

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**September 28-29-30, 2018**  
**Subscription Concert No.1**  
**Michael Allsen**

This program begins our 93rd season, a season that celebrates Maestro John DeMain's 25th year as our music director. In keeping with this celebratory tone, we open the program with a brisk, upbeat, and rhythmically intense overture by Jennifer Higdon. We continue a set of dramatic selections from Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. Our soloist for this program is the amazing Emanuel Ax, performing the monumental second piano concerto of Brahms. (This is his fourth program with the Madison Symphony Orchestra: he performed the same Brahms concerto in 2005, and has played both concertos by Chopin, No.1 in 1979 and No.2 in 2008.)

**Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962)**  
**Fanfare Ritmico**

*Higdon composed Fanfare Ritmico in 1999, and it was premiered by The Women's Philharmonic in San Francisco in March 2000. This is our first performance of the piece. Duration 6:00.*

Jennifer Higdon is among America's most successful contemporary composers. Born in Brooklyn, she studied flute at Bowling Green State University and composition at both the University of Pennsylvania and the Curtis Institute, where she now teaches. In 2010 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her *Violin Concerto*, one of many honors she has garnered in the past several years. In just the last few years, her first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the prestigious International Opera Award for Best World Premiere in 2016—the first American opera to do so in the award's history. Within the past year, Higdon has had successful premieres of her *Low Brass Concerto* with the Chicago Symphony and Philadelphia Orchestra, her *Tuba Concerto* with the Pittsburgh Symphony and Royal Scottish National Orchestra, and her *Harp Concerto* with the Rochester Philharmonic and Harrisburg Symphony. She is among America's most frequently-programmed composers, and her *blue cathedral* is among the most often-played pieces of contemporary music, receiving well over 600 performances since its premiere in 2000. (We played it in 2013.) *Fanfare Ritmico*, heard here, was written as nearly the same time as *blue cathedral*, but the two works are entirely different in style: *blue cathedral* is a lyrical and deeply spiritual work, while *Fanfare Ritmico* is aggressive and propulsive throughout. She provides the following note:

“Writing this work on the eve of the move into the new Millennium, I found myself reflecting on how all things have quickened as time has progressed. Our lives now move at speeds much greater than what I believe anyone would have ever imagined in years past. Everyone follows the beat of their own drummer, and those drummers are beating faster and faster on many different levels. As we move along day to day, rhythm plays an integral part of our lives, from the individual heartbeat to the lightning speed of our computers. This fanfare celebrates that rhythmic motion, of man and machine, and the energy which permeates every moment of our being in the new century.”

Opening with a fierce drum cadence, the piece launches into a series of episodes in which the energy and rhythmic intensity never fades, even in relatively quiet moments. Above this driving background Higdon makes full use of the tone colors available in a large orchestra: a poignant trumpet solo placed against telegraphic rhythms from the woodwinds, fragmented woodwind lines, mysterious string chords, strident brass statements, and the sonic resources of a large battery of percussion.

**Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)**  
**Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*, Suites 1-3, Op.64a, 64b, and 101**

*The ballet Romeo and Juliet was composed in 1934-35, and the first concert performance of the full score took place in Moscow in October of 1935. The ballet was not staged until 1938, with a production in Brno, Czechoslovakia, and it was finally performed in Russia in 1940, with a production by the Kirov Ballet of Leningrad (St. Petersburg). Prokofiev extracted three orchestral suites from this score, and we will be performing excerpts from all three at this concert. The Suite No.1 (Op. 64a) was premiered in Moscow in November of 1937, and the Suite No.2 (Op.64b) was introduced in Leningrad five months later. The Suite No.3 (Op.101) premiered in Moscow in March 1946. Excerpts from the ballet suites have appeared on these programs in 1954, 1984, 1999, and 2009. Duration 34:00.*

There is little doubt these days that *Romeo and Juliet* stands as Prokofiev’s most enduring ballet score. For several years, however, this enormous work was a victim of Soviet artistic politics. The original idea for this full-scale Romantic ballet on *Romeo and Juliet* seems to have come from Sergei Radlov, an influential Leningrad opera director who had collaborated on Prokofiev’s *Love for Three Oranges*. The “story-ballet” *Romeo and Juliet* was to have been produced at Leningrad’s Academic Theater, but at the end of 1934 the theater underwent a sudden change of administration. Sergei Kirov, the Party boss of Leningrad, was assassinated, undoubtedly at Stalin’s order, and in an incongruous move, the Soviet authorities renamed the Academic Theater to honor this “Socialist martyr.” The

new Kirov Theater was tightly controlled by the Soviet artistic bureaucracy, and Radlov—whose views had long been considered suspiciously *avant garde*—fell out of favor. Hopes for producing *Romeo and Juliet* in Leningrad evaporated, and Prokofiev began working with the Bolshoi ballet in Moscow. The score was completed in 1935 and played at the Bolshoi, whose directors pronounced it “undanceable” and canceled the planned production. At least part of the problem was the story line, which had been twisted so that a suicidal Romeo arrived at Juliet’s tomb just a minute *after* she woke up, thus providing the most famous of all tragedies with a happy ending.

Despite these disappointments, Prokofiev continued to work on the score, fixing the sappy ending, and extracting two orchestral suites from the score. The suites were enormously successful, both inside the Soviet Union and in Europe and the United States. (The *Suite No.3* came several years later, after the ballet became a success.) In late 1938, the Kirov Ballet finally agreed to produce *Romeo and Juliet*. Their change of heart seems to have been inspired in part by the enormous success of the suites, but also by embarrassment over the fact that a non-Soviet company (in Czechoslovakia) had actually staged the ballet in 1938. The Kirov’s lavish production in 1940 was a huge success, and the ballet finally found a secure place in the Russian repertoire—the critics hailed *Romeo and Juliet* as a triumph of Soviet art, and hailed Prokofiev the ballet composer as the first worthy successor to Tchaikovsky.

Movements from the orchestral suites are often mixed and matched, and at this concert, Maestro DeMain has selected six movements that illustrate the vast emotional range present in Prokofiev’s ballet score. *Montagues and Capulets* begins with solemn music from Act I of the ballet, which accompanies the Duke as he forbids fights between the two families. The main theme, however, is the accompaniment to the dance of the Capulet knights in Act II—a march theme with a ponderous trombone accompaniment. A contrasting middle section, with a lovely flute solo, is Juliet’s more graceful version of this same music. *Juliet the Young Girl* is a portrait of Juliet from Act I—the mood of this music shifts constantly between quick and flirtatious to quiet and introspective. The *Death of Tybalt* is a complete contrast, dominated by the brasses and blazing string lines. Here, Prokofiev brings together many of the significant moments of Act II: the duel, Tybalt’s death, and the funeral procession. *Romeo and Juliet: Balcony Scene* is unadulterated Romanticism from beginning to end. All is hushed at the beginning as muted violins and harp set the stage. Much of this quiet but passionate movement is a dialogue, with themes representing the two lovers presented alternately in strings and woodwinds. The music moves towards a gentle peak at the beginning, but subsides to a whisper at the end. *Romeo at Juliet’s Grave* is the music that accompanies Romeo’s visit to the sleeping Juliet, whom he thinks is dead. It opens with astringent string lines and begins a slow funeral procession. It builds inexorably towards a deep cry of anguish, and closes in mood of profound resignation as Romeo drinks his poison and dies next to Juliet’s sleeping body. The same mood continues in *Death of Juliet*, as she wakes to find Romeo’s body.

Again, the movement build towards a muted climax, with one short bark from the trombone marking the moment when she plunges Romeo's dagger into her breast ("O happy dagger: this is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die.") before a hushed conclusion.

### **Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**

#### **Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op. 83**

*Brahms's second piano concerto was begun in 1878 and completed in July of 1881. The composer played the solo part at the first performance, a private concert in Meiningen in October 1881, and was also the pianist for the public premiere, in Budapest, on November 9 of that year. Previous Madison Symphony Orchestra performances have featured Gunnar Johansen (1955), Bela Szilagi (1962), Van Cliburn (1971), Alicia de Larrocha (1981), André Watts (1990), Garrick Ohlsson (2002), Emanuel Ax (2005), and Philippe Bianconi (2013). Duration 50:00.*

When a very young Brahms premiered his first piano concerto in 1859, audience reactions ranged from indifference to revulsion. While its failure seems to have been due as much to musical politics as the work itself, Brahms was in no hurry to return to writing piano concertos, and certainly stayed away from works as passionate and flashy as the first concerto. He wrote to the violinist Joseph Joachim: "A second will sound different." Brahms was true to his word, but a second piano concerto was over 20 years in coming. He began sketching the concerto in 1878, during a trip to Italy, and continued to work on it for the next three years. It was not until the summer of 1881, that Brahms—with tongue firmly in cheek—announced to his friend, Elisabeth von Herzogenberg: "I have written a tiny little piano concerto with a little wisp of a scherzo. It is in B-flat..." Brahms was well aware that his "tiny little B-flat concerto" was the largest work in this genre since Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto. Soon after its completion, Brahms and a colleague played a two-piano arrangement of the concerto for a small group of friends, including the influential critic Eduard Hanslick. The concerto's reputation spread quickly, and Brahms was soon invited by Hans von Bülow to perform it with Bülow's orchestra at Meiningen. After working out small details in this private performance, Brahms played the work at in a public concert at the Redoutensaal in Budapest. In contrast to the dismal reception given his first piano concerto, this work was very successful, almost immediately gaining acceptance as a part of the standard repertoire.

In the decades between 1859 and 1881, Brahms had become a self-confident and internationally acknowledged master of symphonic form. The sharp

distinction between the first and second concertos is understandable in this light. While his youthful D minor concerto had been a brilliant and somewhat autobiographical work, Brahms himself was aware of its shortcomings, most of which resulted from his inexperience in orchestration. In contrast, the B-flat concerto is a more mature and emotionally reserved work that makes skillful use of the orchestra. The work was composed directly after the completion of his second symphony, and the elements of his mature symphonic style are heard in this concerto. Brahms even adds a fourth movement, expanding the typical three-movement concerto form to symphonic proportions. But his second piano concerto also presents special challenges for the soloist, above and beyond mere endurance. The pianist must be sensitive to the equal role played by the orchestra in developing thematic material. While there are few outward displays of virtuosity, the soloist is also called upon to play passage-work in octaves and sixths, immense chords, and complex rhythms, often in partnership with the full orchestra.

The concerto begins with a calm and dignified theme played by solo horn, in dialogue with the soloist. After a brief cadenza, the main theme is reintroduced, now by full orchestra. The opening movement (*Allegro non troppo*) continues in a greatly expanded sonata form. Brahms's formal model for this opening movement seems to have been the equally expansive opening of Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto. The second movement (*Allegro appassionato*), Brahms's "little wisp of a scherzo," begins in D minor, with a vigorous offbeat figure in the piano. Aside from jaunty central episode in D Major, the mood is turbulent throughout. Again, Brahms has expanded the form, inserting a great deal of thematic development into this normally clear-cut ternary form. After the stormy scherzo, Brahms places a gentle *Andante*, set in home key of B-flat Major. This movement opens with a solo cello presenting a quiet theme that is later picked up by the soloist in a tranquil and unhurried cadenza. (Brahms would later rework the cello's theme in a song: *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer*.) A central section is more agitated, with the piano taking a leading role, but the solo cello, now in dialogue with the piano, returns again to round off the *Andante*. The finale (*Allegretto grazioso*), which contains the most dramatic and virtuosic music for the soloist, is set in rondo form. The recurring refrain begins with a forceful dotted motive in the piano. The rondo, typically the lightest of Classical forms, is here expanded to massive proportions—anything less would be overbalanced by what has come before.