SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT

December 4, 5 and 6, 2015

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN  
*Leonore Overture No. 3, Op. 72b*

JEAN SIBELIUS  
*Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47*  
Allegro moderato  
Adagio di molto  
Allegro; ma non tanto  
Karen Gomyo, violin

INTERMISSION

IGOR STRAVINSKY  
*Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)*  
PART I: Adoration of the Earth  
Introduction  
The Augurs of Spring – Dances of the Young Girls  
Ritual of Abduction  
Spring Rounds  
Ritual of the Rival Tribes  
Procession of the Sage  
The Sage  
Dance of the Earth

PART II: The Sacrifice  
Introduction  
Mystic Circle of the Young Girls  
Glorification of the Chosen One  
Evocation of the Ancestors  
Ritual Action of the Ancestors  
Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One)

*Leonore Overture No. 3, Op. 72b*
No other work gave Beethoven more trouble than his only opera, *Leonore*, which he retitled *Fidelio* during its final revision. This tale of political idealism, resistance to tyranny and marital fidelity comes to a climax when the heroine Leonore prepares to sacrifice her life to protect her imprisoned husband Florestan from the evil Pizarro. The couple is saved at the last minute by the arrival of the good minister Don Fernando, who has Pizarro arrested. Beethoven’s problems with the opera, which occupied him over a span of 11 years and took him through three different versions, are reflected in his problems devising a suitable overture: *Fidelio* is doubtless the only opera in existence to have four different overtures.

Some chronology is necessary here, for the territory is confusing. Shortly after composing the *Eroica* Symphony in 1803, Beethoven set to work on this opera, which took two years to complete. *Leonore* (Beethoven’s preferred title) was premiered in Vienna in November 1805 and on that occasion was prefaced by what we now know as the *Leonore Overture No. 2*. This version of the opera was not a success, and Beethoven subsequently revised it, trimming the number of acts from three to two. The overture had proven particularly difficult for the players, and for the premiere of the revised version in March 1806 Beethoven completely re-wrote it; this is the version known as *Leonore Overture No. 3*. And what about *Leonore Overture No. 1*? That one was apparently composed for a planned production in Prague in 1807 that never took place. The manuscript for this overture was discovered after the composer’s death and published in 1838 with the absurdly high opus number of 138. (It is in fact is Beethoven’s last opus number.)

In all three of the *Leonore* overtures he had written to that point, Beethoven faced what was essentially a dramatic rather than a musical problem: he composed an overture based on music that accompanies the multiple dramatic events of the opera’s final act (Leonore’s willingness to sacrifice herself, the last-minute arrival of Don Fernando and the arrest of Pizarro). This is powerful material, but it is far in the future when Act I opens with much more innocent activity – the frothy infatuation of the young Marzellina with the new jailer’s assistant. Any of these violently dramatic overtures seem wrong as an introduction to so light a beginning to the opera, and when the powerful *Leonore Overture No. 3* is used to open the opera, it
“annihilates the first act,” in the wonderful phrase of English musicologist Donald Francis Tovey.

Beethoven was aware of this problem. When he made his final revisions of the opera in 1814 (re-naming it Fidelio at that time), he composed the Fidelio Overture as the fourth – and most successful – of his overtures to this opera. A conventional curtain raiser, full of thrust and noble sentiment, it makes no use of musical material from the opera itself, and perhaps for this reason it has become a successful opening to the first act. However, many subsequent opera conductors (Mahler and Toscanini among them) have felt that the Leonore Overture No. 3 was too good to lose and so performed it as an introduction to the opera’s final scene, where it comes just after the fortuitous arrival of Don Fernando and just before the release of Florestan. In that position, the overture’s fiercely dramatic character makes good sense.

In the concert hall, of course, none of this matters, and the music can be taken on its own terms. The Leonore Overture No. 3 has become one of Beethoven’s most popular overtures, preserving some of the high drama of the opera and treating it in taut sonata form. The overture’s slow introduction opens with descending phrases (mirroring Florestan’s descent into the dark dungeon?), and woodwinds soon echo a phrase from his great aria at the beginning of Act II, In des Lebens Frühlinstagen, a sad account of how far he has fallen from his happy early life. Gradually the introduction grows more animated and settles into the Allegro, where the rising-and-falling melody in C Major becomes the main idea for the overture; Beethoven quickly syncopates this idea, and that rhythmic kick will animate much of the overture. There is gentler secondary material, but this too grows more turbulent. (This overture never relaxes for very long.) Matters reach a climax, and Beethoven breaks off the development with another quotation from the opera – the off-stage trumpet that heralds the dramatic arrival of Don Fernando in Act II. The coda brings one of the most famous (and difficult) passages in the orchestra repertory: all by themselves, a handful of violins (“due o tre violini,” says Beethoven in the score) race ahead over a sequence of rising scales. They are gradually joined by players from the other string sections and then from the full orchestra as Beethoven drives to a heroic close with music well-suited to this tale of the triumph of good over evil.
Sibelius composed his Violin Concerto – his only concerto – in 1903, between his Second and Third Symphonies. This was a time of transition for the 38-year-old composer, who was moving away from an early romantic style influenced by Tchaikovsky and toward a leaner, more concise language. Sibelius was dissatisfied when he heard the concerto premiered in Helsinki in 1904 by Viktor Novácek, and he revised it completely. The final version was first performed in Berlin on October 19, 1905, with Karl Halir as soloist and Richard Strauss conducting.

It is difficult to characterize this haunting music. The second movement may sing gracefully and the finale is full of energy, but the prevailing impression the concerto makes is of an icy brilliance, a craggy strength. Sibelius’ orchestral sonority emphasizes the darker lower voices – cellos, violas and bassoons – so that the violin, which often plays high in its range, sounds even more brilliant by contrast. Sibelius himself was a violinist who had hoped to make a career as a soloist before he (fortunately) gave up that dream and turned to composition, and he fills the solo part with complex technical hurdles. Long passages played in octaves, great leaps, sustained writing in the violin’s highest register, and such knotty problems as trilling on one string while simultaneously playing a melodic line on another make this one of the most difficult of all violin concertos.

The Allegro moderato opens with a quiet mist of string sound, and over this the solo violin presents the long, rhapsodic main theme: singing, dark, surging. Certain features of this theme – a triplet tag and a pattern of three descending notes – will assume important thematic functions as the movement develops. The originality of this movement appears in many ways. There are three main theme-groups instead of the expected two, but before we get to the second, Sibelius defies all expectations by giving the soloist a brief cadenza. The sober and steady second subject arrives in the dark sound of bassoons and cellos, while the vigorous third is stamped out by the violin sections. And then, another surprise: Sibelius presents the main cadenza – long and phenomenally difficult – before the development begins. After this lengthy and unusual exposition, the development and recapitulation are truncated and the ending is
abrupt: Sibelius drives with unremitting energy to the close, where the solo violin catapults to the top of its range as the orchestra seals off the cadence with fierce attacks.

Woodwind duets introduce the second movement before the violin enters with the intense main theme, played entirely on the G-string. This movement, in ternary form, rises to a great climax and falls back to end quietly and gently. The tempo indication for the last movement – Allegro, ma non tanto (Fast, but not too fast) – is crucial: timpani and low strings set the steady tread that marches along firmly throughout much of this movement. The violin’s vigorous dotted melody dominates this rondo, but even here the mood remains somber. This movement has been described in quite different ways. Donald Francis Tovey called it “a polonaise for polar bears,” while Sibelius is reported to have referred to it as a “danse macabre.” The concerto concludes as the violin climbs into its highest register and – with the entire orchestra – stamps out the concluding D.

Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)
IGOR STRAVINSKY
Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum
Died April 6, 1971, New York City
(Approx. 33 minutes)

In the spring of 1910, while completing the orchestration of The Firebird, Igor Stravinsky had the most famous dream in the history of music: “I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: wise elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dancing herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.” This idea became Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring), which Stravinsky began composing in the summer of 1911, immediately after the premiere of Petrushka. For help in creating a scenario that would evoke the spirit of pagan Russia, Stravinsky turned to the painter-archaeologist-geologist Nicholas Roerich, who summarized the action:

The first set should transport us to the foot of a sacred hill, in a lush plain, where Slavonic tribes are gathered together to celebrate the spring rites. In this scene there is an old witch, who predicts the future, a marriage by capture, round dances. Then comes the most solemn moment. The wise elder is brought from the village to imprint his sacred kiss on the new-flowering earth. During this rite the crowd is seized with a mystic terror. After this uprush of terrestrial joy, the second scene sets a celestial mystery before us.
Young virgins dance on the sacred hill amid enchanted rocks; they choose the victim they intend to honor. In a moment she will dance her last dance before the ancients clad in bearskins to show that the bear was man’s ancestor. Then the greybeards dedicate the victim to the god Yarilo.

This story of violence and nature-worship in pagan Russia – inspired in part by Stravinsky’s boyhood memories of the thunderous break-up of the ice on the Neva River in St. Petersburg each spring – became a ballet in two parts, *Adoration of the Earth* and *The Sacrifice*.

In the music, Stravinsky drew on the distant past and fused it with the modern. His themes (many adapted from ancient Lithuanian wedding tunes) are brief, of narrow compass, and based on the constantly-changing meters of Russian folk music. And yet his harmonic language can be fiercely dissonant and “modern,” particularly in the famous repeating chord in *Dances of the Young Girls*, where he superimposes an E-flat Major chord (with added seventh) on top of an F-flat Major chord. Even more striking is the rhythmic imagination that animates this score: Stravinsky himself confessed that parts were so complicated that while he could play them, he could not write them down. And beyond all these, *The Rite of Spring* is founded on an incredible orchestral sense: from the eerie sound of the high solo bassoon at the beginning through its use of a massive percussion section and such unusual instruments as alto flute and piccolo trumpet (not to mention the eight horns, two tubas and quadruple woodwind), this score rings with sounds never heard before. The premiere may have famously provoked a noisy riot, but at a more civilized level it had an even greater impact: no composer writing after May 29, 1913, would ever be the same.

Stravinsky came to prefer *The Rite of Spring* as a concert piece rather than a ballet, but some reference to the events of the ballet may be useful in following this music. The *Introduction* is scored almost exclusively for woodwinds: from the famous opening bassoon solo through its intricately twisting woodwind figures, the music is Stravinsky’s effort to suggest the wriggling of insects as they unfold and come to life in the spring thaw. This is suddenly interrupted by *Dances of the Young Girls*, driven along by stamping, dissonant chords and off-the-beat accents. The *Ritual of Abduction*, full of horn calls and furious rhythmic energy, rides a quiet trill into *Spring Rounds*, where together the E-flat and bass clarinets outline the haunting principal melody, another of the themes Stravinsky derived from ancient folk music. Deep string chords (which in the ballet accompany the male dancers lifting the girls onto their
backs) soon build to a cataclysmic climax full of the sound of tam-tam and trombone glissandos. The return of the wistful opening melody rounds this section off quietly, but that calm is annihilated by the timpani salvos and snarling low brass of *Ritual of the Rival Tribes*. The eight horns ring out splendidly here, and the music rushes ahead to the brief *Procession of the Sage* and then to one of the eeriest moments in the score, *Dance of the Earth*. Only four measures long, this concludes with an unsettling chord for 11 solo strings, all playing harmonics, as the Sage bends to kiss the earth. At that kiss, the music explodes — without the faintest relaxation of tension or tempo, *Dance of the Earth* races to the conclusion of the ballet’s first half.

The second part, *The Sacrifice*, might be thought of as a gradual crescendo of excitement as it moves from a misty beginning (which has been an inspiration to generations of film composers) to the exultant fury of the concluding *Sacrificial Dance*. Along the way come such distinctive moments as the solo for alto flute in *Mystic Circle of the Young Girls*, where the sacrificial maiden will be chosen; the violently pounding 11/4 measure that thrusts the music into *Glorification of the Chosen One*; the nodding, bobbing bassoons that herald *Evocation of the Ancestors* (another folk-derived theme of constricted range yet of great metric variety); and the shrieking horns of *Ritual Action of the Ancestors*. A solitary bass clarinet plunges us into the *Sacrificial Dance*, whose rhythmic complexity has become legendary: this was the section that Stravinsky could play but at first not write down, and in 1943 (30 years after composing this music) he went back and rebarred it in the effort to make it easier for performers. This music is dauntingly “black” on the page, with its furious energy, its quite short (and constantly changing) bar lengths and its gathering excitement. It dances its way to a delicate violin trill, and *The Rite of Spring* concludes with an upward sweep of sound and the brutal chord that marks the climactic moment of sacrifice.

A NOTE ON THE TITLE: Stravinsky gave this music the Russian title *Vesna svyashchennaya*, which the painter Leon Bakst (who had designed some of the costumes for *The Firebird*) rendered in French as *Le sacre du printemps*. This in turn has been translated literally into English as *The Rite of Spring*, a title that did not wholly please the composer. Stravinsky felt that *The Consecration of Spring* or *The Coronation of Spring* would be more accurate. Stravinsky’s biographer Eric Walter White suggests either *Sacred Spring* or *Holy Spring*.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger
Performance History

By Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Symphony Archivist

Fabien Sevitzky led the San Diego Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Beethoven's *Leonore Overture No. 3* in the 1952 season. Since then, the orchestra has performed it 12 more times, most recently under Murry Sidlin during the 1994-95 season. Ruggiero Ricci was the soloist during the 1961-62 season when the orchestra first presented the Sibelius Violin Concerto. Earl Bernard Murray was the conductor, and since then, the piece has been presented nine times in these programs, most recently during the 2012 season when Jahja Ling led it with Ray Chen as soloist. The Sibelius Violin Concerto was also played by the short-lived San Diego Philharmonic Orchestra. Leslie Hodge was the conductor during its 1951-52 season, and Gerald Vinci was the soloist.

*Le sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring), Igor Stravinsky's revolutionary ballet score, was first ventured by the San Diego Symphony Orchestra with Charles Ketcham conducting during the 1977-78 season. David Atherton led it twice during his tenure as music director, and the most recent SDSO performance was under the leadership of Jahja Ling, during the 2009-10 season.