

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**March 6-7-8, 2020**  
**94th Season / Subscription Concert No.6**  
**Michael Allsen**

Guest conductor Kenneth Woods leads this program, which begins with Haydn's cheerful *Symphony No.96*—one of the twelve great “London” symphonies that rounded out his career as a symphonist. We then welcome Blake Pouliot, a brilliant young Canadian violinist, who will make his Madison Symphony Orchestra debut with the beloved Mendelssohn concerto. After intermission, we turn to one of the largest of Richard Strauss's symphonic poems, his monumental *Ein Heldenleben*, in which the composer himself is clearly the hero of the story.

**Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809)**  
**Symphony No.96 in D Major (“Miracle”)**

*Haydn composed this work in 1791, and the first performance took place in London in April or May of 1791. We have performed the symphony once previously, in 1958. Duration 23:00.*

When his long-time patron Prince Nicolaus Esterházy died in 1790, Haydn was presented with almost total freedom to compose and travel. Johann Peter Salomon, a London violinist and impresario, wasted no time in engaging Haydn for his spring concert series. After some initial hesitation—which was overcome by Salomon's promise of some £1200—Haydn agreed to come to England. His first English tour in 1791-92 was wildly successful: Salomon's receipts were tremendous, and the concert series was helped by friendly competition from a rival London series of concerts by Haydn's former student Ignaz Pleyel. He arrived in London on New Year's Day in 1791, and London audiences obviously could not get enough of his music...or of Haydn himself. Just a week after his arrival, an exhausted Haydn wrote to a friend in Vienna that “Everyone wants to know me. I have had to dine out six times up to now, and if I wanted I could have an invitation every day; I must consider my health, and secondly my work. Except for the nobility, I admit no callers before two in the afternoon.” Haydn subsequently contracted with Salomon for a second trip to London in 1794-95. Under the terms of his contracts, Haydn composed twelve symphonies for Salomon's concerts during his two visits: nos. 93-98 during his first visit, and nos. 99-104 during his second. The “London” symphonies are the final, crowning glories of his long career as a symphonist. He seems to have been inspired by the large orchestras Salomon put at his disposal to create richly-scored works filled with orchestral color and

novel effects. These symphonies also have a new harmonic subtlety and depth of development.

The *Symphony No.96* was one of the first symphonies he wrote in London, and premiered with *No.95* at one of Salomon's concerts in the Hanover Square Rooms in the spring of 1791. Like many of his symphonies, *No.96* has a nickname—in this case the name “Miracle” refers to a story about the premiere performance. The room where it was performed seated about 500 people, and was lit by large candle chandeliers. As the story goes, the crowd had stood and crowded up to the stage to congratulate Haydn after the performance, when one of the chandeliers crashed to the floor, miraculously harming no one. It's a good story, and it's actually true...but it is about the wrong symphony! This incident actually happened during Haydn's second London visit, after the premiere of his *Symphony No.102*, but the name “Miracle” has remained enduringly stuck to *No.96*.

There are miracles enough in the music itself—this is one of the lightest and most joyful of the “London” symphonies. After a short, harmonically unsettled slow introduction (*Adagio*), Haydn suddenly picks up the tempo (*Allegro*) and settles firmly into D Major for the lively main body of the movement, which is set in sonata form. As in many of his sonata-form movements, this works with the same set of ideas throughout the exposition—there is no distinct “second theme,” and all of the drama comes from the underlying harmonic changes. The material he lays out is rich enough to supply a particularly intense development section, and one that contains a formal joke, what is known as a “false recapitulation.” This is easy to hear: there is a sudden grand pause, and the main theme returns. It is however in the wrong key, and Haydn soon launches into a short and stormy burst of development to let us in on the joke. The “real” recapitulation, which starts soon afterwards, is short and to the point.

The main theme of the *Andante* is a gentle melody in 6/8 laid out by the strings. Salomon had provided an orchestra of at least 40 players for these concerts—much larger than the ensemble Haydn was used to working with in Austria—and he seems to have luxuriated in this: exploring ways in which to vary this theme using different orchestral textures. The movement features a stern minor-key central episode that begins in fugal style. The opening music returns, as expected, but there is a surprise at the end: a lovely pastoral violin solo (written for Salomon himself) in dialogue with the woodwinds. The *Minuet* that follows is one of Haydn's typically forceful and rustic takes on this courtly dance. Its trio is a pastoral Austrian *Ländler* featuring a solo oboe. The movement ends with a reprise of the opening music.

The bright finale (*Vivace assai*) is laid out in rondo form, its playful main theme introduced by the strings, with witty interjections by the woodwinds. This music appears in alternation with a couple of contrasting episodes, the first a turbulent minor-key idea, and the second closely based upon the main theme. Once again Haydn throws in a surprise near the end: a sudden pause, and a final wind-band version of the theme, before an exuberant coda.

### **Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

#### **Concerto in E minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op.64**

*Mendelssohn began work on this concerto in 1838, but most of it was completed in the summer of 1844. Ferdinand David was the soloist at the premiere, in Leipzig on March 13, 1845. Previous Madison Symphony Orchestra performances have featured Arthur Kreuz (1935), Masuko Oshioda (1971), Tyrone Grieve (1985), Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg (1991), and Naha Greenholz (2013). Duration 29:00.*

Mendelssohn's violin concerto is certainly the most popular of his solo works, and is probably one of the most often-played concertos for the instrument. It was just as familiar the 19th century: it was a hit as soon as it was introduced in 1845, and some sixty years later, the virtuoso Joseph Joachim listed it as one of *the* "four German violin concertos"—alongside those of Beethoven, Bruch, and Brahms. He concluded by saying: "But the dearest of them all, the heart's jewel, is Mendelssohn's." The concerto deserves every bit of its popularity. Mendelssohn's melodies are memorable and his musical forms are immaculately shaped. And violinists generally love to play this piece—it is certainly not "easy" in any way, but it is crafted in such a way that it lays perfectly on the instrument.

The concerto was the product of Mendelssohn's friendship with the composer and violinist Ferdinand David (1810-1873). David spent most of his career as a violinist and conductor in Leipzig, primarily in connection with the famed Gewandhaus. He and Mendelssohn had become friends in the late 1820s, and in they spent much of late 1830s working together in Leipzig. In 1838 Mendelssohn wrote to David: "I would like to write you a violin concerto for next winter. One in E minor keeps running through my head, and the opening gives me no peace." The violin concerto was not finished that winter or the next, however. In 1840, Mendelssohn took a position in Berlin that kept him too busy to finish the concerto...or much else. (One of the few large works he did complete in Berlin was the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) Mendelssohn returned to

Leipzig in 1843, however, and finished the concerto in relatively short order. He worked closely with David, who provided technical advice, and who probably composed the cadenza in the first movement.

The violin is present from the opening bars of the first movement (*Allegro molto appassionata*), with a lyrical melody that is soon picked up by the orchestra and further developed in the solo part. The second theme is equally expansive, and Mendelssohn closes the exposition with more energetic music. The brilliant cadenza is fully written-out—still a fairly unusual feature in 1844—and appears not as usual at the very end of the movement, but ushers in a shortened recapitulation and fiery coda. Mendelssohn reportedly hated applause between movements, and made sure to connect the opening movement and the second (*Andante*) by having the bassoon hold its final pitch as link. This single note soon blossoms into a flowing and thoroughly Romantic melody. There is slightly darker middle section, but the opening mood soon returns. Once again, Mendelssohn links this movement to the next—in this case with a short interlude (*Allegretto non troppo*) based upon the first movement’s main theme. Suddenly there are trumpet calls, answered by flippant little flicks from the soloist (*Allegro molto vivace*). The main theme has the soloist dancing lightly above the orchestra, and eventually bowing furiously. Critic Donald Francis Tovey described the second theme as “cheeky”—a perfectly apt term for this offbeat tune. Many writers have noted the similarity in tone between this movement and the dancing fairies and good humor of his *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music. Though Mendelssohn conjures up some ingenious details in the accompaniment, it is the solo line that dominates this entire movement, ending with a brilliant flourish.

[**Note:** Though this is usually known as *the* Mendelssohn violin concerto, it is actually his second concerto for the instrument. As a 12-year old, he composed a D minor concerto that was performed by his teacher Eduard Reitz at a private concert in the Mendelssohn home. While this early effort is an entirely satisfactory piece, very much in the style of Mozart, it is not the same kind of mature masterwork as the much more famous E minor concerto.]

**Richard Strauss (1864-1949)**  
**Ein Heldenleben (“A Hero’s Life”), Op.49**

*Strauss composed this symphonic poem in 1897-98. The first performance was in Frankfurt on March 3, 1899. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has performed it twice previously, in 1985 and 2012. Duration 42:00.*

Many late Romantic composers composed symphonic poems (a.k.a. tone poems)—large programmatic orchestral works that depicted a scene, a story, or a character in purely musical terms—after Liszt introduced the genre in the 1850s. But it is a series of symphonic poems by a young Richard Strauss that remain the best-known works in this form. Strauss would eventually compose ten of these works while he was in his 20s, 30s, and 40s, from *Aus Italien* (“From Italy” - 1886) through *Eine Alpensinfonie* (1915). *Heldenleben* of 1898 is the last of the seven symphonic poems that really secured his reputation, and in orchestration and scope, it is the most ambitious of these. (It is exceeded in size only by the gargantuan *Alpensinfonie*.) *Heldenleben*’s orchestra is massive: in addition to the usual orchestration, Strauss tripled the woodwinds, and added four additional horns, tenor tuba, and huge percussion battery.

Strauss’s model in *Heldenleben* was Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony—a work Strauss admired, and which he felt was then being neglected by German orchestras. But he was a bit cagy about whether or not the “hero” in *Heldenleben* was actually himself. Strauss was steeped in Nietzsche’s philosophy at the time—*Also sprach Zarathustra* (“Thus spoke Zarathustra”) of 1896 is a direct response to Nietzsche’s most widely-known work—and Strauss clearly found the idea of a “superman” rising above the petty concerns of the “herd” an attractive idea. He had suffered at the hands of critics, most notably Eduard Hanslick, and if Strauss’s letters to family and friends are any indication, he identified with the archetypical artistic hero little appreciated in his own time. He originally included fairly specific section headings in the work, but later removed them and backed away from the idea of a specific story line, writing: “There is no need for a program; it is enough to know there is a hero fighting his enemies.”

*The Hero* begins with a bold, wide-ranging, and—well—*heroic* theme in the horns that represents the central figure. The texture thickens quickly and secondary ideas that represent various sides of the Hero’s character emerge. After a grand pause, Strauss introduces *The Hero’s Adversaries*—not grand figures like the hero, but a group of small-minded yappers represented by the woodwinds, and more ponderous phrases from the tubas. (He includes the directions *sehr scharf und spitzig* “very shrill and biting” and *schnarrend* “snarling.”) Though Strauss never acknowledged the identity of these nattering nabobs, it seems clear that he had some of own nitpicking critics in mind. The long central section is a solemn

statement by the Hero, but the yammering of the woodwinds intrudes again at the end of the section.

Strauss was perfectly open about the identity of *The Hero's Companion*—the longest, and most lyrical section of *Heldenleben*. The violin solo here is a musical portrait of his wife, the soprano Pauline de Anha, whom he had married in 1894. At turns flirtatious, passionate, and pensive, the solo part eventually grows into a broad, romantic love-theme for the full string section. The “adversaries” break into this serene mood, and a distant trumpet fanfare heralds a great battle-scene (*The Hero's Battlefield*). This music has brief moments of repose, but the dominant mood is ferocious, with the Hero's theme transformed into an angry march, and constant explosions and cannon-shots from the percussion. In the end the Hero clearly emerges victorious, as his theme is stated triumphantly by the full string section.

Strauss denied that this was work entirely about himself, but the next section, *The Hero's Works of Peace* is clearly about his music—it is a parade of quotations from several of his symphonic poems and other works of the previous few years: there is the boisterous main theme of *Don Juan*, and music from *Don Quixote*, *Tod und Verklärung*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Macbeth*, and *Zarathustra*, as well as melodies from his opera *Guntram* and an art song, *Traum durch die Dämmerung* (“Dreaming in the Twilight”). The final section, *The Hero's Retirement from the World and Consummation*, begins with one last reference to the adversaries' music, but this pushed aside by briefly agitated music—as if the Hero is dismissing his critics for the final time. The section that follows grows gradually from a quiet English horn solo to a lush passage for strings and horn. There is a reminiscence of the great battle, but serenity returns quickly, with a passage that features luminous solo music for the violin and horn. A rather muted brass fanfare ends the work, building into the great chord that ends *Ein Heldenleben*.