SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
LING CONDUCTS BRAHMS
A Jacobs Masterworks Concert
Jahja Ling, conductor

April 12 and 13, 2019

CARL MARIA VON WEBER  Overture to Der Freischütz

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN  Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21
Maestoso
Larghetto
Allegro vivace
Jan Lisiecki, piano

INTERMISSION

JOHANNES BRAHMS  Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98
Allegro non troppo
Andante moderato
Allegro giocoso
Allegro energico e passionato
Overture to *Der Freischütz*
CARL MARIA VON WEBER
Born November 18, 1786, Eutin
Died June 5, 1826, London

The first production of Weber’s opera *Der Freischütz*, in Dresden in 1821, was one of those events that at one stroke signal the change of an era. With its conflict between the forces of shining good and a dark and mysterious evil, its evocation of magic and sorcery, and its deliberate use of German, *Der Freischütz* sounded an entirely new note in music, and over the next century composers as different as Schumann, Wagner and Mahler would fall under its magic spell. Briefly, the opera tells of a contest of marksmanship between the heroic but troubled Max and the evil Caspar, who has made a pact with the demon-like Samiel. If Max loses, he cannot wed his beloved, the pure Agathe; Caspar’s pact with Samiel – which involves magic bullets forged in the dead of night in the demonic Wolf’s Glen – guarantees that Max’s final bullet will murder Agathe and deliver his soul to Samiel. That plot is foiled, Samiel (and the forces of sorcery he represents) are defeated, and Max wins his way to ask for the hand of Agathe. Though written after the opera was complete, the overture to *Der Freischütz* was in fact performed before it: Weber led a triumphant first performance of the overture in Copenhagen in October 1820, and since that moment it has remained one of the greatest of German romantic overtures.

And for good reason. The overture is a small drama in itself, a perfect encapsulation of the forces that will be unleashed in the opera. The fire and beauty of its themes (as well as the virtuoso playing Weber demands of his orchestra) have made it an audience favorite. The slow introduction evokes the opera’s magic atmosphere, and soon a quartet of horns quietly echoes the sound of distant hunters. Into this golden nobility steps an unwelcome visitor: tremolo strings and deep timpani strokes give us the music associated with the evil Samiel. The overture leaps ahead at the *Molto vivace*, where – over pulsing, syncopated strings – clarinets give out the theme of Max’s Act I aria “Doch mich umgarnen finstre Mächte.” Resounding horns herald the overture’s second subject, a flowing tune for clarinet and violins drawn from Agathe’s radiant Act II aria “Süss entzückt entgegen ihn.” The terrific development of these themes is enlivened by returns of Samiel’s ominous music and hints of the Wolf’s Glen episode. The music comes to a pause, then Weber offers a great orchestral eruption in C Major, and the overture drives to its resplendent close on Agathe’s theme, which now assumes a properly heroic character.
A NOTE ON THE TITLE: *Der Freischütz* is one of those words that apparently defies accurate translation into English. “The Marksman,” as it is sometimes rendered, is flat, while the more literal “Free-Shooter” is prosaic. In German, that title suggests a shooter with magical powers, one whose bullets – whether they are cursed or blessed – will find their target with supernatural accuracy.

**Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21**
FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN  
Born February 22, 1810, Zelazowa Wola,  
Died October 17, 1849, Paris

Chopin’s extraordinary gifts were evident early – one of his teachers described him in his term-end evaluation in two words: “Musical genius.” His parents, however, were careful not to exploit the boy or to push him into a career as a prodigy. Chopin did not give an official public concert in Warsaw until March 1830, a few weeks after his twentieth birthday. In the fall of 1829, knowing that that occasion was coming, Chopin had set to work on a piece worthy of the event, a piano concerto. On March 3, 1830, a small orchestra crowded into the Chopin home in Warsaw as young Frédéric gave the premiere before invited friends. Two weeks later, on March 17, he played the public premiere at the National Theatre in Warsaw, and the reviews were rhapsodic. Wrote one critic just after the concert: “He plays with such certainty, so cleanly that his Concerto might be compared to the life of a just man: no ambiguity, nothing false…His music is full of expressive feeling and song, and puts the listener into a state of subtle rapture, bringing back to his memory all the happy moments he has known.” Later that same year Chopin wrote another piano concerto, in E minor, which would be published in 1833 as his Piano Concerto No. 1. But while on his way to Paris in the fall of 1830, Chopin mislaid the orchestral parts of the first work, the Concerto in F minor, and they had to be completely reconstructed. This delayed publication, and when this concerto finally appeared in 1836 it was listed as his “Concerto No. 2,” even though it had been written first.

Chopin’s two piano concertos are the work of a very young man, and he never wrote another. Mozart and Beethoven had transformed the piano concerto into a great form, a symphonic argument in which soloist and orchestra were equal protagonists. Chopin might respect such music, but it was not for him – he was interested, first and foremost, in the piano. In his concertos the musical interest lies in the piano part, and the orchestra functions only as a
framework for the soloist. So subordinate a role does the orchestra play, in fact, that after his arrival in Paris, Chopin arranged both concertos for solo piano and played them in that form. Chopin’s writing for orchestra in the two concertos has come in for a hard time – Berlioz said that the “orchestral concertos are cold and practically useless” – but this concerto writing should be understood as the work of a very young man who was writing for a specific purpose, and the orchestral part is effective for that purpose. While he can create a “romantic” fullness of sound in the Concerto No. 2, Chopin scores it for what is essentially Mozart’s orchestra: pairs of woodwinds, trumpets and horns, plus timpani and strings, as well as one additional instrument – a single trombone.

The Concerto No. 2 is in the conventional three movements. Chopin marks the first movement *Maestoso* (“majestic”), but the opening impulse is lyric, as the orchestra launches the concerto with a graceful falling idea that will shape much of the movement. With the entrance of the soloist, however, the orchestra retreats to the shade, and the pianist will dominate the remainder of the movement.

When Chopin wrote the *Larghetto*, he had (like many other teenagers) fallen in love, in this case with a young singer, Constantia Gladkowska. As he worked on this movement, he wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski: “I have – perhaps to my misfortune – already found my ideal, which I worship faithfully and sincerely. Six months have elapsed, and I have not yet exchanged a syllable with her of whom I dream every night. While my thoughts were with her I composed the *Adagio* of my concerto.” In ternary form, this movement has been compared to opera music, particularly to the music of Bellini, a great favorite of young Chopin. The quiet opening recalls *bel canto*, while the middle section grows more dramatic, as the piano declaims its animated song over rustling strings. This movement has been much admired. Schumann exclaimed “What are ten editorial crowns compared with one such slow movement!” and Liszt said: “The whole of this piece is of a perfection almost ideal; its expression, now radiant with light, now full of tender pathos.”

Solo piano leads off the concluding *Allegro vivace*, and Chopin marks its opening theme *semplice ma graziosamente* (“simple but graceful”). Some have heard folk-tunes in this movement, but all the material appears to have been original with Chopin. A great fanfare from the horns leads to a properly spirited conclusion.
Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98
JOHANNES BRAHMS
Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg
Died April 3, 1897, Vienna

The impact of Brahms’ final symphony defies simple description. This music has been called autumnal, tragic, melancholy, sad, serious and eulogistic, and all listeners instinctively feel its gravity and intensity in every bar. Yet from the tentative violin figure that opens the symphony to the mighty cataclysm that ends it 40 minutes later, it is also exhilarating, glorious music, one of Brahms’ finest achievements and certainly one of the greatest symphonies ever written.

Brahms composed the Fourth Symphony in the tiny town of Murzzuschlag high in the Styrian Alps, about 50 miles southwest of Vienna. He wrote the first two movements in the summer of 1884 and the final two when he returned the following summer. Aware of the seriousness of this music, Brahms wrote the conductor Hans von Bülow: “I am pondering whether this symphony will find more of a public. I fear it smacks of the climate of this country; the cherries are not sweet here, and you would certainly not eat them.”

It was Brahms’ custom to send copies of his new works to friends for their comments; habitually he accompanied the copies with self-disparaging remarks to which his friends would have to protest as they praised the new work. This time, to his dismay, his friends did not like the new symphony. After hearing it played in a two-piano version, critic Eduard Hanslick complained that “All through I felt I was being beaten by two terribly clever men.” Elizabeth von Herzogenberg wrote to Brahms: “Your piece affects me curiously, the more penetration I bring to bear on it, the more impenetrable it becomes.” The stunned composer was left protesting to Clara Schumann that “the piece does not altogether displease me.” It did not altogether displease audiences either – the premiere in Meiningen on October 25, 1885, was a triumph.

The criticism by Brahms’ friends may seem strange today, but there is something severe about the Fourth Symphony. Many have noted the fusion of passion and intellect that marks Brahms’ finest music, but the Fourth Symphony takes both of these to an extreme, blending an impassioned emotional content with the most inexorable musical logic. One feels this concentration from the first instant. The Fourth is the only one of Brahms’ symphonies to open without an introduction: it simply begins with the rising-and-falling main subject in the violins, and much of the thematic material of this sonata-form movement is coiled embryonically within
the intervals of this simple theme. A series of fanfares leads to the second subject, a
broadly-striding melody for cellos and horns; while there is no exposition repeat, Brahms begins
the development with so literal a repetition of the beginning that only gradually does the listener
recognize that the music is pressing ahead even as it seems to go back. From the most
understated of beginnings, this movement drives to one of the most powerful climaxes in all of
Brahms’ music.

By contrast, the Andante moderato seems calm, flowing and melodic, yet it too is in
sonata form, and once again Brahms spins glorious music out of the simplest material: the
opening horn call evolves smoothly into the main clarinet tune, and this in turn takes many
shapes across the span of the movement. To the young Richard Strauss, assistant conductor of
the Meiningen Orchestra, this movement sounded like “a funeral procession moving in silence
across moonlit heights.”

When Brahms returned to Murzzuschlag in the summer of 1885 to compose the final two
movements, he wrote the finale first, then the third movement. Knowing in advance just how
rigorous the finale was, Brahms made the Allegro giocoso as rollicking a symphonic movement
as he ever wrote. That marking means “lively, playful,” and this music is Brahms’ closest
approach to a symphonic scherzo. Yet with many differences: once again, it is in sonata form
(there is only a brief whiff of a trio section), and Brahms sets the movement in 2/4 rather than the
standard 3/4 meter of scherzos. The mighty opening theme plunges downward (and is quickly
inverted), while relief comes with the lovely second subject, a relaxed violin melody marked
grazioso. Brahms enlivens the orchestral textures here with instruments he rarely used: piccolo,
triangle, contrabassoon, and an extra timpani.

The Fourth Symphony concludes with one of the most extraordinary – and powerful –
movements in the symphonic literature. It is a passacaglia, a musical form already old when
Bach used it a century and a half before. Brahms in fact took this passacaglia theme from the
concluding chorale of Bach’s Cantata No. 150, “Nach Dir, Herr, verlanget mich”: he re-barred
Bach’s original five-measure theme into eight measures and changed one note to heighten
chromatic tension. The trombones, silent to this point in the symphony, stamp out this theme,
and this ground bass repeats 30 times. Above these 30 strict repetitions, Brahms spins out a set
of variations extraordinary for their variety and expressiveness. Even more impressive is how
this old baroque form is made to conform to the general shape of sonata form: after the powerful
initial statements, the violins have a lyric variation, and this sequence leads a quiet central
episode climaxed by a lovely flute solo over the (barely-suggested) ground bass. The “recapitulation” begins with an earth-shaking explosion over the passacaglia theme, there is a brief flirtation with two waltz-like variations, and a majestic coda derived from the passacaglia theme. The very ending in unflinching in its implacable drive.

Brahms was 52 when he completed the Fourth Symphony and still had 12 years to live. Twice in that span he contemplated writing another symphony and in each case made a few sketches, yet he abandoned both projects. However much we may regret the loss of those symphonies, perhaps Brahms was right to let them go – it is difficult to conceive how he might have gone beyond the Fourth Symphony.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger

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

Three popular favorites are on display at this program, and all are fairly familiar to San Diego Symphony audiences. The Weber overture to his opera, Der Freischütz, was played under Nino Markelli’s direction when the San Diego Symphony performed during the 1936 Pan-Pacific Exhibition. Peter Erős provided the first of the contemporary hearings of the piece when he led it during the 1972-73 season. Its most recent outing at these concerts was conducted by Jahja Ling, during the concert season of 2010-11. That was the eighth time the piece had been played here. Lyell Barbour was the soloist when the San Diego Symphony first played the Chopin Second Concerto for Piano. Fabien Sevitzky conducted that performance in the summer of 1950. Most recently, it was played by Lola Astanova, when Jahja Ling led it in Season 2014-15. Brahms' majestic Fourth Symphony was introduced to San Diego audiences by Fabien Sevitzky, who led the performance in the summer of 1952. In the season 2012-13, Jahja Ling led a performance of the Brahms Fourth, its fifteenth presentation at these concerts.