

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Wed. June 14, The 110th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

Sun. June 18, The 893rd Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

Franz Liszt (1811-1886):

Symphonic Poem "Les preludes", S.97/R.414 (ca. 16 min)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major, S.124/R.455 (ca. 19 min)

Franz Liszt is perhaps known best for his prowess as a pianist, but was equally proficient at composing, as well as writing transcriptions of his own and others' works. In fact it is believed that Liszt's transcription of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* led him to explore further the cyclic form of thematic transformations. It was during Liszt's years in Weimar where he especially developed this 'transformation technique', which has been described as a type of variation technique where there is a particular theme that can be heard throughout the work, however it is altered in fundamental ways, such as in its rhythm, tempo, harmonic treatment and general character.

Up until his appointment as music director in Weimar, Liszt had been active as a concert virtuoso travelling worldwide, becoming recognized as one of the best pianists of his time. He had also composed during this time, primarily for his own instrument, but his time in Weimar allowed him to concentrate on composing for larger orchestral ensembles. During the decade he worked as music director in Weimar, Liszt would compose twelve symphonic poems and two symphonies, as well as complete his two piano concertos, among other works.

Symphonic Poem "Les preludes", S.97/R.414

Les Preludes is perhaps the most well-known of Liszt's symphonic poems, however he originally began composing the work in 1844 as an overture for a choral piece called "The Four Elements" (Earth, Winds, Oceans, Stars), which itself was based on the poems by the French poet, Joseph Autran. Nearly ten years later, the composer would revise the work, presenting it as a symphonic poem with a new title. During revisions, Liszt happened on a poem by Alphonse de Lamartine that seemed to parallel the ideas and feelings the composer was trying to evoke in his work. So it was from this poem that the new title came along with the four contrasting sections of love, the storm, pastoral life, and war.

Liszt would include a preface to the published score with his own interpretation of Lemartine's original poetic text:

“What else is life but a series of preludes to that unknown song, the first and solemn note of which is sounded by Death? Love is the enchanted dawn of all life; but what

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fate is there whose first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm, whose fine illusions are not dissipated by some mortal blast, consuming its altar as though by a stroke of lightning? And what cruelly wounded soul, when the storms are over, does not seek solace in the calm serenity of rural life? Nevertheless, man does not resign himself for long to the enjoyment of that beneficent warmth which he first enjoyed in Nature's bosom. So when the trumpet sounds the alarm and calls him to arms, no matter what struggle calls him to its ranks, he may recover in battle the full consciousness of himself and the entire possession of his powers."

Opening with a slow introduction, the germinal three-note motive can be heard, from which the various thematic transformations will be developed throughout the work. In the final coda section the theme becomes its most grand transformation led by the brass instruments in all their glory, and perhaps representative of someone overcoming their struggles and regaining their strength in great triumph.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major, S.124/R.455

Sketches for Liszt's First Piano Concerto have been dated in the early 1830's, and he apparently continued work on both of his piano concertos into the early 1840's. He would complete both works in 1849, revising them again in 1853 and orchestrating them with the assistance of one of his students, Joachim Raff. The First Piano Concerto was premiered on February 17, 1855 with the composer as soloist and Hector Berlioz conducting.

Presented as one continuous movement, the E-flat major concerto follows a traditional Classical symphonic four-part form (fast – slow – scherzo – fast finale). Each section has its own themes, however the finale is comprised of themes from the previous sections, all 'transformed' utilizing the thematic transformation technique he was developing at the time. The opening motif in the first two measures is believed to have been set by the composer to the words "*Das versteht ihr alle nicht, haha!*" (None of you understand this, haha!), presumably to convey that there is much to discover in this work than may be apparent upon first listening.

The second section, (*Quasi Adagio*) presents a beautiful lyrical melody, while the scherzo features highlights from the triangle, which sparked some controversy at the time. In the finale, the lyrical theme from the *Adagio* is transformed into a march, and there is a return to the opening chromatic theme. Liszt summarized his thoughts about the brilliant closing section:

"This binding and rounding off a piece at its close is a technique I have made my own, but it is justified by the musical form. The trombones and basses take up the second part of the adagio's motif. The piano passage that comes after this is the motif just played in the adagio by flute and clarinet. The final passage is a variation and major-mode development of the scherzo's motif. At last the very first theme comes in with a trill accompaniment, to conclude the whole."

Symphonic Poem "Les preludes", S.97/R.414

Work composed: 1844-1854 **World premiere:** 1854, Weimer

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, cymbals), harp, strings

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major, S.124/R.455

Work composed: 1832-1855 **World premiere:** 1855, Weimer

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (bass drum, triangle, cymbals), strings, solo piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897):

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, op. 98

After taking fifteen years to publicly present his First Symphony, due to his hesitancy to follow in Beethoven's footsteps, Brahms finished his Second Symphony within four months of the First Symphony, somehow having broken through this mostly psychological barrier it seems. It then took him more than five years to complete his Third Symphony, however the Fourth Symphony came within the following year, after having spent the summers of 1884 and 1885 working on it. Contributing to this outpouring of symphonic writing in a relatively short amount of time was the generous offer of conductor, Hans von Bülow, who gave Brahms full use of the Meiningen court orchestra as a 'rehearsal orchestra.' This also was to be the start of the famous 'Brahms tradition' long established from that point on, with the same ensemble continuing to perform the composer's music even after his death. In October of 1885, after rehearsing the Fourth Symphony with this group, Brahms toured with them through Germany and the Netherlands.

One can hear in this work various elements which are said to be typical of Brahms' symphonic writing: the strong opening movement and even more magnificent finale, the two of which provide solid bookends for the middle movements; The third movement using an atypical form, for example in this last symphony, a modified sonata form, since it does not include the traditional development section; And his use of variation, as opposed to contrasting themes, can be heard throughout the work. In the final movement, the theme, taken from Bach's Cantata no. 150, can be heard thirty times, however with an added chromatic twist and with such subtlety that one may not even realize it has been repeated to such an extent.

Other common features found in Brahms' symphonic writing can be heard in his use of instrumentation. In particular, his use of the Classical orchestra, complete with double woodwinds, as well as discretion in layering various timbres so as to create unique sounds, for example in the inner voicings, all created works that represented a tremendous influence from the Classical tradition, yet also pointedly moved forward to developing a style and following

of his own. It is difficult to imagine Brahms ever considered the possibility of never writing a symphony given the depth of creativeness and wealth of ideas that can be seen to have culminated in this his last symphony.

It seems Robert Schumann's statement, written for the *Neue Zeitschrift Musik* more than three decades earlier that Brahms would "give ideal expression to the times" was right on the mark. He had felt from the first time he heard Brahms perform several of his piano works that he had the ability to continue Beethoven's legacy, stating that he heard 'veiled symphonies' in his early piano sonatas. Although Schumann would not live to hear Brahms' symphonic works, his wife Clara would become a lifelong companion to the composer providing tremendous personal and professional support as a pianist and composer herself. One might wonder if it hadn't been for both Robert and Clara's encouragement, if Brahms would have found the courage to pursue his symphonic works to the extent that he did.

Work composed:1884-1885 **World premiere:** 1885, Meiningen

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (triangle), strings

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Next Subscription Concerts in July

July 21, Fri 19:00 start at Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall

The 111th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

June 23, Sun 15:00 start at Bunkamura Orchard Hall

The 894th Orchard Hall Subscription Concert

Conductor: Myung-Whun Chung
Soprano: Yoko Yasui
Mezzo-Soprano: Makiko Yamashita
Chorus: New National Theater Chorus

**Mahler: Symphony No. 2 in C minor,
"Resurrection"**

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Yoko Yasui

Makiko Yamashita