

NORTH SHORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Susan Deaver, Music Director and Conductor
2008-2009 Season
Plainview-Old Bethpage John F. Kennedy High School
Concert III -- Viola Extravaganza!
Saturday evening, May 8, 2010 at 8:00 o'clock

—NOTES ON THE PROGRAM —

Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Opus 56a

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

Brahms was 40 years old before he ventured to finish a musical work for full symphony orchestra, as opposed to Franz Joseph Haydn, who had presented the world with forty symphonies by a similar age, or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart who had written forty-one by his death at age 35, or Ludwig Van Beethoven with his six, all of them lengthy, even though he had been deaf as a post since 1802 when he was 32 years old.

Brahms admitted that his fear of possible failure was in large part the result of the daunting shadow of Beethoven, great master of the orchestra and musical orchestration, that loomed over him and seemed to emphasize his insignificance. “You have no idea,” he wrote to a conductor friend, “how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like *him* behind us.”

And further, when Brahms finally decided to venture his hand with such a work for sizable ensemble, in 1872, he composed these “Haydn” Variations in two forms, one for two pianos and the other for orchestra, as if hedging his bets. We are not certain which version was finished first; both are splendid additions to their respective repertoires, and both were published the same year, the orchestral set as Opus 56a and the pianistic set as Opus 56b. At last Brahms’s creative door seemed to have been flung open, and for the next fifteen years orchestral works flowed from his pen like freshets in spring.

The work’s theme has a curious history. In 1870, a friend of Brahms, Karl Ferdinand Pohl, showed him a *Feldpartita* (a suite of pieces for wind instruments to be played in the open air) supposedly composed by Haydn, a famous biography of whom this same Pohl had recently published. Brahms was much taken with one of the Partita’s sections, a sprightly march in 5-measure phrases, and decided to use it as the melodic theme of his own new work. Apparently he thought it was a traditional tune, because he marked it “Choral St. Antoni,” when he made a copy of it. Not until 1951 was it discovered (by another Haydn biographer, H. C. Robbins-Landon) to be not by Haydn at all, but possibly by one of Haydn’s students, most probably Ignaz Josef Pleyel, composer and manufacturer of pianos, the 24th of 38 children born to a schoolmaster, Martin Pleyel, and his wife Anna Theresia, nearly *all* of whose offspring became musicians of some sort!).

The *Andante* theme is given eight variations, which vary from elaborate to simple, from energetic to languorous, from graceful arabesques to muted whisperings. The seventh of these

eight is marked *Grazioso*; an admirer and biographer of Brahms, Max Kalbeck, wrote that it depicted one of the fabled temptations of Saint Anthony—clearly one of the more feminine seductions, it would seem—and thus, in Kalbeck’s words, “one of the most atrocious because it is the sweetest.” So much for pre-Freudian interpretation!

The splendid Finale is also marked *Andante* and is built on the ancient passacaglia form, which Brahms loved and used frequently (in one of the choruses from *A German Requiem*, for instance, and again as the last movement of his Fourth Symphony, in E minor). The passacaglia (also sometimes termed *chaconne*) is itself a kind of variation form, with a short repeated bass line that remains constant while the melody above it assumes changing patterns and directions. In this passacaglia Brahms uses a phrase adapted from the “Chorale St. Antoni,” maintaining always its quiet hymn-like serenity but ultimately letting it reach a majestic momentum, decked out with flashing scales, played first by the woodwinds and finally by the entire string section.

Serenade No. 2 in A major, Opus 16

by Johannes Brahms

Allegro moderato

Scherzo: Vivace

Adagio non troppo

Quasi Menuetto

Rondo: Allegro

Surprisingly, New York City seems to have pioneered in performing works of Brahms long before he was generally known elsewhere. His lovely *Piano Trio in B major*, Opus 8, was given its première here on this side of The Pond on November 25, 1855, as part of the first of William Mason’s renowned chamber music series of concerts, when the young composer from Hamburg was only 32 and mostly unknown even in his native Germany. And the first performance outside Germany of the *Serenade No. 2 in A major*, Opus 16, for chamber orchestra, was played on February 1, 1862, by the New York Philharmonic Society, as it was then known, conducted by German-born Carl Bergmann (who in three years would be conducting the Philharmonic in a memorial concert for the recently assassinated Abraham Lincoln, having selected a program that included Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, though tactfully omitting the final “Ode to Joy” movement as being “too jubilant” to be appropriate to the occasion).

At the time of the composition of both his Serenades, Brahms was living in the small German village of Detmold, where for the last four months of each year, beginning in 1856, he was engaged to conduct the local choral society, act as court pianist and give piano lessons to Prince Leopold’s daughter Fredericke. The salary was not princely, but Brahms enjoyed the work

because it gave him time to compose and because he could stroll daily in the neighboring Teutoberger Forest. He wrote his Aunt Augusta:

I feel transported when I behold these wooded heights again and walk into this marvelous forest. I have not seen such a marvelous place for a year. I think only of music, quite ecstatically. I feel like writing love-songs again. [This from a 23-year-old whom one would hardly have expected to move *out* of the “love-song” period yet!]

But life in Detmold was not all forests and free time. Though he made some good friends, the major part of what passed for “society” was provincial at best in this chocolate-box principality; for example, Brahms had to conduct a chorus of young matrons, among its members many of the town gossips, and richly adorned with other “Serene Highnesses,” as he sarcastically called them, who were generally appalled at his lack of social grace and inveterate sloppy clothes. “The other day,” he wrote his mother, “I conducted my rehearsal without a necktie. Fortunately I was not at all embarrassed or vexed, as I only noticed it when I got ready for bed.”

Part of his duties consisted in providing occasional music for the small orchestra sustained by Prince Leopold and his music-loving wife, and soon after he arrived he began making plans for a couple of Serenades in the manner of the light-hearted works of Haydn and Mozart called “cassations.” (The first of Brahms’s two, in D major, Opus 11, was last played by the North Shore Symphony Orchestra on December 11, 1999, under the baton of Maestra Deaver.)

The second Serenade, in A major, Opus 16, was only partially finished in time for his dear friend Clara Schumann’s birthday in the autumn of 1859. Along with his written dedication of the music to her he sent the second and third movements individually, asking particularly how she liked the *Adagio*: “Give full vent to your opinions!” Eight days later she replied: “I can find no words for the joy it has given me. It is as if I were looking one by one at the stamens of an exquisite blossom. Incredibly beautiful! In its serenity it could almost be a [*Kyrie*] *Eleison*. As for the Minuet, I find it utterly charming, especially the lissome oboe solo with its soaring melody . . . “

Brahms, who sometimes had doubts about what he was currently working on, seems this time to have enjoyed his own music almost as much as Clara did. Later that spring, he wrote to their mutual friend violinist Joseph Joachim, “I have been arranging my Second Serenade for piano four hands. Don’t laugh! I had the greatest joy in it. Seldom have I written musical notes with such extreme pleasure. The tones permeated my being so gently and so lovingly that I was delighted through and through!” (The Serenade was finished later that year, 1859, but considerably revised in 1875, when Brahms also enlarged the size of the orchestra.)

The first public performance was given by the Hamburg Philharmonic on February 10, 1860, Brahms conducting—a significant success. Three years later, after he had permanently moved to Vienna to live, another performance was eagerly scheduled, but the Vienna Philharmonic musicians, complaining of the “exorbitant” difficulty of the parts, almost staged an open rebellion. Finally the conductor, Otto Dessoff, who loved the piece, smoothed feelings over, and the performance on March 8, 1863 (one year later than the New York première) was again a triumph.

The influential Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick wrote: “Brahms has showed himself an independent, original individual, a finely organized, true musical nature, an artist ripening towards mastery by means of unwearied, conscious endeavor.” (When was the last time you read music criticism like *that?*) Hanslick compared the A major, Opus 16, to its earlier companion, the Serenade in D major, Opus 11, as the “younger, tenderer sister in an even more peaceful, dreamy garden mood,” and mentioned the audience’s applause, “which grew heartier even as the composer, in his gallery seat, grew ever more modest and reluctant to receive its praise.”

Perhaps the most striking quality of the Second Serenade is its unique tone color, which is due primarily to the absence of any violins. Violas as the highest-sounding string instruments, plus violoncelli and double basses, give a strikingly rich but somber hue to the orchestra (“Eight or more violas, six violoncellos, and four double basses, or something like that, seem good to me,” Brahms wrote to another conductor. “And of course it depends on how they play!”)

The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, is typical Brahms with its see-sawing melody, rising and falling, launching the sonata-allegro form, with softly glowing clarinets soon rounding out the texture, along with the silvery gleam of flutes. The second theme, a rocking figure for two clarinets in parallel thirds, lingers in the memory.

The Scherzo enters with a lively bounce, enlivened by one of Brahms’s favorite devices: the cross-play of two beats against three. Woodwinds dominate the Trio.

The ensuing *Adagio non troppo* offers not only the central portion of the Serenade but its crowning emotional peak as well. A haunting theme is heard in bare octaves from the entire string section, and eventually a sensuous song from the woodwinds is enriched with the mahogany glow of horns. A concluding section returns to the original *ostinato*, answered by a delicate contrapuntal web of melodies derived from it.

The fourth movement is almost but not quite a minuet. Its gently rocking pattern supplies a nice symmetrical balance to the preceding Scherzo.

The Finale, marked *Allegro*, is a light-footed, dance-like rondo, filled with high spirits and delicate humor. One of the contrasting episodes is a delicious oboe solo, and the movement ends with a rush of brilliance surmounting a brief coda.

— INTERMISSION —

Symphony No. 7, in A major, Opus 92

by Ludwig Van Beethoven (*born in Bonn on December 16, 1770; died in Vienna on March 26, 1827*)

Poco sostenuto—Vivace

Allegretto

Presto

Allegro con brio

It was the brilliant, handsome and charming Andrei Razumovsky, one of Russia's leading diplomats, who introduced Beethoven to Alexander I, Tsar of Russia, though we are not quite sure when. It must have been some time before 1802. Alexander, whose dates are almost exactly those of Beethoven (he was born in 1777 and died in 1825), was an enthusiastic supporter of all the arts, though he played no instrument, wielded no pen and plied no brush. Beethoven always doted on royalty in his alternately fawning and suspicious fashion, and, as it turned out, both Alexander and his Tsarina, Elisabeth Alexeyevna, doted on Beethoven and his music in equal degree. He dedicated music to them; they in turn rewarded him with such splendid gifts as an enormous diamond and a handsomely pedigreed Arabian steed (which ate so much hay that Beethoven could barely afford to feed it).

When the Tsar later visited Vienna in 1815 to play one of the more important roles in the Congress of Vienna, where he and the Austrians succeeded, after the stunning defeat of Napoléon, in rearranging greater Europe to their own greater glory, Beethoven met his benefactor once again, but did *not* dedicate his new Symphony in A major to him, as had been expected, though the music was finished as early as 1812. Instead that honor went to Ludwig's great friend Count Moritz von Fries, an unbelievably rich man with an unbelievably opulent lifestyle. An art collector and passionate music lover, he was co-owner of the Vienna bank Fries & Co. and had been one of three friends to guarantee Beethoven a generous annual pension until the Fries bank foundered in 1815 and went utterly bankrupt several years later, in 1826, whereupon the Count fled to Paris where he died a couple of months later. Fortunately Beethoven had other affluent friends so his own income was always secure, though he loved to present himself as being always on the verge of financial ruin.

It was probably as early as 1801 that the composer unburdened himself in a long letter to his friend the violinist Wenzel Krumpholz, about the direction he felt his own musical life should be taking. No one would have had a better understanding of his considerable ambitions. The two men had been close friends for several years; their thoughts were in complete agreement, on matters both musical and political. Beethoven not only sought and occasionally took Krumpholz's advice but continued to study violin with him for several years after he arrived in Vienna, meanwhile falling into the affectionate habit of addressing him from time to time as "my loyal old clown."

In this letter Beethoven confided that he was not really satisfied with the quality of the compositions he had thitherto finished. He wished, he said, to strike out along more highly original paths. Karl Czerny, another of the composer's intimate circle of friends, reckons that this change in Beethoven's musical ambitions came to fruition in 1810, just about the time he began work on the Symphony No. 6 (nicknamed the "Pastoral," and last heard in these concerts on May 10, 2008) and the Symphony No. 7 (heard this evening). Certainly Beethoven's newest works would be judged by the discriminating ear to excel his earlier ones, handsome though

those were. Beginning with Opus 67 (the Fifth Symphony, in C minor) we realize that we are hearing a magnificent new freedom of invention, a fresh richness of harmony, an extended, almost architectural concept of design.

Beethoven himself conducted the première of his new Symphony on December 8, 1813, in the Hall of the University of Vienna as a benefit for wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers. The first New York performance took place thirty years later, on November 18, 1843, by the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Ureli Corelli Hill, an American born and bred, despite his bizarre name, though he studied violin and composition with Louis Spohr in Germany. (Hill's brother, an actor, was named Georg Handel "Yankee" Hill, the "Yankee" because he specialized in "down-home" characters.)

The slow introduction to the Symphony's first movement is long and richly developed. It leads to a fast section, *Vivace*, based on a lightly skipping figure which caused composer Hector Berlioz to label the movement "a peasant rondelay." Soon the tempo becomes so madcap that it actually confused Beethoven's bourgeois audience, causing another well-known composer, Karl Maria von Weber, to exclaim that Ludwig was now "quite ripe for the madhouse."

The second movement is marked *Allegretto*, though there is very little that is light or frivolous about it. It begins with chords in the wind instruments, less a melody than a heartbeat, which becomes a series of variations, around which violas and cellos weave a melancholy strain that eventually grows to a poignant climax, whereupon melodic fragments rise in whispers and the movement ends with an echoing sigh from the violins. It is one of Beethoven's strangest and most haunting symphonic movements.

The burly peasant dance that follows is an explosive contrast, buoyant in its rhythm, kaleidoscopic in its color, rough and tumble in its wit.

The final movement drives like a dancing whirlwind in its hectic speed and energy. Indeed, later in the century composer Richard Wagner, ardent in his worship of Beethoven, famously called the Symphony, and particularly this movement, "the apotheosis of the dance." The opening theme may remind the listener of a vast Virginia Reel, but it soon develops into a cosmic commotion that leaves any ordinary dance pattern far behind, sweeping on and on in a kind of bacchantic fury to climax after climax until it concludes in a coda of grandeur past description.

—*Musical annotations specially written by Clair W. Van Ausdall*

for Maestra Susan Elizabeth Deaver and the North Shore Symphony Orchestra