

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**March 8-9-10, 2019**  
**Subscription Concert No.6**  
**Michael Allsen**

It has become an annual Madison Symphony Orchestra tradition to devote one program to showcasing the orchestra and soloists from our ranks. Three soloists appear tonight, beginning with concertmaster Naha Greenholz, performing Prokofiev's second violin concerto. Principal clarinetist JJ Koh then performs the exquisite *Rhapsody* of Debussy. The tuba is all too infrequently heard as a solo voice with the orchestra, but here Josh Biere performs the 1954 *Tuba Concerto* of Vaughan Williams—the very first concerto written for the instrument. Framing these solos are two familiar works that serve as showpieces for the orchestra itself: Schubert's great "Unfinished" symphony, and Gershwin's colorful *An American in Paris*.

**Franz Schubert (1797-1828)**  
**Symphony No.8 in B minor, D.759 ("Unfinished")**

*Schubert composed this work in 1822, but it was not premiered until long after his death, in 1865. The Madison Symphony has played the work on five previous occasions between 1943, and 2006. Duration 27:00.*

Schubert composed what has since become known as his "Unfinished" symphony when he was 25, soon after his election as a member of the music society of Graz. He sent the autograph score to the society in gratitude, and the score was given to a friend of Schubert's, Anselm Hüttenbrenner. This was virtually the last that was heard of the symphony until long after Schubert's death. One of Schubert's early biographers, Heinrich Kreissel von Hellborn, finally tracked down the score in 1865. He persuaded Hüttenbrenner to present it to Johann Herbeck, the conductor of the *Gesellschaft de Musikfreunde* in Vienna. Herbeck conducted the premiere performance on December 17, 1865. The "Unfinished" has since become Schubert's most popular symphony, and one of the most familiar and beloved works in the symphonic repertoire.

So why was this work "unfinished"—in two movements rather than four? There is the romantic, but patently incorrect notion that the composition of the symphony was cut short by Schubert's death. (We do know, however, that at the very time he was writing the symphony, he was diagnosed with Syphilis, which could throw

anyone off his stride.) Others have suggested that the very power and majesty of the first two movements discouraged the composer from adding a third and fourth—that it would have been impossible to balance these opening movements with the lighter forms that were characteristic of concluding movements. At least one writer argued that Schubert intended from the beginning to write a two-movement symphony, rather than the more typical four movements. However, there exists a sketch version of a third movement, a *scherzo* with trio, which was at least partially orchestrated by Schubert. There is also the possibility that the overture to Schubert’s opera *Rosamunde* may in fact have been the missing fourth movement. (The symphony is occasionally performed today with a completed version of the sketch *scherzo* and the *Rosamunde* overture as a finale.)

It is clear that Schubert was struggling with symphonic form in the 1820s. He dashed off his first six symphonies in quick succession before he was 21 years old—vivacious works set in the mold of Haydn and Mozart. But then he stalled—between 1818 and 1822, he made at least three abortive starts on large-scale symphonies before writing the two movements that came to be known as the eighth. He seems to have been after something much more profound—in orchestration, expression, and in the development of themes. In short, he was trying to deal with the formidable legacy of Beethoven. He finally achieved a symphony that matched Beethoven in scope when he finished his *Symphony No.9* (the “Great” C Major) in 1825. If the “unfinished” symphony was a kind of experiment along the way, it was certainly a successful one, and one of Schubert’s masterpieces.

The two movements of the “Unfinished” symphony are broad enough to be “symphonic” on their own accord. The *Allegro* opens with a dark, brooding introductory melody in the low strings, which sets the emotional tone for the entire movement. The main theme soon follows: oboe and clarinet above a tense string accompaniment. A more lyrical theme, possibly one of the most famous of Schubert’s melodies, is introduced by the cellos. All three melodies used in the first movement are subtly related. The *Allegro*’s development section is particularly extended and stormy and somewhat unusual for Schubert in its single-minded concentration on a single theme. While the recapitulation is conventional in form, Schubert includes several unusual harmonic twists. The movement ends with a final development of the opening theme.

In contrast to the complexity of the opening movement, the *Adagio* is set in a fairly simple form, alternating two contrasting sections of music. The movement begins with placid counterpoint between the horns, upper strings, and basses. There is a brief moment of stridency at the midpoint of this section and a return to the more

relaxed feeling of the opening. The other main idea, begins with a melancholy melody played by the solo clarinet, which then is developed slightly by the oboe and flute. As in the opening section, there is contrasting music in the middle—a stormy contrapuntal episode—and a return to the clarinet theme. Both of these sections return in varied form, before a final repeat of the opening idea. A short coda blends elements of both main ideas.

[NOTE: In the critical edition of Schubert's works completed in 1978, his symphonies were renumbered to reflect the actual order of composition—thus this symphony should “officially” be known as *No.7*, and in fact is presented as such in many of today's recordings. Likewise, the “Great” C Major, usually known as the *Symphony No.9*, becomes *No.8*. Over a century of tradition is hard to shake, however, and I have retained the familiar numbering here. - MA]

**Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)**  
**Concerto No.2 in G minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op.63**

*Prokofiev composed his second violin concerto in 1934-35. It was premiered in Madrid on December 1, 1935, with soloist Robert Soetens. We have performed it once previously in 2012, with Augustin Hadelich as soloist. Duration 27:00.*

Prokofiev left Russia in 1918, after the Bolshevik revolution, ostensibly on a concert tour, but in reality beginning a long self-imposed exile. Though he traveled extensively in America, and Europe, he spent much of the 1920s and 1930s in Paris, where he forged a sarcastic, distinctly modernist style. However, he remained in close contact with his homeland, accepting many Soviet commissions, publishing much of his music in Russia, and eventually making several extended visits to the Soviet Union in the 1930s. He eventually moved back to in 1936, driven in part by patriotism and homesickness, but also attracted by the artistic ideals of the Soviet regime. Like his Soviet colleague Shostakovich, Prokofiev eventually suffered under the heavy hand of Stalinist artistic control. In one of the great ironies of Soviet music history, Prokofiev and Stalin died on the same day, March 5, 1953.

His second violin concerto was one of the last major works he wrote before returning to Russia. It was commissioned by the Belgian virtuoso Robert Soetens. Though Prokofiev had sketched out the concerto at home in Paris, much of orchestration was finished while Prokofiev was on an extended concert tour through Europe and the Soviet Union in 1934-35. He later wrote that: “The

number of places in which I wrote the concerto shows the kind of nomadic concert-tour life I led then. The main first movement theme was written in Paris, the main theme of the second movement in Voronezh [in Russia], the orchestration was finished in Baku [in Azerbaijan], and the premiere was in Madrid.” Soetens joined him in the fall of 1935 for a tour through Spain, and Prokofiev was deeply impressed by the warmth of the Spanish people and by their receptiveness to his music. After the Madrid premiere, Soetens had exclusive rights to perform the piece for one year, but soon afterwards, many other virtuosos, including Jascha Heifetz, began to program it.

Prokofiev’s second violin concerto was completed some 18 years after the first, and the two works are very different. The first is a thoroughly modernistic work, full of surprising French-style harmonies. The second is a rather sober piece, based on strict “Classical” forms. Prokofiev had been searching for a simpler, more direct style in the early 1930s, and it is almost as if he is anticipating the works he would create after returning to the Soviet Union.

The concerto is laid out in three movements, beginning with an *Allegro moderato* set in a fairly traditional sonata form. The wistful opening idea, laid out by the violin in the opening bars is picked and expanded by the orchestra. The second theme, also played by the violin is equally lyrical. Only at the end of the exposition does the mood become strident—though briefly—and then Prokofiev provides an extended and very contrapuntal development of these ideas. In the recapitulation, he is able to weave both ideas together before a soft and whimsical ending, with horns above pizzicato strings. Pizzicato strings begin the second movement (*Andante*) as well, as a quiet counterpoint to a warmly singing solo line. The movement continues as a set of loosely-constructed variations in which Prokofiev feels free to constantly introduce new ideas and vary them as well. There is a kind of dancelike grace to this music, which was written at more or less the same time as his ballet score *Romeo and Juliet*. The last movement (*Allegro, ben marcato*) is also danceable, an energetic Rondo whose main theme is a strong triple-meter caper. This alternates with other material—a brief moment of lyricism, furious solo passages, and occasional quirky shifts of meter—before the movement ends abruptly with bustling strings and a crisp drum stroke.

### **Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

#### **Rhapsody for Clarinet and Orchestra (Première rhapsodie)**

*Debussy composed this work in December 1909 and January 1910 as a piece for clarinet and piano. The public premiere of the orchestral version heard*

*here was in Paris in January 1911, with clarinet soloist Prosper Mimart. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 8:00.*

Since its founding in 1793, the Paris Conservatory has served as one of the great centers of French musical life. A Conservatory education was the goal of any aspiring 19th- or 20th-century French musician, and to receive one of its coveted annual prizes—whether the Premier Prix awarded to performers on each instrument or the Prix de Rome for composition—virtually insured professional success. Debussy was admitted to the Conservatory at age 10, but by his late teens he had begun to chafe at the conservative approach to composition and butted heads with his composition teachers. When he did win the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1884, it was over the objection of some of the more conservative faculty. The prize came with a year’s residency in Rome—which Debussy apparently detested—in the expectation that he send back samples of the work he was doing. The committee rejected these works, at one point calling his music “bizarre, incomprehensible and unperformable.” Debussy eventually returned to Paris before his year was up, breaking the terms of the Prix de Rome.

Over the next decade, Debussy’s musical career was largely at odds with the French musical establishment, but in 1909 Gabriel Fauré named him to the Conservatory’s governing council—again over the objection of conservative faculty. For his part, Debussy (who badly needed the stipend that came with the appointment) faithfully attended to his duties. In 1909 the Conservatory asked him to create two pieces for the 1910 clarinet juries, a short piece designed to test students’ sightreading abilities, and a more substantial piece that all students would learn. While Debussy seems to have dashed off the sightreading etude—later published as the *Pétite Pièce*—at the last possible moment, he lavished much more attention on the *solo de concours* (contest solo), which he titled *Première rhapsodie*. He was apparently quite pleased with the piece. He dutifully sat in on the clarinet juries in 1910, and wrote to his publisher that “to judge by the looks on the faces of my colleagues, the *Rhapsody* was a success,” and noted that it was “one of the most charming [pieces] I have ever written.”

The *Rhapsody* opens with delicate music that is marked “slowly dreaming” in the score. The solo line spins out a long lyrical line from a brief motive heard at the beginning, above a transparent background of strings and harps. (Though Debussy hated the term “impressionistic,” it is the perfect description for this music.) At the midpoint, there is a distinct change in mood, marked “sweet and penetrating” and the solo line playfully trades a new idea back and forth with its woodwind

colleagues. The piece ends with a brief burst of almost strident virtuosity and a short cadenza.

**Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)**  
**Tuba Concerto in F Minor**

*Vaughan Williams composed this concerto in 1953-54. The first performance was in London on June 13, 1954, with soloist Philip Catilinet and the London Symphony Orchestra. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 13:00.*

The youngest of the regular instruments of the instruments of the orchestra, the tuba was invented in the 1830s and gradually became a standard part of the brass section in the later 19th century. But it was well into the 1950s before the tuba was featured in a solo orchestral concerto—the Vaughan Williams concerto heard here. By this time, Vaughan Williams was the Grand Old Man of British music: deeply respected, and still vigorously composing in his 80s. There was no commission for the work, and he seems to have written it purely out of regard for the sound of the instrument, and a general fascination with unusual timbres. (His late works feature sounds as diverse as the saxophone, flugelhorn, vibraphone, harmonica, and wind machine.) His intended soloist was Philip Catilinet of the London Symphony Orchestra, and he consulted with Catilinet on the technical aspects of the piece. It was eventually performed on one of the concerts celebrating the LSO’s 50th anniversary jubilee in 1954. Over 30 years later, Catilinet published a wry account of the composition and premiere of the piece, in which he detailed how his piece, scheduled for after intermission was delayed by the conductor John Barbirolli, having “a bit of a party” toasting the jubilee. Catilinet, fearing ridicule, was in fact worried enough about the public reaction to the piece that he asked his wife to stay home from the premiere. He needn’t have worried however, as he later noted: “The applause seemed sincere enough; probably happy, along with me, that I had finally made a tuba concerto sufficiently plausible musically to be acceptable.”

Vaughan Williams was clearly determined to exploit both the technical and lyrical capabilities of the instrument in the concerto. The opening movement (*Prelude: Allegro moderato*) is a technical showpiece, based upon a pair of angular themes heard at the beginning and a lively 6/8 contrasting idea that shows the influence of Vaughan Williams’s beloved English folk song. The movement culminates in an extended solo concerto that calls for considerable virtuosity. The *Romanza* (*Andante sostenuto*) is a lyrical aria, with the tuba singing a pair of lovely folk-style themes above a quietly flowing accompaniment. The movement ends with an

introspective solo passage. The brief last movement (*Rondo alla tedesca: Allegro*) is built upon a figure played by the tuba in the opening bars, which eventually expands to a main theme. There are a few short contrasting ideas introduced along both by the tuba and its colleagues in the brass section, before a wide-ranging solo cadenza and a terse coda.

### **George Gershwin (1898-1937)** **An American in Paris**

*An American in Paris was composed in 1928 and received its premiere at Carnegie Hall in New York City, on December 13, 1928. We have performed it on six previous occasions between 1953 and 2012, Duration 19:00.*

Throughout his all-too-brief career Gershwin lived a kind of double life, with feet planted in both Broadway and in what he considered to be more “serious” Classical music. His first big splash on Broadway was the hit song “Swanee” in 1919. His big moment in the Classical world came just five years later. Paul Whiteman, the self-styled “King of Jazz” announced an “Experiment in Modern Music” for February 12, 1924, to be held at the venerable Aeolian Hall, a concert that would supposedly answer the question “What is American Music?” Somewhat to his surprise, Gershwin found that he would be writing would be composing a “Jazz concerto” for Whiteman’s event. With help from Whiteman’s staff arranger, Ferde Grofé, Gershwin completed *Rhapsody in Blue* in about a month, which he played at the concert.

Whiteman’s pretentious “Experiment” was a qualified success, but *Rhapsody in Blue* was a career-making event for Gershwin. Within a year he was approached by Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony Society. Damrosch, who had been at Whiteman’s “Experiment in Modern Music,” gave Gershwin a commission for a “New York Concerto.” The result, the *Concerto in F*, is a more ambitious piece than the *Rhapsody*, and has become the most successful of all American piano concertos. In 1928, Damrosch offered a second commission, this time for an orchestral work.

In March, George and Ira Gershwin, together with their sister Frances and Ira’s wife Leonore, left for a European tour, spent mostly in Paris. Paris of the 1920s could still boast of its place at the center of the artistic universe: the city was host to a dazzling array of composers, sculptors, painters, Jazz musicians, dancers, writers, and poets—both French and foreign. Gershwin, who was still a bit self-conscious about his reputation as a “serious” composer, took every opportunity to

*schmooze* the composers he admired most: Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Poulenc, Ravel, and Milhaud. There is a well-known (and possibly apocryphal) story about a meeting with Stravinsky, with whom Gershwin hoped to study. Stravinsky abruptly asked Gershwin how much money he made, and Gershwin, put off guard, answered. “About a \$100,000 a year.” “In that case,” replied Stravinsky, “I should study with you.”

Gershwin brought the unfinished score for the new orchestral piece with him to Europe, and sketched out much of the score in Paris that spring. In fact, several of his themes seem to have been conceived during an earlier, 1926 trip to Paris, long before there were any hints of a commission. He completed the full score and orchestration by November, 1928. Reviews of the first performance were decidedly mixed, but once again the best answer to the critics was success: *An American in Paris* became a standard of the orchestral repertoire almost as soon as it was premiered. Gershwin provided the following outline of the work:

“This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely, and is the most modern music I’ve yet attempted. The opening part will be developed in a typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and the Six, though the themes are all original. My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls around the city, and listens to various street-noises and absorbs the French atmosphere.

“As in my other orchestral compositions, I’ve not endeavored to represent any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such as his imagination pictures for him.

“The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simple than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax, followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part, with its impressions of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues, and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.”

Gershwin's use of the orchestra in this work is much more confident than in either the *Rhapsody* (which, after all was arranged almost entirely by Grofé) or the *Concerto*. There were some later, nasty rumors that Gershwin had had help with the orchestration of *An American in Paris*, but it appears that virtually every bit of this score is his. He felt no need in the completed score to include a piano part for himself, though the original score does have a piano part at several points which he later crossed out. The influence of Jazz is clearly audible, but the most prominent element is the variety of orchestral moods he projects and the ingenious ways he achieves them. The standard orchestra is augmented by saxophones, a huge array of percussion, and—one of Gershwin's most prized souvenirs from his 1928 trip to Paris—a set of four French taxi-horns.

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