

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77

Brahms is known to have written a number of his works for particular artists, especially those he had a close association with. This violin concerto was written for one of the top violinists of the time, who was also one of Brahms' closest friends and professional colleague, Joseph Joachim.

In 1848, Brahms was on tour with the Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi, as his accompanist, when he was first introduced to Joachim. It was through Joachim that Brahms first met Robert and Clara Schumann, who opened many doors for him as an up-and-coming composer. Over the years, Joachim and Brahms collaborated in performance and composition, the highlight of which can be said to be this violin concerto.

Thirty years after they first met, in the summer of 1878, Brahms began to compose this work for his dear friend while vacationing in the Austrian village of Pörtschach. And even though Brahms knew intimately of Joachim's abilities as a performer, his hesitancy in composing for an instrument he didn't himself play was apparent in a letter he wrote asking his friend for assistance: "You should correct it, not sparing the quality of the composition... I shall be satisfied if you will mark those parts that are difficult, awkward, or impossible to play." Joachim's reply indicated his support when he stated that "most of the material is playable – some of it, in fact quite originally violinistic." Referring to the actual challenge of

playing such a difficult piece, he went on to jokingly say however, that he might not be successful in playing it “in an overheated concert hall!” So began the collaboration between the two artists.

Brahms originally composed four movements for this concerto later eliminating the middle two movements with what he told his friend in his usual dry humour was “a feeble Adagio.” The last movement seems to have given even more of a nod to the soloist for whom it was written, with its Hungarian flavour, the country from which Joachim originated. Joachim premiered the work on January 1st, 1879 in Leipzig. The reaction was not so warm, most realizing that the piece was beyond the abilities of the majority of violinists of the time. Conductor Hans von Bülow has even been famously quoted as saying this is a concerto “against the violin.” Brahms and Joachim continued making revisions to the concerto after its premiere until it was published six months later, and in spite of its virtuosic challenges, the work displays the composer’s amazing abilities at weaving beautiful lyrical melodies amongst the rich sonorities of the orchestra.

Work composed: 1878 **World premiere:** January 1st, 1879, Leipzig
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, solo violin

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)
Symphony No.3 in C minor, Op. 78
"Organ Symphony"

Though this work acquired the moniker “Organ Symphony”, the complete title originally given to the work was *Symphony No. 3 in C minor, with Organ and Two Pianos*. Given that the organ (and piano) are for the most part yet an additional timbre added to the already large ensemble, it may make some wonder why the work acquired the nickname, given the role the organ ultimately plays, only appearing in two of the four movements, and only significantly in the last.

Saint-Saëns completed this work, his last symphony, in 1886. He had been commissioned by the Philharmonic Society in England, and upon its completion stated: “With it I have given all I was able to give. What I did I could not achieve again.” Saint-Saëns had composed in a variety of genre, including opera, concertos, songs, chamber music, solo piano, sacred and secular choral works, and symphonic works. He had written four symphonies prior to this work, however since he had kept two of the earlier works from being published, this final work of the genre came to be labeled as the third.

As a renowned pianist and organist, it’s perhaps not surprising that Saint-Saëns included his two feature instruments in his final symphony. The work was premiered in London on May 19, 1886 with the composer conducting. Saint-Saëns had dedicated the work to Franz Liszt, and although Liszt would not hear a live performance of the work (he died a few months after the premiere), the score was published with the dedication: “À la Memoire de Franz Liszt.”

Liszt’s influence can be heard throughout the work, primarily in Saint-Saëns’ use of the technique of thematic transformation. And the form has been modified from the typical four movements, as stated in the composer’s own words at the premiere:

“This Symphony, divided into two parts, nevertheless includes practically the traditional four movements: the first, checked in development, serves as an introduction to the *Adagio*, and the scherzo is connected after the same manner with the finale. The composer has thus sought to shun in a certain measure the interminable repetitions which are more and more disappearing from instrumental music.”

The ‘motto’ theme is presented at the outset and variously transformed throughout the entire work. The organ makes its first subtle appearance in the *Adagio*, the slow movement that Saint-Saëns described as “extremely peaceful and contemplative”. The piano is highlighted with “arpeggios and scales, swift as lightening” in the opening movement of the second of the two main ‘parts’. And the organ returns, this time in full force, in the finale *Maestoso*, and this is perhaps the primary reason why the piece was referred to as an ‘Organ Symphony’ by so many.

Popular culture has made Saint-Saëns’ main theme from the *Maestoso* familiar to many outside of the classical concert hall, as it was adapted for use with the pop tune “If I Had Words” in 1977, by Scott Fitzgerald and Yvonne Keeley. And in more recent years, both this pop-song, as well as an arrangement of the symphonic version, were used in the soundtrack for the film *Babe* (1995).

Work composed: 1886 **World premiere:** May 19th, 1886, London
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbals, bass drum), 2 pianos, organ, strings

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