself transcribed the first ten Hungarian Dances for solo piano and Nos. 1, 3 and 10 for orchestra. Many other composers and arrangers have made orchestral transcriptions of the other dances. Dance No. 5, which was written by Brahms in F-sharp minor, and then arranged for orchestra in G minor by the conductor Albert Parlow (1822-1888), is a setting of the melody Bartfai-Emlek ("Remembrance of Bartfa"), attributed to the German-Hungarian bandmaster and composer of light music Béla Kéler (1820-1882). It is probably the best known of the whole set.

Scored for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54 Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Composed in 1841 and 1845. Premiered on December 4, 1845 in Dresden, conducted by Ferdinand Hiller with Clara Schumann, the composer's wife, as soloist.

In creating the the ‘Biedermeier’ concerto, where showmanship prevailed, Mozart had provided the model for many pianist-composers in the 1820s and 1830s. The concerto had become little more than a musical ego trip, and so the form that had found perfection in Mozart eventually buckled under the weight of so much ostentation. It died a death in the late 1830s, prompting this comment from Schumann – as brilliant a musical commentator as he was composer – in 1839:

What once was regarded as an enrichment of instrumental forms, as an important discovery, is now voluntarily abandoned. Surely it would have to be counted a loss if the piano concerto with orchestra were to pass from the scene ... and so we must await the

genius who will show us in a newer and more brilliant way, how orchestra and piano may be combined, how the soloist, dominant at the keyboard, may unfold the wealth of his instrument and his art, while the orchestra, no longer a mere spectator, may interweave its manifold facets into the scene.

It was Schumann himself who came up with a solution only a couple of years later with his Piano Concerto, where soloist and orchestra are much more integrated, and where virtuosity is integral to the music rather than merely decoration.

In 1837, three years before their marriage, Schumann wrote to Clara of a plan for a work for piano and orchestra that would be “a compromise between a symphony, a concerto and a huge sonata.” It was a bold vision for Schumann who had, with one discarded exception, written nothing for orchestra. In 1841, the second year of their marriage, he returned to his original conception, and produced a Fantasia in one movement for piano with orchestral accompaniment. Clara ran through the work at a rehearsal of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra on August 13, 1841, and Robert thought highly enough of the piece to have it published; his attempts were rejected, however, and so with great disappointment, he laid the piece aside. Schumann revisited the work in May 1845. He retained the original Fantasia movement, and added to it an Intermezzo and Finale to create the three-movement Piano Concerto, which was to become one of the most popular of all such works in the keyboard repertoire.

Were Schumann’s composition timeline unknown, there would be no way to tell that several years separate the creation of the first from the second and third movements. The Concerto’s sense of unity arises principally from the development and permutation of the opening theme heard throughout the work. This opening motive, a lovely melody presented by the woodwinds after the fiery introductory chords of the piano, pervades the first movement, serving not only as its second theme but also appearing in many variants in the development section. Even the coda, placed after a stirring cadenza, uses a double-time marching version of the main theme. The second movement is written in three parts with a rich, singing melody for cellos in its middle section. The movement’s initial motive, a gentle dialogue between piano and strings, is based on the first movement’s same opening theme. The principal theme of the sonata-form finale is yet another rendering of the Concerto’s initial melody. After a striding central section, the recapitulation begins in the dominant key so that the movement finally settles into the expected tonic major key only with the syncopated second theme.

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64
Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Composed between May and August 26, 1888. Premiered in Saint Petersburg on November 17, 1888 with Tchaikovsky on the podium.

Ten years had passed since the completion of his Fourth Symphony, ten years in which Tchaikovsky's international reputation grew tremendously. If the Fourth had been the symphony of triumph over fate, and, admittedly, an imitation of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, we have nothing as explicitly revealing when it comes to the Fifth. There is, however, a notebook page dated April 15, 1888, which is about a month before Tchaikovsky began work on his new symphony, and here he outlines a scenario for the first movement: "Introduction. Complete resignation before Fate, or, which is the same, before the inscrutable predestination of Providence. Allegro. (1) Murmurs of doubt, complaints, reproaches against XXX. (2) Shall I throw myself in the embraces of faith??? A wonderful program, if only it can be carried out."

The "XXX" probably referred to Tchaikovsky's homosexuality, the only matter he concealed behind secret signs in his notes and diary. If this is so, the Fifth Symphony represents Tchaikovsky's resignation to his fate in the way he could best command — music. While Symphony No. 5 addresses the same programmatic issue of fate as his Symphony No. 4, the Fifth is much more optimistic, moving from minor to major, from darkness to light, from melancholy to joy — or at least to acceptance.

The Symphony opens with a slow, dark theme suggestive of a funeral march: the "Fate" theme, which recurs in each of the symphony's four movements. The introduction gradually subsides, coming to a suspenseful halt. When the main part of the first movement begins, the tempo is quicker and the theme is new, though connected to the previous material through the alternating chords of E minor and A minor in the first twelve measures; these are the very chords with which the Fate theme was harmonized. Following a fortississimo climax, Tchaikovsky then goes without pause into a new, anguished theme in the strings. Despite the tremendous rise of the movement, the music vanishes into the darkness in which it began.

At the top of the manuscript of the second movement Tchaikovsky is said to have written, "Oh, how I love ... if you love me..." Given the number of operas that Tchaikovsky wrote, it is easy to think of an operatic love scene. The opening theme, played by the solo horn, is enhanced and passed around the orchestra as the movement progresses. The lyrical flow is halted by the fate theme on two occasions: first announced by the full orchestra over a fierce timpani roll midway through, and again just before the end.

If the second movement suggests opera, the third grows from ballet. In place of a scherzo, Tchaikovsky writes a somewhat melancholy waltz. The trio is somewhat livelier, with playful runs in the strings. There is a sense, though, of uneasiness, suggesting something sinister on the horizon. The fate theme sounds quietly in the low winds just before the dance is over. The finale begins with a long introduction based on the Fate theme but transformed into a triumphal march, with the furious outbursts midway through the movement only serving to make its climax more impressive. The symphony ends with a final statement from the trumpets and horns, and closing chords from the full orchestra.

Scored for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.