

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Thu. January 26 The 106th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Overture to “Tannhäuser” (Dresden version) WWV 70 (ca. 14 min)

Richard Wagner’s deep interest in music and theater is known to most audiences. He began composing operas in a primarily German Romantic style, eventually developing a unique style in what have been referred to as music dramas. Wagner synthesized words and music in a new way, to the point of constructing the renowned Bayreuth theatre in which to perform these particular music dramas. It was with great persistence and determination that he attempted to educate the audiences of his time to appreciate this new form of musical theatre, but perhaps he was not fully appreciated by most audiences until much later.

Tannhäuser has been considered a transitional work of Wagner’s, as he developed this new style. The first version was completed in 1845, but received a less than warm welcome by audiences. This only spurred Wagner on more, to help audiences understand his intentions, as well as develop this new style. It also inspired a second version, revised in 1861, and reflects the later developments he explored in such works as *Tristan and Isolde*.

The Overture can be divided into three main parts, the first of which is the pronouncement of “The Pilgrim’s Chorus” by the winds and the horns. The trombones eventually take over this chorus, while the strings play a dramatic sweep of ornamented motives over the top. In the second part, the violas, flutes and oboes play leaping figures, said to represent Venusberg in the famous tale

of *Tannhäuser*. One can hear the music of Tannhäuser’s hymn to Venus in this section also, played by the strings, as well as the voice of Venus herself in the solo clarinet. The final and third part of the Overture has been said to be reflective of the redemption so often found in Wagnerian dramas. The transformation can be heard in the orchestration, as the lilting ornamented swirls in the violins enhance the trombones as they once again play the “Pilgrim’s Chorus,” which is then taken up by the entire orchestra in a jubilant tone. Wagner’s words sum it up as he describes the imaginary scene:

“Dawn begins to break. From afar is heard again the Pilgrims’ chant. As the chant draws near, closer yet and closer, as the day drives farther back the night, that whir...of the air which had erstwhile sounded like the eerie cries of souls condemned now rises to ever gladder waves; so that when the sun ascends at last in splendor, and the Pilgrims’ chant proclaiming in ecstasy to the world that to all that lives and moves thereon salvation is won, this wave itself swells out the tidings of sublimest joy. ‘Tis the carol of the Venusberg redeemed from the curse of impiousness, this cry we hear amid the hymn of God. So wells and leaps each pulse of life in chorus of Redemption; and both dissevered elements, both soul and senses, God and nature, unite in the atoning kiss of hallowed love.”

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, percussion (tambourine, bass drum, triangle), timpani, harp, strings

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

Bandoneon Concerto “Aconcagua”

- I. Allegro marcato (ca. 7 min)
- II. Moderato (ca. 7 min)
- III. Presto - Melancolic final (ca. 6 min)

Born in Mar del Plata, Argentina to Italian immigrant parents, Piazzolla would soon be moved to New York with his family where he would spend most of his childhood years. When he was eight years old his father surprised him with a musical gift, a bandoneon: “Papa sat himself on a chair, placed the thing between my arms, and said to me: ‘Astor, this is the instrument of the tango, I want you to learn to play it.’ My first reaction was to complain. The tango was the music that he listened to almost every night when he returned from work, and which I did not like.”

In spite of these initial reservations, Piazzolla not only became interested in the instrument but also developed a talent for the tango. When he was sixteen years old, the family returned to Argentina, which gave him the opportunity to play with some of the top tango orchestras in the region. He also began to study composition with the renowned Argentinian composer, Alberta Ginastera, and by the mid-1940’s he formed his own orchestra, the Orquesta del 46, where he could have his own works performed. With the encouragement of Ginastera, Piazzolla would enter his *Buenos Aires Symphony* in a contest, which would earn him a scholarship to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris in the mid-1950’s.

Upon his arrival in Paris, Piazzolla shared a number of works with Boulanger to get her feedback. These included works in the style of Stravinsky and Ravel among others, which she described as ‘well-written but lacking in feeling.’ She would go on to say: ‘I can’t find Piazzolla!’ The composer would eventually admit to Boulanger that he wasn’t really a pianist, but a bandoneon player. This led him to show her one of the tango pieces he had composed, where she is quoted as saying: ‘This is Piazzolla! Don’t ever leave it!’ With Boulanger’s encouragement, Piazzolla would develop the tango in new ways, incorporating both classical and jazz elements.

Upon returning to Argentina, the composer would form the Octeto Buenos Aires, as well as the Quinteto Nuevo Tango, where he could perform his ‘nuevo tango’ pieces. One way Piazzolla described this new style was with the following equation: “Nuevo tango = tango + tragedy + comedy + whorehouse.” Traditional tango musicians, however, were not convinced that this new tango style was true to the native traditions of their home country. Consequently, Piazzolla’s ‘new tango’ was not well received at first by his compatriots. Instead, the composer would receive acclaim from European and North American audiences, who embraced this merging of tango, jazz and classical styles.

Tangazo was composed in 1969 with the subtitle *Variations on Buenos Aires*. Premiered in Washington D.C., and performed by the Ensembles Musical de Buenos Aires, Piazzolla apparently gave mixed reviews, since he felt that some

of the 'old division that exists' between classical and popular musicians affected the energy of the performance:

"The Ensemble Musical de Buenos Aires gave a good account of it, but somewhere it lost a pinch of salt and pepper. Those classical musicians are like that – they are from Buenos Aires, Argentineans, and yet it seems that the tango shames them. That is an old division that exists between the classical and the popular.

Concerto for Bandoneon and Orchestra 'Aconcagua', was composed in 1979. The publisher added the descriptive title 'Aconcagua' giving the following explanation: "This is the peak of Astor's oeuvre, and the highest mountain peak in South America is Aconcagua." Highlighting the bandoneon, one can see and hear the close relationship this instrument has to the accordion. Originally invented in Germany by Heinrich Band to

be used as a substitute for church organs, the bandoneon uses a series of buttons rather than keys of the keyboard, and found its way to South America along with the wave of immigrants.

The Concerto is presented in three movements, following a traditional classical model of a fast-slow-fast form. The opening movement **Allegro marcato** immediately establishes a strong rhythmic driving pattern of the tango. The second movement, **Moderato**, opens with the bandoneon playing a melancholic melody, and features interludes by the harp, violin and cello. The final movement, **Presto**, is described by the composer in his own words: "I didn't know how to finish it... And then I told myself: I give them a tango so the erudite know that when I want I can write like them, and when I want I can do my own thing."

Instrumentation: timpani, percussion (triangle, guiro, bass drum), piano, harp, strings, solo bandoneon (accordion)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, op. 68

- I. Un poco sostenuto - Allegro (ca. 18 min)
- II. Andante sostenuto (ca. 8 min)
- III. Un poco allegretto e grazioso (ca. 6 min)
- IV. Adagio - Più andante - Allegro non troppo, ma con brio - Più allegro (ca. 18 min)

Brahms was pulled by opposing musical forces throughout his lifetime. He was surrounded by contemporaries such as Liszt and Wagner who were mapping out an ever-changing musical journey, while

he felt solid in the footprints of those of the previous eras such as Bach, Handel, Haydn, Schumann, and most significantly, Beethoven. Yet this desire to stay rooted in the traditions of those who came before him, along with his own plethora of self-doubt, often kept him from publicly presenting his compositions.

It is believed that Brahms first gave thought to composing a symphony in 1854, parts of which were eventually adapted for the First Piano Concerto. However, when that work was not so successfully

received by the public, Brahms went back to the proverbial drawing board and began exploring orchestral techniques in smaller chamber-like settings. He returned to the thought of composing a symphony again in 1862 when the first movement of his First Symphony came to fruition. In 1868 he sent a birthday card to Clara Schumann from Switzerland, in which he referred to a tune he had heard played by a shepherd on an Alpine horn, which was later to be incorporated into the final movement of this symphony.

His hesitations in this genre continued however, and were made even clearer when he was quoted as saying to the conductor Henry Levi in the early 1870's: "I will never compose a symphony. You have no idea what it feels like for people like us to constantly hear such a giant (referring to Beethoven) marching behind us." Eventually, however, Brahms would compose a large orchestral work (albeit not a symphony) shortly thereafter: *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, but his First Symphony would take several more years before it would be completed, in 1876. And as was his tendency, continued revisions kept the work from being published until a year later in 1877.

The work is presented in the traditional classical four-movement arrangement, with the intensity of the opening and closing movements acting as bookends to the lighter inner movements. One can hear the elements in this symphony that would become the hallmarks of many of

his large orchestral works: motives that are interconnected across movements, the use of variation technique, the influences of multi-layered voices in counterpoint, and sudden shifts in mood especially through dramatic thematic changes.

The work was premiered outside of Vienna, in Karlsruhe on November 4th, 1876, this due primarily to the composer's apprehensions of following in Beethoven's footsteps. However, after a successful premiere there, a Vienna performance was arranged, and although obvious comparisons were made to the 'father of the symphony', Brahms' First Symphony was lauded by critic Eduard Hanslick as "one of the most individual and magnificent works of the symphonic literature."

Brahms paid overt homage to Beethoven in the finale, where he incorporates a melody, which makes an obvious reference to *Ode to Joy*. This, together with Brahms' devotion to the classical symphonist's traditions, perhaps instigated the infamous quote from conductor/pianist Hans von Bülow referring to Brahms' First Symphony as "Beethoven's Tenth." Yet Brahms could finally be satisfied that he could stand in his own right as a symphonic composer, not only carrying on the traditions of his predecessors but further developing the symphony with the most beautiful nuances of the Romantic era.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings

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