

CHARLOTTESVILLE
SYMPHONY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

PROGRAM NOTES FOR FEBRUARY 17 & 18, 2018

***Ricercar* (2015)**

Nathan Shields

Born 28 September 1983 in Traverse City, Michigan

Approximate duration 8 minutes

- Shields is a young American who derives inspiration from the past.
- *Ricercar* adapts an ancient form using modernist orchestral language.
- Listen for dramatic shifts in volume and orchestral color as tension builds and subsides.

Nathan Shields was certain he would grow up to be a professional cellist. He'd started the instrument as a child, and rapidly cultivated his natural talent. Then instinct intervened. "I was relentlessly distractible" he recalls, "and when I sat down to practice scales or etudes, I would always get derailed, improvising instead." His high school cello teacher, who had studied composition herself, suggested that perhaps he was demonstrating a passion and aptitude for composition.

Her intuition was spot on. She started teaching him composition as well as cello. Shields continued in composition at New England Conservatory with Lee Hyla and David Rakowski, then at Juilliard for his masters and doctorate with Milton Babbitt and Samuel Adler. Today he is based in New York, teaching both privately and in a part-time academic position - and composing. He won the 2014 Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and has had performances and residencies in distinguished venues throughout the United States.

Shields acknowledges eclectic influences in his music, spanning the centuries from Renaissance polyphony to 20th-century Expressionism. He writes in a contemporary voice that is distinctly his own, emphasizing color, dynamic contrast and mood intensity. He views *Ricercar* as deeply indebted to the Germanic art music tradition, specifically to Bach and Brahms (with a particular nod to the *chaconne* finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony). His composer's note explains:

During the Baroque, the term *Ricercar* came to designate an instrumental work of a particular form and character, a kind of archaic predecessor to the fugue whose slow-moving lines and stately polyphony looked back the sacred vocal music of the Renaissance, even while its creeping, often anguished harmonies kept it firmly rooted in an uncertain present.

My own *Ricercar* is not an essay in the Baroque genre, but rather an attempt to capture what I take to be its spirit—to recreate, within my own idiom, its fascinating synthesis of serenity and unease. The work opens in near-silence, as high, quiet pulsations in the double bass alternate with slow, menacing fragments of melody in the winds. These mysterious fragments gradually grow and cohere into long, arching melodies which, like the themes of

a fugue, weave in and out of one another in increasingly lush and elaborate configurations. The musical fabric is drawn ever tighter until it contracts into an explosive climax, after which the piece begins its slow retreat into the quiet with which it opened. Its final sound, like its first, is the high, insistent pulsation of the double bass, hovering over the silent orchestra like a question mark.

Shields identifies two other influences lurking within *Ricercar*. One is Wagner's prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, "evident particularly in the yearning plangency of its melodic lines." The other is the early, pre-twelve-tone music of Arnold Schoenberg. "Both Wagner and Schoenberg were deeply concerned with their inheritance from the immediate past," he observes, "but they looked beyond it to a much older past – Greek tragedy and Norse legend for Wagner, Rabbinic Judaism for Schoenberg – hoping to find a way to address the turmoil of their own time."

Similarly, Shields says, he seeks "ways in which music may be brought to bear on both our present solitude and our larger crisis of meaning. As the case of Wagner suggests, the attempt to address this crisis can go terribly wrong. But that it exists, and that it needs addressing, seems to me undeniable."

Ricercar is one of several works Shields has composed that pursue this goal. "It is saturated with quiet anxiety, particularly at its beginning and end, contrasting strangely with the archaic quality of its counterpoint. And its orchestral climaxes, for all their seeming cathartic intensity, leave its underlying tensions unresolved."

Shields composed *Ricercar* in 2015 for Benjamin Rous and Greenwood Music Camp in Massachusetts.

The score calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, large cymbal, maraca and strings.

Trumpet Concerto in E-flat major, Hob. VIIe:1

Franz Joseph Haydn

Born 31 March 1732 in Rohrau, Austria

Died 31 May 1809 in Vienna

Approximate duration 15 minutes

- This concerto was Haydn's last purely orchestral composition.
- Listen for intimate dialogue between trumpet and orchestra in the first movement.
- Lyricism in the low register adds gentleness to Haydn's pastoral slow movement.
- Octave leaps add brilliance to the finale.

Most of Haydn's instrumental concertos were composed early in his career for individual members of the fine Esterházy court orchestra. The E-flat trumpet concerto, one of his most beloved works, is an exception. Haydn wrote it in 1796, when he was in his mid-60s, and after his two successful trips to London in the 1790s. He was stimulated by the invention of a new keyed trumpet by one Anton Weidinger, trumpeter in the Viennese imperial court.

Weidinger's trumpet had more latitude in its lower range. The keys on the instrument permitted the trumpeter to produce more pitches, particularly chromatic tones, not available on the earlier trumpet. The disadvantage of the new instrument was a loss of brilliant tone. Eventually – about 1820 – the keyed trumpet gave way to the valve trumpet, which prevails in the modern symphony orchestra.

Ironically, after its initial appearance in the 1790s, Haydn's concerto was virtually unknown until the early 20th century. A reduction for trumpet and piano appeared in 1929, then the original version for trumpet and orchestra was published in 1931. Since then, the piece has been central to the trumpet's concerto literature.

Haydn's concerto takes full advantage of the possibilities of the Weidinger trumpet. Though the work is so familiar to us, we cannot lose sight of the experimental spirit of Haydn's music. Always the innovator, he was the first to fully explore the potential of the keyed trumpet. His adaptation has become a staple of the trumpet repertoire, and is considered to be the finest of the instrumental concertos.

Ms. Duncan plays a cadenza in the first movement inspired by Wynton Marsalis's cadenza.

Haydn's score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, solo trumpet and strings.

IN THE SOLOIST'S WORDS

Program annotator Laurie Shulman asked Principal Trumpet Rachel Duncan about the concerto she performs this weekend.

Laurie Shulman: *Why is the Haydn Trumpet Concerto so important to your instrument's literature?*

Rachel Duncan: The trumpet community is indebted to Haydn for not only gifting us with our most popular solo concerto, but also for paving the way for future composers to write for trumpet as a melodic and soloistic instrument. In the Classical era, the trumpet's brilliant sound and articulation were valued. With the addition of keys to the instrument, we were one step closer to becoming a true melodic instrument.

LS: *Did Haydn envision an instrument with the flexibility of Weidinger's new keyed trumpet and the brilliance of a natural trumpet?*

RD: He was surely drawn to the brilliance and projection of the trumpet. Unfortunately, the keyed trumpet took away some of that brilliance, but I would like to believe that Haydn envisioned the capabilities of the modern trumpet. Valves were added in the 19th century, giving modern trumpets flexibility and brilliance. Haydn would have been quite pleased!

LS: *When did you first become acquainted with Haydn's concerto?*

RD: My Dad was my first trumpet teacher. When I was about 13, he thought it was a good age to introduce me to this piece. It was my first "serious" composition – unless you consider Aladdin's "A Whole New World" serious! My Dad presented the Haydn with the care and respect this piece deserves. The second movement is simple and beautiful. I remember loving being able to express myself in such a lyrical way. It was rewarding to discover repertoire written for trumpet that was so melodic, delicate and beautiful.

LS: *Do you have a favorite movement or passage in the Haydn?*

RD: It's hard to choose a favorite movement or moment in this concerto. The slow movement has a vocal quality that speaks to me as a kind of lullaby. Haydn's melodic trumpet line, in 6/8 meter, is innocently beautiful, precious and simple. It makes me envision an infant being rocked to sleep. In the first and last movements, I love how Haydn showcases his playfulness by weaving in and out of trumpet techniques both old and new. He features the then-new keyed trumpet through use of chromatic and melodic figures - then follows those lines with little fanfares, which I perceive as a joke to the old natural trumpet.

LS: *Have you performed the Haydn previously with orchestra?*

RD: No, this weekend is a career first for me! I would like to thank our new music director, Benjamin Rous, and the Charlottesville Symphony for giving me the opportunity to perform the Haydn Trumpet Concerto.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73

Johannes Brahms

Born 7 May, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany

Died 3 April, 1897 in Vienna, Austria

Approximate duration 43 minutes

- Summer music! Think sunshine, blue skies, and gorgeous mountain scenery.
- Listen for a hint of the Brahms Lullaby theme in the first movement.
- All four movements are in major mode. Brahms was thinking good weather, good mood, good times.

Alpine paradise

"So many melodies fly about that one must be careful not to tread on them." So wrote Johannes Brahms to friends in Vienna during the summer of 1877. His rapturous observation was prompted by the beautiful mountain village of Pörtlach am Wörthersee in the province of Carinthia. Brahms enjoyed Pörtlach enough to return for two additional summers, producing along the way three major works of strikingly similar spirit: the D major Symphony, Op.73 (1877), the D major Violin Concerto, Op.77 (1878) and the G major Violin Sonata, Op.78 (1879).

Of the three, the Second Symphony is perhaps the most amazing, not because it is better than the other two, but because it is so different from what preceded it. Brahms labored over his First Symphony for two decades. Always his own most severe critic, he waited until he had reworked musical material, forging it into a form that met his own high standards. Consequently, the First Symphony reflects musical ideas – and internal struggle – dating back as early as 1854.

Floodgates opened: composing with ease

By contrast, the Second Symphony unfolded naturally and rapidly, ready for its premiere barely more than a year on the heels of its predecessor. It is as if the floodgates were opened; the next symphony poured out of him with fluid grace. Once Brahms had cleared the hurdle of that first major orchestral work, ideas streamed forth from him, and such ideas! "It is all rippling

streams, blue sky, sunshine and cool green shadows. How beautiful it must be at Pörtlach!" exclaimed the composer's friend Theodor Billroth, upon hearing the new symphony played through at the piano.

Brahms's 'Pastoral' Symphony

Often called "Brahms's 'Pastoral'", Op.73 overflows with the dappled sunlight and exquisite natural beauty of the Austrian Alps. It is nearly devoid of the tension and tragic struggle that permeate the First Symphony. Eduard Hanslick, the powerful Viennese critic, spoke of its "untroubled charm." Yet the symphony is not without urban sophistication. Michael Musgrave has written: "The Second Symphony opens in the world of the symphonic waltz, as made familiar in Vienna by Johann Strauss, Jr." Confounding us further, Brahms expands his orchestra to include trombones and bass tuba in three of the four movements. Their brassy presence is belied by the tenderness and intimacy of his music. Brahms's biographer Karl Geiringer has noted:

The whole atmosphere of this work is reflected in its instrumentation, which is more delicate, more translucent, and definitely brighter than that of the First Symphony, the pastoral flutes, oboes, and clarinets receiving particularly prominent parts.

The seductive power of waltzes

The first movement is in gentle, swaying triple time. While not unprecedented in a symphonic first movement (Mozart's #39 and Beethoven's "Eroica" are the most famous examples), triple time was still unusual in Brahms' day. Far from apologizing for it, he emphasized it with a frankly waltz-like second subject, closely related to his beloved Lullaby. Though it has dramatic moments, notably a fugal development section, the first movement firmly establishes an aura of benign geniality that prevails for most of the symphony. The coda includes a dreamy horn solo, one of those delicious scoring details that rewards careful listening.

Spotlight on cellos and low brass

The rich key of B major provides the backdrop for a rare hint of darkness in this predominantly sunny symphony. Brahms' slow movement, *Adagio non troppo*, begins with a luscious, expressive cello melody. Though the celli relinquish the melody at its second statement, they reclaim it several times, and retain a high profile throughout the movement. Surprisingly, Brahms emphasizes the darker sound of the lower instruments by retaining timpani, trombones and bass tuba in his scoring; frequently they remain silent in slow movements.

A transitional passage switches meter from 4/4 to 12/8, ushering in a contrasting middle section in B minor. Clouds temporarily obliterate the sunshine before a poignant oboe solo reintroduces the cello melody of the beginning.

The Schubert connection

Timpani and low brass disappear in the *Allegretto grazioso*. More an intermezzo than a scherzo, this gentle movement rocks gracefully between major and minor modes, recalling similar ambivalence in Schubert. Its two intervening trio sections (one in 2/4, the other in 3/8), have a

sprightlier character, but still draw their melodic motives from the *Allegretto*. Both trios include some fine woodwind passages.

Contrapuntal *tour de force*

Brahms the contrapuntalist is in rare form in the finale, applying virtually every technique in the imitative book. After a bright start for strings alone, he takes maximum advantage of the episodes in this sonata-rondo for ingenious contrapuntal feats. Canon and inversion, augmentation and diminution, fugato: all are incorporated with consummate skill. The sunshine of the first movement is definitively restored, with a healthy dash of Haydnesque exuberance thrown in for good measure.

Brahms' Second Symphony is scored for flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass tuba, timpani and strings.



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