

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT**

May 22, 23 and 24, 2015

AARON JAY KERNIS

Music celestis

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37

Allegro con brio

Largo

Rondo: Allegro

Stephen Hough, piano

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

Allegro non troppo

Adagio non troppo

Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino)

Allegro con spirito

PROGRAM NOTES

Musica celestis

AARON JAY KERNIS

Born January 15, 1960, Philadelphia

Approx. 11 minutes

Aaron Jay Kernis composed his String Quartet No. 1 in 1990, and it was first performed in November of that year by the Lark Quartet. But Kernis saw larger possibilities in the quartet's slow movement, and the following year he arranged that movement for string orchestra. Titled *Musica celestis* (Music of the Heavens), the new work was premiered on March 30, 1992, by the Sinfonia San Francisco under the direction of Ransom Wilson. In a note in the published score, Kernis says: "*Musica celestis* is inspired by the medieval conception of that phrase, which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end . . . *Musica celestis* follows a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern through a number of variations (like a passacaglia) and is framed by an introduction and coda."

The angels sing with extraordinary clarity and luminosity in the 11-minute *Musica celestis*, which is cast in a slow-fast-slow structure. The ethereal introduction gradually makes way for the long principal melody. This is stated slowly at first but then accelerates across the span of its transformations, growing more animated as it proceeds. This energy breaks off suddenly in mid-phrase, and material from the introduction returns to draw the music into silence. Throughout, Kernis writes with a subtle sense of string color (he trained originally as a violinist): solo instruments are set in contrast to the larger string orchestra, at moments some but not all of the instruments are muted, particular passages are played without vibrato and dynamics are notated with scrupulous precision throughout *Musica celestis*.

Aaron Jay Kernis studied at the San Francisco Conservatory, Manhattan School of Music and Yale School of Music. He has been Composer-in-Residence with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 for his String Quartet No. 2. For some years Kernis served as New Music Advisor for the Minnesota Orchestra, which performed *Musica celestis* as part of its 2004 European tour.

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 17, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

Approx. 34 minutes

Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto is usually dated from 1800, but there is evidence that he had been working on it for several years at that point, and he continued to revise the music right up to the time of its premiere on April 5, 1803; at the premiere he actually played the piano part from his pencil-scrawled manuscript. This was a moment of transition in Beethoven's career. He was working to put the classical models of Haydn and Mozart behind him and to find a distinctive voice of his own. (In fact he would begin work on the *Eroica* only months after the premiere of this concerto.)

Brahms was haunted by the overpowering example of Beethoven's nine symphonies (he waited until he was 43 to write one of his own), but Beethoven himself was just as intimidated by Mozart's piano concertos. He knew how good those concertos were and recognized that any concerto he wrote would stand in that shadow. Once, after hearing a performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor, K. 491, Beethoven turned to his friend, the pianist Jean-Baptiste Cramer, and cried: "Cramer! Cramer! We shall never be able to do anything like that!" But Beethoven resolved to try, and many have noted the influence of that particular Mozart concerto on Beethoven's own Piano Concerto in C minor. Beethoven comes very close to "lifting" Mozart's opening theme for his own – both concertos begin with the same quiet rise and fall on the notes of a C minor triad. And the influence of Mozart can be felt in many other ways in Beethoven's concerto, particularly in the imaginative writing for solo woodwinds. But this music is at the same time unmistakably the work of Beethoven: in the choice of C minor, a key he reserved for his most dramatic music; in the aggressive, edgy quality of the first movement; and in the virtuosity of the solo part. Beethoven wrote this music for his own use, and it is a real display concerto.

The form of the Third Piano Concerto, however, is straightforward: a sonata form first movement, a singing slow movement and a rondo-finale. The opening *Allegro con brio* is based on two themes, both announced by the orchestra: the ominous opening (what energy is coiled within this simple figure!) and a singing, flowing second subject. The entrance of the piano on

fierce octave runs is strident, and much of what follows is similarly turbulent. Beethoven gives the pianist a brilliant (and lengthy) cadenza, and the quiet return of the orchestra after this is a stroke of genius: very softly the timpani taps out the powerful rhythm of concerto's very beginning to lead the orchestra back in. The second movement is marked *Largo* – a marking Beethoven seldom used – that appears to have been for him an indication of solemnity as well as slow tempo. He mutes the strings here and sets the movement in the remote key of E Major and in a slow 3/8 meter. From the inspired simplicity of the piano's solo beginning, the music grows increasingly ornate, and the writing for solo winds here is particularly distinguished. The finale is a propulsive rondo based on its powerful opening idea, again introduced by solo piano. Along the way, Beethoven offers some wonderful episodes, each strongly characterized; one of these is a brief fugato on the rondo theme. That same tune is magically transformed at the coda: Beethoven moves into C Major, re-bars the music in 6/8 and marks it *Presto*. On this bright energy the concerto dances to its energetic close.

Beethoven barely finished his work on the concerto in time for the premiere. He played from his manuscript and asked the young conductor at the Theater an der Wien, Ignaz von Seyfried, to turn pages for him. Seyfried later remembered how harrowing that experience had been: "I saw almost nothing but empty leaves; at the most on one page or the other a few Egyptian hieroglyphics, wholly unintelligible to me, scribbled down to serve as clues for him; for he played nearly all of the solo part from memory...He gave me a secret glance whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly. He laughed heartily at the jovial supper we had afterwards."

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna

Approx. 43 minutes

As noted above, Brahms was intimidated by the example of Beethoven's nine symphonies. "You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us," Brahms remarked to the conductor Hermann Levi, and he worked on his own

First Symphony for nearly 20 years before he was ready to take it before audiences. The premiere in November 1876 was a success, and Brahms himself conducted the new work throughout Europe during the winter concert season. With the stress of that tour behind him, he spent the summer of 1877 in the tiny town of Pörschach on the Wörthersee in southern Austria, and there he began another symphony. This one went quickly. To Clara Schumann he wrote, “So many melodies fly about, that one must be careful not to tread on them.” Brahms’ First Symphony may have taken two decades, but his Second was done in four months, and its premiere in Vienna on December 30, 1877, under Hans Richter was a triumph.

While the Second Symphony is quite different from the turbulent First, this music is not all pastoral sunlight. The first two movements in particular are marked by a seriousness of purpose and a breadth of expression. Brahms’ friend Theodor Billroth spoke of only one side of the Second Symphony when he said: “It is all rippling streams, blue sky, sunshine and cool green shadows. How beautiful it must be at Pörschach!” For all the sunshine in this symphony, the first two movements explore some of those shadows in depth.

The hand of a master is everywhere evident in the Second Symphony, particularly in Brahms’ ingenious use of the simple three-note sequence (D – C# – D) heard in the cellos and basses in the first measure. This figure recurs hundreds of times throughout the Second Symphony, giving the music unusual thematic and expressive unity. The constant repetition of such a simple a figure might become monotonous or obsessive in the hands of a lesser composer, and it is a mark of Brahms’ skill that he uses this figure in so many ways. It gives shape to his themes, serves as both harmonic underpinning and blazing motor-rhythm, and is by turns whispered softly and shouted at full-blast. Once aware of this figure, a listener can only marvel at Brahms’ fertile use of what seems such unpromising material.

The *Allegro non troppo* opens with this figure, and a rich array of themes quickly follows: a horn call, a flowing violin melody (derived from the opening three-note motto), a surging song for lower strings (Brahms characteristically sets the cellos above the violas here), and a dramatic idea built on the violins’ octave leaps. This wealth of thematic material develops over a very long span (the only longer movement in a Brahms symphony is the massive finale of the First) before the movement comes to a relaxed close.

The expressive *Adagio non troppo* opens with the cellos’ somber melody; while this is in B Major, so dark is Brahms’ treatment that the movement almost seems to be in a minor key.

The center section, with its floating, halting melody for woodwinds, brings relief, but the tone remains serious throughout this movement, which comes to a quiet conclusion only after an eruption in its closing moments.

After two such powerful movements, the final two bring welcome release. The charming third movement comes as a complete surprise. Instead of the mighty scherzo one expects, Brahms offers an almost playful movement in rondo form. The oboe's opening melody (Brahms marks it *grazioso*: "graceful") leads to two contrasting sections, both introduced by strings and both marked *Presto*. Brahms' rhythms and accents here are imaginative and complex: phrases are tossed easily between instrumental families and complicated rhythms are made to mesh smoothly as one section gives way to the next. This movement so charmed the audience at the symphony's premiere that it had to be repeated.

The *Allegro con spirito* opens quietly and quickly – so quickly that one may not recognize that its first three notes are exactly the same three notes that began the symphony. In sonata form, the finale features a broad second subject that swings along easily in the violins. Full of energy and explosive outbursts, this movement drives to a mighty conclusion. We do not usually think of Brahms as a composer much concerned with orchestral color, but the writing for brass in the closing measures of this symphony is thrilling, no matter how often one has heard it.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY/WHY THIS PROGRAM?

Jahja Ling is familiar with the music of Aaron Jay Kernis. He conducted his *Too Hot Toccata* in San Diego a few seasons back, but he has not conducted *Musica celestis* prior to our performances here. In contrast, he had a great deal to say about the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 and about its soloist, Stephen Hough, whom he admires tremendously, especially the very wide spectrum of his tastes in repertory. As our maestro said, "He is so versatile. He can play everything so very well, and that just isn't hype. I have played so many things with him in such a wide range, from Hummel to Scharwenka, and the Beethoven *Emperor* Concerto, Saint-Saëns' *Egyptian* Concerto, the Rachmaninoff Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and such classics as the Mendelssohn Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor and the Mozart Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major (K. 488), and here he is coming home to Beethoven." The most recent local performance of this concerto was in the 2009-10 season, when Yefim Bronfman was the soloist and Jahja Ling

conducted. That was the 13th presentation of this popular concerto here. It was first played at San Diego Symphony Orchestra concerts by Grant Johannesen during the 1958 summer season, when John Barnett conducted.

Interestingly, the most recent performance here of Brahms' gorgeous Symphony No. 2 was in the 2006-07 season, when our music director's own conducting teacher, Otto-Werner Mueller, led it. Before and since then, Jahja Ling has conducted the other three Brahms symphonies here to considerable success, but this is his first outing for the Second in the Masterworks series. He describes it as "...the most pastoral of Brahms' symphonies. Its slow movement may be Brahms' greatest, a true slow movement with profound expression. It is the most emotionally expressive of his symphonies." Although Fabien Seitzky led a couple of movements from this work during the summer season of 1951, the true San Diego debut of this symphony came under Robert Shaw's baton during the summer season of 1953. Since then, fourteen performances have followed. Pertinently, every music director of this orchestra has conducted the Second Symphony here, sometimes more than once. Now the list includes our current music director, who has been itching to get to it.

-by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Symphony Archivist