

CHARLOTTESVILLE
SYMPHONY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

PROGRAM NOTES FOR NOVEMBER 17 & 18, 2018

Overture to *Semiramide*

Gioacchino Rossini

Born 29 February, 1792 in Pesaro, Italy

Died 13 November, 1868 in Passy, near Paris, France

Approximate duration: 12 minutes

There have been no previous performances of this work by the Charlottesville Symphony.

- *Semiramide* is the the most soloistic of Rossini's overtures.
- Listen for a quartet of horns in the slow introduction.
- A rapid repeated note dominates the Allegro section.
- Rossini's overture employs a typical recipe, building through a giant crescendo to the climax.

The Rossini Overture is practically a genre unto itself. Few other composers have had so many operatic overtures find such a congenial second home in the concert hall. The reasons for Rossini's success in this realm are manifold. His melodies are irresistible, and his sense of orchestration impeccable. Further, he has a signature: the Rossini *crescendo*. Virtually all audiences recognize it and respond to it. Yet his overtures are flexible in approach, and not at all formulaic. Rossini sculpts his material differently in each one. Rossini biographer Richard Osborne has written:

In its stabilized form, the Rossini overture involves a slow introduction, first and second subjects, a recapitulation, and a coda. The whole thing is a functionally elegant scaling down of a classical sonata form movement which Rossini proceeds to transform by the outstanding quality of his invention.

Semiramide is one of Rossini's lengthier overtures, clocking in at approximately twelve minutes. That makes it comparable in duration -- though not in form -- to the *William Tell* overture. The scope of the *Semiramide* overture corresponds to the size and spaciousness of the opera it introduces. Characteristically, Rossini uses several themes from the opera as the basis for his instrumental prelude.

The plot of *Semiramide* (pronounced *Seh-mee-RAH-mee-deh*) is based on the French philosopher Voltaire's tragedy *Sémiramis* (1748). It deals with episodes in the life of the Queen of Assyria, and is categorized as an *opera seria* rather than an *opera buffa*. The two-act score was first premiered at Venice's Teatro La Fenice in 1823. It proved to be the last opera Rossini wrote in his native Italy. After a brief sojourn in London, he moved to Paris the following year and settled permanently in the French capital.

This overture became extremely popular in Rossini's day and was transcribed for numerous other instruments and ensembles. Its most distinctive feature is the rich *andantino* passage for four

horns that dominates the slow introduction after an opening flourish from the timpani and strings. The composer's essentially sunny temperament shines through this segment and the sprightly repeated note theme that anchors the body of the overture. Divorced from the opera, the overture seems far removed from dramatic tragedy. A military crispness to the rhythmic motives helps to imbue the music with vigor and vitality.

Rossini scored his overture for piccolo, woodwinds in pairs, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, cymbals, timpani, bass drum and strings.

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op.14

Samuel Barber

Born 9 March, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died 23 January, 1981 in New York City

Approximate duration: 25 minutes

There have been no previous performances of this work by the Charlottesville Symphony.

- Barber's roots were in vocal music; this concerto sings throughout.
- Departing from traditional concerto technique, the first movement explores lyrical, rhapsodic realms.
- The finale makes up for it in a perpetual motion whirlwind of violin fireworks.

During the first half of the twentieth century, violin soloists appearing with orchestras favored a relatively small repertoire of concerti. The four nineteenth-century German titans – Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch and Brahms – accounted for a disproportionate number of violin concerto performances. Tchaikovsky, Wieniawski and Saint-Saëns were close runners-up, and the Lalo *Symphonie espagnole* had a number of champions attracted by its sparkle and Latin panache. In the second half of the twentieth century, tastes expanded and shifted. Mozart's relatively early violin concerti became mainstream and Bach's concerti found their way into the concert hall with some regularity. Contemporary composers whose music was cutting-edge before the Second World War — Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Bartók, even Sibelius — were less threatening to audiences that had become more acclimated to their musical language. With the exception of Sibelius, their violin concerti have not become audience favorites, but these works receive occasional performances and are accepted as important contributions to the literature.

If we consider that background, the astonishing success of Samuel Barber's violin concerto is all the more remarkable. To begin with, Barber was American. The United States was an upstart country and its classical composers were slow to gain acceptance here or abroad.

Barber's early successes were legion. By the time he completed the Violin Concerto in 1939, he had already established a solid reputation with his Overture to *The School for Scandal* (1931), *Dover Beach* (1931) Sonata for Cello and Piano (1932), *Music for a Scene from Shelley* (1933), the ubiquitous *Adagio for Strings* (1936; originally part of his String Quartet), his First Symphony (in one movement, 1936) and the *First Essay for Orchestra* (1937). The legendary Arturo Toscanini, who was not known for his interest in new music – let alone American music – became a proponent of Barber's work. For a young man in his mid-twenties, these were impressive achievements.

Barber went on to fulfill his early promise. Among other works, he completed several important operas, most notably *Vanessa* (1956) and *Antony and Cleopatra*, with which the new Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center opened in 1966. But nothing in his *oeuvre* other than the *Adagio* has captured the popular imagination like the Violin Concerto. And no American violin concerto in this century has so entranced great violinists. What is it about this work that draws us back to it again and again?

To better understand his Violin Concerto, we must consider Barber himself. Born into a stable upper middle class family, he pursued his formal musical education at the newly-formed Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Barber was a renaissance man with a keen intellect. In addition to music, he cultivated interests in art and literature. He spoke French, German, Italian and Spanish with ease, and read voraciously in all his languages. With respect to music, his persona was influenced substantially by his aunt and uncle, Louise and Sidney Homer. Louise was an important contralto; Sidney a respected composer of art songs. Barber was one of the few modern composers to receive formal training as a singer, and his sensitivity to vocal line is a defining aspect of his music, even the instrumental works.

He certainly brought this gift to the Violin Concerto. Its first two movements combine Brahmsian eloquence with Mendelssohnian melody; its perpetual motion finale is a dazzlingly difficult *tour de force* for the soloist. The concerto was Barber's first major commission. He undertook the work at the behest of Samuel Fels, a member of the Curtis Institute board and the owner of the Fels Naptha soap fortune. Fels intended the concerto for his adopted son, Iso Briselli, a gifted young violinist. Barber spent the summer of 1939 in Sils-Maria, Switzerland, completing the first two movements. With war imminent, American citizens were advised to leave Europe. Barber completed the concerto the following summer in Pocono Lake Preserve, Pennsylvania. When he presented Briselli with the finale, the violinist was dissatisfied. According to Barber's biographer Barbara Heyman:

Many years later, Briselli offered [an] explanation in which he professes that although he believed the first two movements of the concerto were beautiful and eagerly awaited the finale, he was disappointed with the third movement as 'too lightweight' compared to the rest of the concerto. He suggested that the middle section be expanded to develop the movement into a sonata-rondo form, but Barber would not consider it.

Barber's commission, the proceeds of which he had already spent in Europe, was briefly in question. Eventually, he and Fels negotiated a compromise whereby Barber would retain his fee and Briselli would forego his right to première the work. That honor went to Albert Spalding in February, 1941. The composer wrote the following description of the work for the first performances:

It is lyric and rather intimate in character and a moderate-sized orchestra is used. . . . The first movement -- *allegro molto moderato*—begins with a lyrical first subject announced at once by the solo violin, without any orchestral introduction. This movement as a whole has perhaps more the character of a sonata than concerto form. The second movement — *andante sostenuto* — is introduced by an extended oboe solo. The violin enters with a contrasting and rhapsodic theme, after

which it repeats the oboe melody of the beginning. The last movement, a perpetual motion, exploits the more brilliant and virtuoso characteristics of the violin.

What he does not say is that his clear tonal language and unerring sense of drama make the Violin Concerto extraordinarily effective in performance. These are the factors that cause us to welcome its regular return to the concert hall.

Barber scored his Violin Concerto for woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani, piano, solo violin and strings. He adds military drum for the third movement only.

IN THE SOLOIST'S WORDS

Concertmaster Daniel Sender developed a fondness for American music early, through the symphonic repertoire. "I was instantly drawn to the open, expansive timbres of Copland's *Appalachian Spring* and *Fanfare for the Common Man*, the bustling energy of Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*, and the sublime beauty of the works of Barber," he confirms. "In particular, I recall a performance of Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* that really opened my eyes to the unique qualities of Barber's aesthetic. Like Schubert – another of my musical idols – Barber possessed a gift for producing simple melodies of transcendent beauty. His Violin Concerto has always appealed to me because of the power of its melodies and the way the orchestral forces work in such intricate symbiosis with the solo part."

He points out that Barber obviously knew the substantial concerto repertoire available to violinists when he set about writing his own. "As a violinist, I can share that far too many of our concerti (especially those written by violinists) are focused more on technical difficulty and virtuosity than the grace of the melodic writing and the subtleties of the orchestration," Sender declares. "One of things that I love about Barber's concerto is that it offers a compelling alternative to this paradigm. As a 'statement piece,' the concerto is all the more remarkable when one considers just how different the writing is compared to the musical style being propagated by the major European composers of the 1930s and 1940s."

Sender revels in the lyric beauty of the Barber concerto's first two movements, which are about sound, about creating moods and phrasing. The opening of the slow movement is a personal favorite. "There is no solo part at the beginning, so I can just listen and enjoy. The principal melody is introduced by the solo oboe before being passed around the orchestra. Principal Oboe Kelly Peral has such an incredibly lyrical, sweet sound – just perfect for this part!"

He acknowledges that Barber's total change in the finale is difficult to reconcile. "The third movement is unrelenting, flashy, and, in some ways, mechanical – in other words, exactly the opposite of the first two movements," he explains. "I can understand why Barber was asked to reconsider the last movement, but I'm glad he left it the way it is. It is splendid for what it is - a four-minute showpiece in perpetual motion."

Barber's synthesis of the Western post-romantic tradition with modernist touches appeals to Sender. "Like Copland, Barber explored a use of harmony and melodic writing that evolved into a distinctly American style," he says. "He did include compositional elements outside of his personal aesthetic. For example, the third movement – and even some passages of the second

movement – are rich in dissonance, straying purposefully from a traditional sense of tonality. I find it incredible how Barber was able to weave these disparate elements together so seamlessly.

“In fact, the entire score is rich with opportunities to be in dialogue with my friends and colleagues in the orchestra,” he adds. “I look forward to being inspired by their beautiful playing!” Sender also feels deeply connected to the Charlottesville audience. “Over the past seven years, many of you in the audience have become like an extended family – steadfastly supporting and encouraging me, and this orchestra, in so many ways. I give you my most heartfelt thanks, and I hope you enjoy the concert.”

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky

Born 7 May, 1840 in Votkinsk, Viatka district, Russia

Died 6 November, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Approximate duration: 44 minutes

Previous performances by the Charlottesville Symphony: March, 1980; April, 1992; March, 2001; and March 2008.

- Emotional, dramatic, and melodious, Tchaikovsky’s Symphony has it all.
- The famous horn solo in the slow movement is one of the glories of the literature.
- Cohesion, power, vulnerability, and emotionalism run the gamut in this symphony.

If Beethoven and Brahms were intellectual symphonists, Tchaikovsky favored the emotional side of the genre. As is the case with most generalizations, there are plenty of gray areas once one begins to elaborate on such statements. Tchaikovsky certainly understood the principles of musical form and development that he had learned during his conservatory training. In fact, he favored those ideals more than most of his Russian contemporaries. Many of them were caught up in a more specifically Russian nationalism, seeking to separate themselves from western musical models and embrace folk music and Russian orthodox church melodies into their art music. Even though Tchaikovsky was more classically oriented, he was still an intensely emotional man who regarded music ultimately as a lyrical medium. More to the point, he believed that the symphony was the most lyrical vessel in which to express musical ideas. For him, the symphony was a prism through which the innermost reaches of the human soul could be refracted.

The inherent conflict between these two approaches to the symphony — left brain/right brain, if you will — is at the heart of both the success and the flaws in Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony. There have always been critics of the formal shortcomings in his music, particularly his grasp of first movement sonata form. Yet this work has earned its enormous popularity because of an emotional immediacy in the music that reaches the listener on a very personal level. Is there any symphony more immediately moving and ingratiating than this one? From its opening measures, where the clarinet declaims a lugubrious Russian march tune, this symphony grips and retains our emotional involvement. Nowhere is Tchaikovsky less subtle, and nowhere is he more effective.

The lovely horn melody that dominates the famous slow movement is one of the triumphs of the symphonic literature: memorable and eminently singable, it stays with us for weeks after a hearing of this symphony.

And the waltz – a bow to Berlioz's similar ploy in the *Symphonie fantastique*, also replacing the scherzo – is graceful and alluring, ever a reminder that Tchaikovsky was the greatest ballet composer of the nineteenth century. His reliance on dance rhythms in this symphony, particularly waltzes and marches, contributes to its cyclic unity and emphasizes his innate gift as a composer for the ballet stage.

Tchaikovsky began work on his Fifth Symphony shortly after taking occupancy of his new country house at Frolovskoye, near Klin. He moved there in April 1888, and at first was entranced by gardening and the natural beauty of his surroundings. By midsummer, however, the urge to compose had returned. He commenced work on the E minor symphony, his first in over a decade, and was orchestrating by August. The premiere performances took place that autumn in St. Petersburg. Their failure depressed Tchaikovsky, whose opinion of his own new compositions tended to vacillate wildly with public and critical opinion. He was much encouraged by Johannes Brahms' kind words the following spring in Hamburg when the new symphony was first heard in Germany on tour. In a letter to his brother Modest from Hamburg in March 1889, he wrote:

Brahms stayed an extra day to hear my symphony and was very kind. We had lunch together after the rehearsal and quite a few drinks. He is very sympathetic and I like his honesty and open-mindedness. Neither he nor the players liked the Finale, which I also think rather horrible.

But two weeks later, from Hanover, this harsh self-criticism had passed, and he was able to write:

The Fifth Symphony was beautifully played and I have started to love it again -- I was beginning to develop an exaggerated negative opinion about it.

Like its predecessor, the stormy Fourth Symphony, the Fifth focuses on mankind's futile struggle with destiny. This is, however, a more spiritual work than the F minor symphony; specifically it deals with man's spiritual helplessness and inadequacy. These thoughts are most evident in the finale, which opens with great solemnity. But the entire symphony is filled with operatic crescendos and dramatic, sudden shifts in tempo, all of which bespeak a soul in torment, searching for its own catharsis.

Tchaikovsky scored his Fifth Symphony for three flutes (third doubling piccolo, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings.



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