

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
November 8-9-10, 2019
94th Season / Subscription Concert No.3
Michael Allsen

This this program opens with a work by American composer Aaron Jay Kernis. Five years ago, the Madison Symphony Orchestra played his exuberant *Too Hot Toccata*. Kernis's *Newly Drawn Sky*, heard here, is a much broader and more introspective work—filled with musical drama that leads to a quiet conclusion. We then welcome pianist Joyce Yang, who makes her first appearance at these concerts playing Prokofiev's powerful third piano concerto. The program ends with Schumann's great *Symphony No.2*, a revealing autobiographical work.

Aaron Jay Kernis (b. 1960)
Newly Drawn Sky

Kernis composed this work in 2005, for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, who played the premiere at the Ravinia Festival on July 1, 2005. This is our first performance of the work. Duration 17:00.

Aaron Jay Kernis first came to national prominence in 1983 when, as a 23-year-old, he had a work premiered by the New York Philharmonic. Since then, he has garnered an impressive number of performances and commissions for new works, and awards that include a Pulitzer Prize and the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Composition. A Philadelphia native, Kernis studied at the San Francisco Conservatory, the Manhattan School of Music, and Yale University. He has served on Yale's faculty since 2003. Many of his works are topical or political, such as the *Second Symphony* (a response to the Gulf War of 1991), *Still Movement with Hymn* (his reaction to the senseless ethnic violence that erupted in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s), or *Colored Field* (a response to his visits to the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps). But Kernis is also capable of exuberance and humor, as in his salsa-inspired *100 Dance Hits*. More recent music includes his *Violin Concerto*, which won a 2018 Grammy Award for best contemporary classical composition. His works are most often characterized by the rather slippery term “postmodernist”—music that freely adapts influences from across the musical spectrum without being rigid or doctrinaire.

Kernis provides the following note on his 2005 *Newly Drawn Sky*: “*Newly Drawn Sky* is a lyrical, reflective piece for orchestra, a reminiscence of the first summer

night by the ocean spent with my young twins (who were six months old when the work's initial inspiration came to me), and of the changing colors of the summer sky at dusk. While the work is not programmatic or specifically descriptive, it reflects a constancy of change and flux musically and personally. The piece begins with chromatically shifting three-note chords in the foreground that move upwards through the strings, then enlarge into the horns and winds as a background to a long, singing line in the violas. These chords and their shifts between diatonic and chromatic voice-leading are a fundamental element in the formation of the work. Short bursts of quick, scherzando music which grow larger in orchestration alternate with continuations of the increasingly expressionistic singing melodic line and rhythmically punctuated brass and percussion outbursts. A chaotic culmination leads to a return of open fifths (the first notes of the piece) in the full orchestra and metal percussion. The calm middle section of the work features serene melodic writing in the winds and solo trumpet, underpinned by undulating, slow moving harmonies in the strings. The opening lyrical line returns in the strings and leads upwards to a brief interruption, a transformation of the scherzo-like music which quickly vanishes into a full return of the opening music which grows into a vast landscape of sound in the entire orchestra, leading upwards once again to a short, intense climax. *Newly Drawn Sky* closes with a simple, consonant coda, which gradually and lyrically calms the memory of tensions that have surfaced over the course of the work.”

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)
Concerto No.3 for Piano and Orchestra in C Major, Op.26

Prokofiev's third piano concerto was composed in the summer of 1921, and the first performance took place on December 16, 1921, when he played the solo part with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This is our sixth performance of the work. Previous soloists include: Grant Johannesen (1968), Horacio Gutierrez (1982), John Browning (1991), Philippe Bianconi (2003), and Yefim Bronfman (2008). Duration 28:00.

In the aftermath of the 1917 revolution, Prokofiev left Russia for the United States. His decision to leave probably had less to do with politics than with his assessment of the market for new music in his devastated country. He had apparently intended to return to Russia after a few months, but he would not return to his homeland permanently for almost twenty years. His American sojourn (1918-22) was personally disappointing however. In an attempt to cash in on his novelty value, he was promoted as a “Bolshevik composer” from “Godless Russia.” Prokofiev always tried to maintain good musical relations with Soviet musical authorities,

even at this early date, but there is little evident that he considered himself to be a Bolshevik. While he was financially successful, American audiences gave his music and performances a lukewarm reception. Musically conservative American audiences found his music too harsh and dissonant, and American critics were savage. One *Chicago Tribune* writer, reviewing a 1921 performance of his opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, wrote that: "...Mr. Prokofiev might well have loaded up a shotgun with several thousand notes and discharged them against the side of blank wall." He was particularly disappointed by the tepid reaction to his *Piano Concerto No.3*, premiered in Chicago that year. He played the concerto the next year in Paris, and received an enthusiastic response. French reaction to this and other works was a major factor in his decision to leave America. He later wrote that he left America "...with a thousand dollars in my pocket and an aching head." He moved to Paris in 1922, and spent most of the next fourteen years there.

Prokofiev's third piano concerto was completed in 1921, during a summer vacation on the coast of Brittany. The work brought together several bits of sketch material from as early as 1911, but Prokofiev was able to fuse all of these ideas into an organic whole. It was composed directly after his famous "Classical" symphony (1917) and the *The Love for Three Oranges* (1919). Like these works, the concerto is built along Classical lines, with forms that resemble those of Mozart and Haydn. He conceived the concerto as a solo showcase for himself, and the main focus is the piano writing, reflecting Prokofiev's own style of playing—bold, incisive, and powerful. (A friend once remarked that, when Prokofiev played *fortissimo*, it was "...hard to bear in a small room.")

The concerto opens with a quiet and thoroughly Russian melody played by the solo clarinet. The *Andante* introduction abruptly changes character and speed (*Allegro*), and the piano introduces the main theme, an angular and exuberant melody. The more fragile second theme is stated by the oboe. After this theme is developed by the piano, the tempo slows to the original *Andante* for an extended central episode. Insistent beats from the timpani lead into a lengthy conclusion that serves both as a recapitulation and development of the two main *Allegro* themes.

The basis of the second movement (*Theme and Variations*) is a droll, marchlike melody played by the woodwinds. The piano plays the first variation, a sentimental commentary on the theme. The tempo quickens for the next two variations, in which the orchestra carries bits of the theme beneath piano ornamentation. The fourth variation is an unhurried dialogue between piano and orchestra. The final variation calls for brilliant *forte* technique from the soloist. In the coda, the theme is played quite slowly under a delicate countermelody from the piano.

In his own program notes for the concerto, Prokofiev described the finale (*Allegro ma non troppo*) as an “argument” between soloist and orchestra. The opening bassoon theme “is interrupted by the blustering entry of the piano.” This difference of opinion is not settled until the piano picks up the orchestra’s theme and develops it. (The composer mined this melody from an unfinished string quartet written “on the white keys” of the piano.) The tempo slows and the woodwinds introduce a calmer idea, to which the piano makes a sarcastic reply. After further development of this new material, the movement closes with a blisteringly virtuosic coda.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)
Symphony No.2 in C Major, Op.61

Schumann’s Symphony No.2 was composed in Dresden, during a three-week period in December 1845. It was first performed in Leipzig in November 1846, conducted by Felix Mendelssohn. It has been played on four previous occasions at these programs: in 1952, 1968, 1987, and 2005. Duration 38:00.

Schumann referred to the two-year period leading up to the composition of his *Symphony No.2* as his “dark days”—a time when he was depressed and deep in the grip of the mental illness that would eventually lead him to an asylum a decade later. The work itself was written rather quickly in 1845—between December 12 and 28—but he continued to revise and orchestrate for another ten months. Considering his mental state, the outwardly brilliant nature of the symphony seems a surprise. However, Schumann hinted at a deeper significance in writing about the symphony: “I might say that it was the resistance of my spirit that was at work here. The first movement is full of struggle and is capricious and refractory in nature.” The circumstances of the symphony’s composition still were clear in his mind three years later when he wrote to a colleague: “I wrote my symphony in December 1845, and I sometimes fear my semi-invalid state can be divined from the music. I began to feel more myself when I wrote the last movement, and was certainly much better when I finished the whole work. All the same it reminds me of dark days.”

The quality and the “meaning” of the *Symphony No.2* have remained a point of contention since the time of its first performance. In writing about it, one early London reviewer remarked: “Schumann went for his melody to a dried-up well.” Most 19th-century writers were much more enthusiastic—Clara Schumann, in a letter to Brahms called it “...the most masterful of his orchestral works.” The symphony was certainly the most popular of Schumann’s orchestral works during

the 19th century. Though Schumann himself never discussed it as a programmatic piece, critics such as Brahms and Eduard Krüger lavished the highest praise on it—comparing it favorably to Beethoven’s fifth symphony as an expression of triumph over adversity. Early 20th-century writers, from W. H. Hadow onwards were generally a lot less kind: Hadow complained of the symphony’s “vagueness of form,” and other writers focused on weaknesses in orchestration.

A 1984 essay by Anthony Newcomb is one of the best interpretations of the symphony. He points out that the notion that a work could have an underlying narrative or biographical reference without being overtly programmatic is central to much of Schumann’s music and writings about music. In a penetrating analysis of the work, Newcomb suggests that the forms used by Schumann in the work, which are often inconsistent with “Classical” norms are in fact consistent with the idea of an evolution from confusion and struggle to triumph. The first three movements represent a working out of the two conflicting ideas presented in the slow introduction to the first movement: a starkly simple motto and a chromatic countermelody. Nearly all of the major themes of the opening two movements are derived from one of these two ideas and that the melody that dominates the third movement is in fact a fusion of the two. The *Adagio*’s tone of resignation is then shattered by the joyous opening of fourth movement. But despite the triumphant opening, the real focus of the finale is its conclusion, where the composer finally resolves the thematic conflicts of the finale and of the preceding movements.

Many of his contemporaries noted references to Beethoven in the *Symphony No.2*, and its opening movement sounds purely “Classical” in nature: a long introduction (*Sostenuto assai*) with textures that would not have sounded out of place in Haydn. The body of the movement (*Allegro ma non troppo*) is roughly in sonata form, though Schumann develops his themes rather freely throughout the movement and in an extended coda.

The light-footed second movement (*Scherzo: Allegro vivace*) has an innovative form. Most scherzos, from Beethoven onward have a contrasting trio section at the center, but here, Schumann gives us *two* trios: a rustic woodwind folk-dance that mixes 6/8 and 2/4, and a mock-solemn chorale theme. Just before the end he slyly works in a reference to the symphony’s opening motto theme in the midst of a flurry of strings.

The melancholy third movement (*Adagio*) must have its roots in Schumann’s “dark days.” A series of solo lines present the long, flowing main over a pulsing string background. The mood is broken at a few points within the movement, however.

There is a brief horn chorale near the beginning (later reinterpreted by strings), and a short central fugue that leads to a restatement. In the end, the *Adagio* fades away in quiet sadness.

This mood is swept away quickly by the jubilant opening of the finale (*Allegro molto vivace*). The second theme is clearly a transformed version of the *Adagio* melody. In an autobiographical moment—Schumann credited part of his return to health to his study of J.S. Bach—there is a reference to Bach’s personal motive (BACH - or B - A - C - B-flat). The dramatic climax of the movement is the end, where Schumann introduces a new theme, borrowed from Beethoven’s song-cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (“To the distant beloved”). The melody is from the final song in the cycle, *Nimm sie hin denn, diese Lieder* (“Take, then, these song that I sang to you, beloved”). The musical quotation many have been intended as a tribute to his wife Clara—he had quoted the same song in his 1839 *Fantasie in C Major* for solo piano, where it was present as a private message to her at a time when their plans to marry were being frustrated by her father. This sets up a long coda in which the symphony’s melodic material, particularly the opening motto, is transformed.

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