

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT
Jahja Ling, conductor**

May 26-28, 2017

JOHANNES BRAHMS **Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83**
Allegro non troppo
Allegro appassionato
Andante
Allegretto grazioso
 Yefim Bronfman, piano

INTERMISSION

JEAN SIBELIUS **Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43**
Allegretto
Andante; ma rubato
Vivacissimo
Finale: Allegro moderato

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna

In the summer of 1878, Brahms returned from a vacation in Italy – which in every way had been a delight – and took summer lodgings in Pörschach on the Wörthersee. Music seemed to flow out of him that summer, and he made sketches for a new piano concerto. But he set these aside for several years while composing the Violin Concerto, First Violin Sonata, and *Academic Festival* and *Tragic Overtures*. After a second vacation trip to Italy in the spring of 1881 (just as enjoyable as the first), Brahms returned to his plans for the new piano concerto and completed the score on July 7 of that year, two months to the day after his 48th birthday.

Brahms was habitually coy about his new compositions, and to his friend Elizabeth von Herzogenberg he wrote that he had composed “a tiny, tiny piano concerto with a tiny wisp of a scherzo”; he mailed a copy of the score to his friend Theodore Billroth with the comment that “I am sending you some small piano pieces.” Lurking behind these evasions, of course, is one of the longest (it has four movements), mightiest and most formidable piano concertos ever written. Yet the Second Piano Concerto is a strange mix. For all its grandeur and difficulty, there is an unusually gentle quality about much of this concerto, a lightness of texture and a playfulness unusual in Brahms’ music. This concerto may demand a pianist of near-superhuman strength, but it also needs one with a sense of fun and play.

Brahms seems to delight in doing the unexpected in this concerto. It opens not with the normal orchestral exposition, but with the sound of solo horn, calling nobly from the distance, and quickly the horn and piano engage in a dialogue of almost chamber-music intimacy. And then Brahms annihilates this sylvan mood with another surprise: the cadenza – thorny, gnarled and tough – comes at the *start* of this movement. (Was Beethoven’s *Emperor* Concerto the model here?) Only when this cadenza is out of the way does the actual exposition begin. Full orchestra stamps out the horn’s opening call – now transformed into a tough statement capable of symphonic growth – and the flowing second subject arrives moments later. Brahms builds the first movement from this material. Even if this is music of stature and power, the surprise is how often it turns gentle, with the piano content to think over, to ruminate and to extend the material. This is a big movement (well over a quarter of an hour in length), and it drives to a mighty close.

The “extra” movement is the scherzo, and in many ways it is the odd-man-out in this concerto. It is the only movement in a minor key (D minor), and its outer sections drive implacably forward with a dark intensity missing from the other movements. This movement was originally going to be part of Brahms’ Violin Concerto, and the composer told a friend that he included it here because the first movement seemed to him too “simpel.” While that word translates prosaically into English as *simple* or *plain*, it implies that Brahms felt a lack of dramatic tension in his opening movement. He makes up for that here, composing a scherzo in sonata form whose surging opening gives way to a floating second subject, announced by the violins high in their range. The trio section brings a great burst of energy and D Major sunlight, but Brahms soon returns to the opening material. The reprise is not literal, however, and the music continues to develop as it drives to its unrelenting close.

The *Andante* opens with a long cello solo, and this noble, flowing melody is soon taken up by the violins. Significantly, the piano is never allowed to have this wonderful theme: it can comment and decorate that line – and in the turbulent center section it heads off in its own direction—but that theme remains the province of the orchestra. One of the magical moments in this concerto comes at the end of the piano’s central episode: things calm down, and in a long passage for piano and two clarinets Brahms slowly leads us back to the return of the cello solo and the quiet close. Brahms liked that cello theme a great deal. Five years later he used it as the central theme of his song *Immer leiser wird mein schlummer* (“Ever fainter grows my slumber”), where it sets the text sung by a dying girl.

The last movement defeats our expectations once again. Instead of a mighty finale that would make a counterweight to the huge first movement, Brahms concludes with music of whimsy and playfulness. Donald Francis Tovey called this a “childlike finale,” but that need not mean that it is inferior music, only that it aims for something quite different from the first three movements. This one seems to dance all the way through, from the piano’s graceful opening through the languorous second episode full of gypsy fire and on to the piano’s playful extension of both these ideas. Brahms keeps things light here (trumpets and timpani are significantly silent throughout this movement), and at the end the music comes dancing home in a way that is fully satisfying, even if it is an ending that no listener would have predicted after hearing the first three movements.

Brahms tried out this concerto in private rehearsals with Hans von Bülow and the

Meiningen Orchestra in the fall of 1881 before giving the premiere in Budapest on November 9, and then Brahms, von Bülow and the Meiningen Orchestra took the new concerto on tour throughout Switzerland, Germany and Holland. As a young man, Brahms had been one of the finest pianists in Europe, but even the creator of this music found some of it nearly impossible to perform; there are reports that he was swearing under his breath during concerts over his inability to play his own music. This concerto *is* one of the supreme tests for pianists, full of difficulties at every turn: much of the writing is chordal – or in octaves – and demands huge (and powerful) hands; there are great leaps across the range of the keyboard; the rhythmic complexities are enormous; there are sudden shifts of mood within movements; and simply getting through the concerto demands steely strength and stamina. Brahms may have jokingly called this “a tiny, tiny piano concerto” when he announced it to his friends, but by the end of his tour with the Meiningen Orchestra he had changed his mind. Now he referred to it as “the long terror.”

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43

JEAN SIBELIUS

Born December 8, 1865, Tavastahus, Finland

Died September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland

Sibelius' Second Symphony, composed in Italy in 1901 when the composer was 35, has become one of the most famous in the orchestral repertory. It is easily Sibelius' most popular symphony, it is a favorite of audiences around the world, and it is a favorite of performers too: over 30 recordings are currently available. This popularity has been explained in various ways. Some sense the sunny atmosphere of Italy warming Sibelius' austere Scandinavian sensibilities. Others hear a *Finlandia*-like program that dramatizes Finland's struggle for national identity in the face of foreign domination. But Sibelius would have had none of this. He wanted his music considered abstractly – as sound-drama and not as a vehicle for extra-musical interpretation – and there is no doubt that the Second Symphony, in all its austere grandeur, is a stunning success as sound-drama.

Sibelius' music has the sweep of the true symphonist, yet his symphonic methods are unique. Rather than presenting themes and then developing them, a Sibelius symphony will often present its themes at first only as fragmentary shapes. These shapes can come together to assume a more complete form within the course of a movement, but then shatter into fragments once

again. And this transformation of material takes place during violent contrasts of mood, long buildups that culminate in a constant series of climaxes, and great splashes of instrumental color that burst out of the leaden skies of Sibelius' musical landscape. These methods may be unique, but they take us on a true symphonic journey: across the forty-minute span of the Second Symphony, Sibelius moves inexorably from the tentative beginning through the battlefields of the interior movements to the thrilling culmination of the heroic finale. No wonder this is one of the most emotionally satisfying – and most popular – symphonies ever written.

Many have noted that Sibelius seems to reverse the sequence of the first two movements. Rather than opening with a dramatic movement, Sibelius begins with a gentle *Allegretto*. The pulsing string figures at the opening will recur throughout, and over them woodwinds sing an almost innocent tune. These theme-shapes return in a variety of forms, but the movement resolves nothing and concludes on the same tentative chords with which it began. The drama one expects from a first movement erupts in the second, marked *Tempo Andante*. Over the deep pizzicato opening, a pair of bassoons chant the main theme, aptly marked *lugubre*, and soon the music explodes in furious brass and percussion outbursts. Such episodes alternate with melting lyricism in a lengthy movement that is never at peace for long.

The scherzo arrives like a blast of wind across the frozen tundra. Its brief trio section, marked *lento e suave*, is in the unusual meter of 12/4: solo oboe sings its gentle song, built of a number of repeated notes. A sudden return of the scherzo leads to a further surprise: Sibelius brings back the music of the trio one more time before the symphony proceeds – on gradually more excited waves of sound – directly into the finale.

This concluding *Allegro moderato* is heroic in every sense of the term: its broad D Major opening strides ahead in thunderous octaves, so powerfully that one may miss the fact that this appears to be a variation of the woodwind tune from the symphony's very beginning, now played backwards. Trumpet fanfares and throbbing accompaniment push this music steadily forward, and this heroic beginning might prove anticlimactic were it not for Sibelius' control of his material. More lyric secondary music intervenes, and Sibelius continually delays the return of the home key of D Major until the shining return of the main theme in the triumphant final moments.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Symphony Archivist

The great Brahms Second Piano Concerto was first played in San Diego by Eugene Istomin, under Earl Bernard Murray in the summer of 1961. The tenth and most recent time it was programmed here was during the 2008-09 season, when Jahja Ling conducted Yefim Bronfman as soloist. The powerful Sibelius Second Symphony was first played by the San Diego Symphony when Nicolai Sokoloff conducted it in the summer of 1941, the last of the orchestra's pre-war seasons. Since its post-war re-organization, the San Diego Symphony has programmed it eight times, most recently at these concerts in 2010, when Jahja Ling conducted it.