



About the Music

by Andy & Beth Buelow

Brahms & Dvořák

2:30 p.m. Sun., Feb. 22, 2015

Rialto Theater

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Finlandia (1900)

Written as a protest against censorship by the ruling Russian Government, Sibelius's *Finlandia* was an immediate hit and remains the most famous and popular work by this Finnish composer. It was the finale of a set of pieces written to accompany an extended stage pageant presenting important happenings in Finnish history, held during the Press Celebrations of 1899. Sibelius revised the eight-minute symphonic poem the following year; the Helsinki Philharmonic premiered this version in 1900.

Along with such works as Ravel's *Bolero* and Holst's *The Planets* (to be performed during our season finale concert in May), *Finlandia* belongs to the class of pieces whose popularity annoyed and/or embarrassed their creators. In the decades after its premiere, it was arranged for military bands, piano solo, chorus, and even marimba! Much to Sibelius's chagrin, lyrics were written to accompany its closing hymn tune. To this day it represents Finnish nationalism and is widely held as an international ode to humanity and freedom.

When listening to this highly pictorial work, it is not hard to follow the ongoing struggle and eventual triumph of the Finnish people. The piece starts out on a portentous, ominous note, and moves through periods of challenge and conflict with heavy use of brass and timpani. This is followed by quieter sections featuring woodwinds and strings with themes that convey heaviness and unrest. The turbulence builds to a rousing climax, in which we can almost see the people arising in insurrection and protest. The energy subsides gradually into calm, ushering in the beautiful, hopeful "Finlandia" hymn. The piece builds to its vibrant conclusion, in which conflict and protest are replaced by triumph and joy.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Concerto in D Major (1878)

A dedicated introvert who lived alone his entire adult life, Brahms formed a number of devoted friendships, the deepest and most lasting of which was the great Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim. The two met as young men in their 20s; Joachim was already a well-known soloist but Brahms still relatively obscure. Over the ensuing years Joachim became known not only as a violinist but also as a conductor and composer of no little ability, and Brahms would consult with him frequently on his own works. It was thus only natural that Brahms entered into a full collaboration with Joachim in composing the Violin Concerto in D. Much of this took place by mail correspondence, with the two exchanging ideas over the course of 1878, until they finally

got together for a trial performance late in the year. Brahms dedicated the work to his friend, inviting him to perform as soloist for its official premiere in Leipzig in 1879.

Brahms sketched out the work originally in four movements, more like a symphony than a traditional concerto, but ultimately replaced the two inner movements with what he disparagingly called a “feeble adagio.” Even so, the scale of the resulting work was such that it was regarded as virtually a symphony with solo violin part. Conductor Hans von Bülow famously remarked that Brahms had written a concerto not for but against the violin. Violinist Bronislaw Huberman, some years later, went a step further: “It is a concerto for violin against the orchestra—and the violin wins.”

The first movement is in sonata-allegro form, but with a double exposition, one for the orchestra and one led by the violin. The movement is marked by contrast, with a long, lyrical opening orchestral exposition of great grandeur. This is followed by an aggressive and portentous secondary theme in D minor that introduces the solo violin. The violin weaves together elements of both themes, resulting in a mood that is alternately rapturous and severe. Soloist and orchestra are seemingly engaged in mortal combat one moment, only to be dancing arm in arm the next.

The so-called “feeble Adagio” is perhaps the most achingly beautiful of all Brahms’ music. It opens with one of the most lovely and poignant oboe solos in the repertoire. Apparently violinist Pablo de Sarasate eschewed this concerto on the grounds that he refused “to stand on the platform, violin in hand, to listen to the oboe playing the only real tune in the whole work.” It is hard to sympathize with this viewpoint given the incredible beauty of the violin part that follows.

If the final movement seems somehow familiar, it may be because it formed the inspiration for the song “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina,” from the Lloyd Webber-Rice musical *Evita*. In contrast to the rest of the concerto, it is neither severe nor poignant, but unabashedly and boisterously jolly. The flavor is reminiscent of the Hungarian gypsy violin style that both Brahms and Joachim loved, and a fitting tribute to their deep and fruitful musical friendship.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No. 8 in G, Op. 88 (1889)

While full of dramatic fervor, Dvořák’s Symphony No. 8 is more reflective of time in the country, of natural surroundings, bird-like motifs and graceful dances. The work is sometimes called the “English” symphony because of its early performance and publication in England, but it is most certainly Czech in flavor. It is thought that with this symphony, Dvořák found his own voice, after many years of mimicking and composing in the shadow of the Germanic tradition, and in particular, the works of Brahms. He wrote of a wish to compose a work that was “different from the other symphonies, with individual thoughts worked out in a new way.” Dvořák was apparently successful; the Symphony No. 8, completed in 1889, is so replete with beautiful

melodies, Brahms was inclined to respond to a critic of Dvořák's work, "I would be happy if one of his passing thoughts occurred to me as a main idea."

In the opening, **Allegro con brio**, in addition to introducing multiple themes without any extended development, Dvořák switches between G major and G minor, giving the music added intensity and interest. The second movement, **Adagio**, is a poignant, somewhat moody contrast to what came before. Of particular beauty is Dvořák's scoring for the two clarinet voices and lilting answers by the flutes and violins. Before the serenity has a chance to lull you into complacency, the mood shifts to almost Mahler-like proportions, with commanding brass fanfares and timpani punctuation. Its bravado makes the return of the delicate melody almost seem comical. The third movement, **Allegro grazioso**, has the feel of a folksy waltz. The trumpets boldly announce the final movement, **Allegro Ma Non Troppo**. The celli and strings answer with a lush, expressive melody that is soon interrupted by an abrupt quickening of the tempo and a glorious horn line. What follows are inventive variations that range in mood from wild folk dancing to quiet reflection. Dvořák brings back the whirlwind dance melody one last time, leaving us breathless and back on the edge of our seat.