

NORTH SHORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Susan Deaver, Music Director and Conductor
2010-2011 – 50th Anniversary Season

Plainview-Old Bethpage John F. Kennedy High School
50 Kennedy Drive Plainview, N.Y.

Concert II
on Saturday evening, March 12, 2011
at 8:00 o'clock

— NOTES ON THE PROGRAM —

Overture to the opera *La Forza del Destino* (The Force of Destiny)

by Giuseppe Verdi

(born at La Roncole, near Bussero in the duchy of Parma, on October 9, 1813; died in Milan on January 27, 1901)

Verdi finished the twenty-third of his twenty-seven operas, *La Forza del Destino*, in 1862, and it was first performed in the Imperial Theater of Saint Petersburg on November 10 that year. He used as a libretto Francesco Maria Piave's adaptation of a Spanish play by Ángel de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas, entitled *Don Álvaro, o La Fuerza del sino* ("Don Alvaro, or The Force of Destiny"), with interpolations from Friedrich von Schiller's play, *Wallensteins Lager* (Wallenstein's Encampment), published in 1799.]

If you think that the preceding paragraph is unpardonably complicated and murky, consider the plot of this masterly opera, which is similarly labyrinthine and all but incomprehensible, as well as garnished with a host of implausible coincidences, not to mention gushing rivulets of blood and gore.

The young nobleman Don Alvaro, lately settled in Seville from his native Peru, has fallen in love with the beautiful and virtuous Donna Leonora. Leonora's father, the Marquis of Calatrava, is insistent that his daughter marry a man of similarly ancient and noble family, and forbids Leonora to pursue this unworthy liaison with Alvaro, though he realizes how much in love she is. Leonora, torn by her love for Alvaro and for her father finally agrees to elope with the former, but the Marquis learns of her plan, accosts Alvaro and threatens him with death. Alvaro, brandishing a pistol of his own, throws it to the ground in surrender, but it goes off accidentally, killing the Marquis almost instantly though not before he can invoke a curse on his daughter and her suitor. Leonora's brother, Don Carlo also swears vengeance on her and her lover, Alvaro, but when he encounters her in an inn does not recognize her since she has decided to dress in male attire, while Carlo himself is disguised as a student so that no one will guess his exalted rank. A fortuneteller at the inn persuades Carlo to join the army, which he does. Meanwhile Leonora seeks refuge in a nearby monastery, intending to spend the rest of her life there in expiation of her part in her father's death. Alvaro, whose face is unknown to Carlo, also joins the army, where the two young men become close friends and go into battle side by side.

When Alvaro is seriously wounded, he entrusts Leonora's letters to him, to Carlo, who swears he will destroy them. Instead, he gives way to his suspicion that Alvaro is not telling him enough, and opens the letters, only to find a picture of his sister. When Alvaro recovers, Carlo is delighted; now he can avenge his father's death as he planned. The two men draw their swords but are separated by their friends, and Alvaro decides that he must enter a monastery, and of course is will be the same monastery near which Leonora lives in a nearby cave, praying daily that death will release her from her guilt. When Alvaro rushes in, having mortally wounded Carlo in their duel, he recognizes and the love of his life, Leonora, under her nun's habit. She in turn rushes to the side of her dying brother, who

musters just enough strength to stab her to the heart. When she dies, the heartbroken Alvaro throws himself into the sea.

In 1869 Verdi made several important revisions to his ambitious opera, including the addition of the overture we hear this evening (replacing a much shorter introduction) and sparing the life of Alvaro, who does not throw himself off a cliff after all. This is the version almost always performed these days.

In later years *Forza* gained the reputation of being “cursed” or at least “unlucky.” This came about not from its death-strewn and convoluted plot, and certainly not from Verdi’s music, much of which is ravishingly beautiful, but from a convergence of what we might call terrible luck. In 1960, when the opera was being performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the beloved baritone Leonard Warren, playing Don Carlo, had just launched into his vigorous *cabaletta* of Act III, which begins with the words, *Morir, tremenda cosa* (“To die, a momentous thing”) when he suddenly fell face-forward on the stage, dead at 48 from a massive cerebral hæmorrhage. Tenor Franco Corelli always clutched at part of his costume for security whenever he sang Alvaro in the opera afterwards, and costume designer Anthony Stivanello superstitiously would not lend his designs to any other company, for fear of tragic accident. Luciano Pavarotti avoided the part of Alvaro throughout his subsequent career. And at a performance in Bergen County in New Jersey, the lights went out just as the tenor was about to sing his most important aria, “*Oh, tu che in seno agli angeli,*” (“O my beloved, risen among the angels”) though the cause turned out to be a power failure problem in the cemetery across the avenue from the opera house.

Verdi might have been very pleased to know that he was listed as co-composer for French director Claude Berri’s two very successful films released in the United States in 1986, both based on a single novel by Marcel Pagnol, *Jean de Florette* and its sequel *Manon des Sources* (“Manon of the Springs”). Both film scores drew heavily on *La forza del destino* and made a new audience for Verdi among art-film lovers.

Orchestral Suite II, from the opera *Carmen*

by Georges Bizet (*born in Paris on October 25, 1838; died in Bougival, near Paris, on June 3, 1875*)

Marche des contrebandiers

Habañera

Chanson du Toréador

Danse bohème (Gypsy Dance)

Jacques-Emile Blanche, a fine portrait painter and able amateur pianist, tells of a social visit to Bizet who was deep in the composition of his opera *Carmen*, seated at a cleverly designed piano-desk built for him by the famous piano manufacturer Érard. “An enormous bearded head, that of a Roman emperor with glasses, hunched up in his pea-jacket, a red scarf around his neck, his feet in Turkish slippers . . . played for us some of the score, whistling the notes he couldn’t play with his hands. I was in an ecstasy, wordless. He asked me whether I liked the music. I dissolved in tears.”

Blanche was also present for the opera’s premiere on March 3, 1875, as were a great number of socialites, music critics, *boulevardiers* and others, many of them doubtless drawn by the producer’s often-voiced fears that Bizet’s opera was “too immoral,” too “scandalous” for the average opera lover. Said producer, head of the Opéra-Comique, had forbidden his own about-to-be-married daughter and her fiancé to attend.

In its opening scenes, though, the performance was warmly received, and at the first intermission Bizet’s loge box was filled with congratulatory friends. The second act began well too, and the audience applauded the “Toreador Song” wildly. (Bizet is said to have remarked when he wrote this aria: “So they want trash (*de l’ordure*)? All right, I’ll give them trash.”) But as the opera began to deviate from what the audience was accustomed to, the mood turned glacial. Someone circulated the rumor (untrue) that Bizet had stolen themes from Gounod. Others thought the third act with its smugglers among the wild mountains looked cheaply presented. There was no ballet. That in itself was

a *scandale*. “The whole ballet corps was composed of two mildly pretty dancers,” said someone later, derisively. And why was there no final love duet? Bizet was dumbfounded. “These *bourgeois* have not understood a word of the work I wrote for them.”

Such a failure is impossible to understand today when *Carmen* has become one of the most popular operas in the entire literature, praised by audiences and critics alike, produced by every opera house in the world, the delight of singers and scholars together.

Subsequent performances—there were not many that first season—were better received, but over all the response was tepid, though some of Bizet’s composer friends were genuine in their praise, among them such highly reputed figures as Massenet, Gounod and Saint-Saëns; the last-named wrote, “I found it marvelous and I am telling you the truth.” But on the whole it was too original in music and libretto for the French middle class of those days.

Eventually the opera found a devoted and world-wide audience, but it was too late for the composer to enjoy his triumph. He succumbed to a sudden heart attack and died in early June, barely two months after *Carmen’s* disappointing premiere.

Carmen, the heroine of the opera, is a young gypsy woman who lives only for sensuality. Love drives her from passion to passion. When she meets army corporal Don José and handsome bull-fighter Escamillo she tries to dazzle them with sultry dances like the Seguidilla and the Habanera, or the highly rhythmic Gypsy song that taunts anyone in earshot with her complete indifference to lasting romantic commitments of whatever sort.

Bizet’s publisher selected two suites for orchestra, using some of the opera’s most popular melodies. In the second of these, which we hear this evening, are heard the chorus of the smugglers in their hideaway in the mountains to which Carmen and José have fled in Act III. The *Habanera* is sung by Carmen in Act I when she first sets eyes on Corporal José as she comes out of the cigarette factory where she works. Later, having cast José aside, she impulsively falls for the bullfighter Escamillo, especially after he sings, in Act II, his braggadocio in the excitement and glamour of his profession. Also in the second act Carmen, who has not yet decided to throw José over, tempts him with her exciting *Danse bohème*, starting perkily and gradually turning into an increasingly animated tempo, seasoned with the peppery accent of castanets and ending with the flourish of her final whoop.

A Festival Prelude

by Alfred Reed (born in New York on January 25, 1921 and died in Miami on September 17, 2005)

Alfred Reed wrote extensively for concert band and wind ensemble and also has to his credit works composed for orchestra, chorus and chamber ensemble. In addition to his prolific composing of over two-hundred published works, he was also a frequent guest conductor. Trained at the Juilliard School of Music, he served as a staff composer for both NBC and ABC in the 1950’s and later became a professor of music at the University of Miami in 1966 where he established the first Music Industry Program which became a model for other universities. He was so sought after as a composer that it was calculated that at the time of his death that he had “composition commissions that would have taken him to the age of 115”!

A Festival Prelude was originally written for concert band, but due to its triumphant success, and at the urging of many requests, Reed rescored the work for full orchestra. The work has one principal theme with a flourish of two fanfares occurring throughout the work in alternating tempos, and is scored to feature all the sections of the orchestra – brass, strings, woodwinds and percussion. Tonight’s performance joins together the talented young musicians of Plainview Old Bethpage JFK High School with North Shore Symphony Orchestra to bring the concert to a grand conclusion in celebration of music.

Double Concerto for Violin, Violoncello and Orchestra, Opus 102

by Johannes Brahms (born in Hamburg on May 7, 1833; died in Vienna on April 3, 1897)

Allegro

Andante

Vivace non troppo

Clara Schumann called it “the Concerto of Reconciliation.” She, the widow of composer Robert Schumann and for many years Brahms’s principal confidante, was also devoted to the Hungarian-born violinist Joseph Joachim who had helped young Brahms so often on his road to a secure career and had been a close friend for years. Thus she knew all about Joachim’s unhappy divorce from his wife Amalie in 1880, after several months of bitter acrimony.

Brahms, who was as fond of Amalie as he was of Joseph, felt he had to choose sides, and he sympathized with Amalie. He wrote her a long letter full of empathy, telling her of his own struggle to maintain a professional relationship with her husband and how difficult it had been. Amalie produced this letter at the divorce trial, and Joachim flinched as though he had been struck by lightning. He refused to speak to Brahms from that moment, though he went on performing Brahms’s music, much of which he had premiered and made famous.

Brahms had a history of scarred friendships, and a corresponding history of trying to patch them up. Off he went again on a campaign to pacify his old friend.

In the spring of 1887 he returned from a very pleasant trip through southern Italy with some friends. (En route they had passed through the little village of Pesaro, where Gioacchino Rossini was born; they did not get off the train at the station stop, but all of them did bawl out a well-known aria from the composer’s best-known opera, *The Barber of Seville* in his honor.)

Brahms had taken for the ensuing summer (1887) a “nice brown house with green shutters” right on the Aare River where it joins Lake Thun in the charming little Swiss village of Thun, and he felt in the mood for a large composition. After working on it industriously for a couple of weeks, he bubbled over in a letter to Clara Schumann: “I’ve just had the jolliest idea! I’m writing a concerto for violin and cello. If it is successful at all it might give us some fun. You can imagine the sort of pranks one could play in such a situation. (Just don’t imagine *too* much.)” “Fun” and “pranks” are not the sort of words the august Brahms felt comfortable using, and one senses behind his writing a vague unease.

He had already taken the plunge and written Joachim: “Drop me a card. I want to give you news of an *artistic* matter.” Joachim eagerly dispatched the asked-for response, whereupon Brahms wrote him: “Get set for a little shock. I find myself unable to resist the idea of a concerto for violin and violoncello . . .” and Joachim could not contain his excitement. Perhaps he was as eager as Brahms to bury the hatchet. It had been seven long years since their almost daily communication.

They all met—Brahms, Joachim, Clara, and Robert Hausmann (the cellist in Joachim’s string quartet, for whom Brahms had written his Second Cello Sonata, Opus 99)—in the resort village of Baden-Baden where Clara was staying. Hausmann, who had kept on excellent terms with both men, had already told friends the exciting news about the Concerto and his “unbounded joy” in it.

Brahms worried: “I really should have passed the idea along to someone who knows strings,” he said. When he composed his Violin Concerto a dozen years before, he and Joachim had talked over every difficulty in the technical writing and solved every problem together. Composing the Double Concerto, without Joachim, he had had to think everything through by himself.

Clara was possibly the happiest of them all at their meeting for the rehearsal, where Brahms flailed away at the accompaniment on a tired old upright piano. Her thought was not of the gorgeous music she was hearing for the first time but only of friendships regained.. “Brahms and Joachim have spoken to each other again for the first time in years,” she wrote in her diary that night.

Perhaps to cement the joys of re-born affection Brahms contributed a lot of money—a hundred gulden—towards a bust of Joachim that was to be housed in the Berlin Hochschule, which Joachim directed, in honor of the violinist’s fiftieth anniversary as a performer. (Brahms was disappointed with the completed sculpture, of course. “Why did they make the head like a cabbage?”)

The Double Concerto in A minor had its première on October 18, 1887, in Cologne. Brahms conducted, Joachim played the violin and Hausmann the cello. The audience was lukewarm. But Brahms was happy. “Now I know what has been missing in my life for the past few years,” he exclaimed. “It was the sound of Joachim’s violin. How he plays!”

The first Vienna performance, in December by the same soloists and conductor, was cheered enthusiastically. Brahms could always find something to fret about, though, and he worried that perhaps the audience was applauding *him*—he was much loved in Vienna where he had lived for a long time—rather than the *music*. A number of later performances finally convinced him, though the Double Concerto has never found the lofty place it deserves among the major masterpieces of Brahms’s output.

Like his other concertos, Brahms here treats the solo instruments as if they were part of the orchestra and not soloists. Seldom is his writing virtuosic. After an imposing opening, the cello plays a cadenza-like passage introducing the main theme, and the violin echoes it. The two instruments twine around each other, one completing the other’s arpeggios and continuing the other’s lyrical arabesques throughout. For a rigorously massive concerto, this one includes a good many moments marked *dolce* (“quiet,” “sweet”), and Brahms also uses the *G.P.* (“Grand Pause”) to particular effect. The cello introduces the second theme of the movement as well, a slightly ambiguous phrase in which we are not always sure which are the strong beats and which the weak.

The slow movement is introduced by two queries sounding the interval of a fourth, the first, A to D, in the horns, the second, E to A, in the woodwinds. Then we find that the entire movement structure is based on that same motif, introduced by the solo instruments (A to D and onwards). The second half of the theme is a reworking of the first half, which technical feat Brahms accomplishes with his usual ease and suavity.

The third movement has a distinct gypsy flavor, perhaps in homage to Joachim’s Hungarian background. It is based on two themes, one strong and brisk, the other as noble as a great chorale. Once again the instruments complement themselves and the orchestra without striving for virtuosic effects.

Brahms published the Double Concerto in 1888 and then supervised a slightly revised edition the next year. But in 1887 Vincent Van Gogh had painted his highly imaginative and scary *Moulin de la Galette*, the cocky young Richard Strauss had composed his *Don Juan*, and Debussy, whose *L’Après-midi d’un faune* was about finished, had met Brahms. Soon Brahms’s world—and, to a great extent, ours as well—would become something completely different. Atonality and the twentieth century were right around the corner.

—Musical annotations specially written by Clair W. Van Ausdall for Maestra Susan Deaver and the North Shore Symphony Orchestra