

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Subscription Program No. 6 – Garrick Ohlsson plays Chopin
March 12-13-14, 2027

Music Director Emeritus John DeMain leads this program featuring audience favorite, pianist Garrick Ohlsson as soloist, in his seventh appearance with the Madison Symphony Orchestra. Mr. Ohlsson has previously appeared with the orchestra in 1984 (Rachmaninoff, *Concerto No. 3*), 1985 (Mozart, *Concerto No. 25*), 2002 (Brahms, *Concerto No. 2*), 2009 (Rachmaninoff, *Concerto No. 3*), 2012 (Tchaikovsky, *Concerto No. 2*), 2016 (Brahms, *Concerto No. 1*), and 2022 (Beethoven, *Concerto No. 5*). At these concerts he performs a romantic showpiece by Chopin, the *Piano Concerto No. 1*. The program opens with *The Observatory*, by Caroline Shaw: a work partly inspired by an actual observatory and partly by her love for science and science fiction. Then we turn to the wonderfully complex third symphony of Brahms.

The multitalented Caroline Shaw is among America's leading composers.

Caroline Shaw

Born: August 1, 1982, Greenville, North Carolina.

The Observatory

- **Composed:** 2019.
- **Premiere:** August 27, 2019, by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, under Xiang Zhang.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 16:00.



Shaw's 2019 work, *The Observatory*, written for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, was partly inspired by the famous view of Los Angeles from the Griffith Observatory.

Background

One of America's leading contemporary composers, Pulitzer Prize recipient Caroline Shaw describes herself as "a musician who moves among roles, genres, and mediums, trying to imagine a world of sound that has never been heard before

but has always existed.” She has composed over 100 commissioned works in the last decade, ranging from orchestral works and film scores to chamber music. In addition to her credits as a composer, Shaw works extensively as a performer on violin and percussion (touring with the ensemble So Percussion). She is also in demand as a vocalist, both as a soloist and with the contemporary vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth. In program notes for its premiere, Shaw talked about her inspiration for *The Observatory*:

One morning on a visit to Los Angeles, I hiked up the hill to Griffith Observatory, to clear my head before returning to work on this piece for orchestra. I looked down at the city with all its curving road patterns, and up at the sky, which has been observed and wondered about since the beginning of consciousness. I had been thinking about my friend Kendrick Smith, a cosmologist at the Perimeter Institute who is at the cutting edge of the ancient tradition of stargazing. Kendrick constructs new conceptual frameworks for analyzing data collected by the CHIME radio telescope—developing ways of looking at ways of looking at ways of looking at the universe. (Maybe that is also what music can be.) There was something about writing for a full symphony orchestra that had made me think about sci-fi films. I love the way epic tales of the beyond can zoom in and out, using imagined alternative universes to tell stories about ourselves on multiple scales at once. And I love how music in these films carves and colors our attention to those worlds (in their various permutations). I’d like to dedicate *The Observatory* to Xian Zhang, the brilliant conductor who premiered this work, and whose generosity, wisdom, and energy is something that I aspire to in my own life in music.

The texture of this work is based largely on repeating motives, with occasional quick references to other classical works.

What You’ll Hear

Shaw provides the following description:

The Observatory features some very large chords, and some very large spaces. Motives appear in diminution and augmentation simultaneously, like objects in orbit at different phases. Patterns in the foreground occasionally yield to patterns hovering in the background (including brief references to Strauss’s *Don Juan*, Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3*, Sibelius’s *Symphony No. 2*, Brahms’s *Symphony No. 1*, and to the arpeggios played on chimes to summon audiences to their seats at formal orchestra concerts).

There is celebration and criticism of systems, amid moments of chaos and of clarity. The very large chords return at the end, but their behavior is not the same as when we began.

One of the most famous images from the Hubble Space Telescope is the “Deep Field.” In December of 1995, the HST spent ten days aimed at a seemingly empty and tiny spot in the night sky near the Big Dipper. The result was an astonishing photograph showing at least 3000 galaxies (A subsequent “Ultra Deep Field” pushed the number towards 10,000.), including some that existed as early as 12 billion years ago. I found this image came irresistibly to my mind in listening to *The Observatory*: Shaw’s mix of large and small repeating patterns seemed to accord perfectly with the Deep Field, with the slower patterns representing galaxies who are merely tens of millions of light years away, and the quicker more fleeting patterns reflecting those tiny background dots who are billions of light years distant. And to bring things back to earth, I’ll note that Shaw’s “blink and you’ll miss them” allusions to other classical compositions are very witty!

Brahms completed this symphony in 1883, after just four months of work.

Johannes Brahms

Born: May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany.

Died: April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria.



Symphony No. 3 in F Major, Op. 90

- **Composed:** 1882-83.
- **Premiere:** December 2, 1883 in Vienna, with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, under the direction of Hans Richter.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1932, 1958, 1973, 1983, 2000, and 2012.
- **Duration:** 39:00.

The *Symphony No. 3* is the most challenging of his four symphonies for the orchestra: particularly in its approach to rhythm.

Background

Brahms’s four symphonies came in two distinct pairs. The first symphony, result of nearly twenty years of work, was completed in 1876, and the cheerful second was written with much less effort a year later. The years after 1877 were happy and productive—Brahms wrote many fine chamber works, his two orchestral overtures,

and his second piano concerto—but he didn’t compose a symphony for over five years. The third symphony was finished in 1883, and he began his fourth the very next year. The third is the shortest of them and seems to have cost him the least effort—in all, he spent less than four months working on the score. (He had a head start: the two middle movements seem to have been adapted from an unfinished set of incidental pieces to Goethe’s *Faust* he had sketched in 1881.) One factor that may have inspired Brahms to return to the symphony in 1882 was his friendship with pianist Hans von Bülow, who was conductor of the fine court orchestra at Meiningen. In 1881 Bülow offered to allow Brahms to use this ensemble, then one of the best orchestras in Europe, as a “rehearsal orchestra” and in November of that year, Bülow presented an excellent all-Brahms program.

The premiere of the *Symphony No. 3* in Vienna was a triumph (despite the best efforts of a noisy claque of Wagnerians), and this work was quickly picked up across Europe, though it also picked up a reputation as an *avant garde* and “difficult” piece. And what was so hard about it? It is certainly one of the most harmonically adventurous of Brahms’s works, with unexpected key relationships, and an almost nervous alternation between major and minor in many passages. Of the four Brahms symphonies, the third presents the greatest expressive challenges for the orchestra. Though each movement has great emotional peaks, nearly all of them begin and end quietly, the only exception being the forceful opening measures. There are no crashing final chords to work towards, and the interior of each movement calls for a great deal of musical sensitivity from every player. It is also technically difficult, particularly with regards to rhythm. Though Brahms seemed to revel in creating phrases that did not fit neatly within duple or triple meter, this sort of rhythmic displacement is most prominent in the *Symphony No. 3*. (If you watch carefully, you’ll notice vast stretches of music in the outer movements where the melody will seem to have little to do with the conductor’s downbeat.) This rhythmic play becomes part of the genius of this work, though, as Brahms finds subtle ways of shifting the rhythm back on track. The challenges presented by the *Symphony No. 3* are well worth it: this is the work of a master composer at the peak of his powers.

The symphony is in four movements:

- A complex opening movement in sonata form, incorporating Brahms’s personal musical motto.
- A tender slow movement featuring expressive writing for the clarinet.
- A movement in a three-part form.
- A finale in sonata form that culminates in a reference to the main theme of the first movement.

What You'll Hear

The opening movement (*Allegro con brio*) begins with three massive chords, which contain a subtle symbol. The highest voice, the flute, rises through the pitches F - A-flat - F. Here, lifelong bachelor Brahms is spelling out a personal motto *Frei aber froh* ("Free but happy")—a sort of joking response to his recently divorced friend Joseph Joachim's more melancholy musical motto F-A-E, *Frei aber einsam* ("Free but lonely"). This F-A-F motive will reappear in many forms throughout the symphony. The first group of themes is dominated by a passionate descending melody from the upper strings. The little clarinet figure that closes off this group is very nearly a quotation from Beethoven's third symphony, and it is entirely possible that Brahms was making a sly reference to the *Eroica* in his own third. The second group begins with a quiet, pastoral theme from the solo clarinet, which leads to a short, offbeat episode for the woodwinds, and a sweeping conclusion to the exposition. The development section begins with a minor-key transformation of the second theme in bassoons and cellos. A solo horn sings the F-A-F motto, the mood darkens, and the development closes with an ominous-sounding version of the opening theme. There is a full recapitulation, and then Brahms ends the movement with a highly concentrated coda.

Brahms's favorite orchestral voice was the clarinet, and the *Andante* contains some of his most beautiful writing for the instrument. The clarinets lead a woodwind choir at the beginning as they play a hymnlike theme, with soft echoes from violas and cellos. There is a slight variation, and then clarinet and bassoon present a more reflective second theme. After some initial hesitation, the entire string section enters with a passionate variation on the opening hymn. One idea presented in this movement that will receive much broader treatment in the finale is a two-note motive that is passed between instrumental groups. Both main themes are developed, and at the very end, upper strings introduce a broad new idea.

The third movement (*Poco Allegretto*) is set in a simple three-part form. The first section is based upon a lush Romantic melody laid out by the cellos. The trio, dominated by the woodwinds, has a marvelous rhythmic ambiguity that is resolved only by fragments of the main theme in clarinets and flutes. The concluding section sets the main theme in solo horn, then solo oboe, and finally in the full string choir.

The finale (*Allegro*) begins with a whisper—strings playing a winding *sotto voce* melody in their lowest range. Trombone chords introduce a reference to the second movement, and the mood changes abruptly, as Brahms inserts an almost angry new

idea, with subtle echoes of the F-A-F motto. The development section focuses on the opening melody, now passed between a series of solo woodwinds. Just as in the exposition the recapitulation builds up to a furious peak, but then there is an abrupt shift of gears. Brasses and woodwinds play a broad chorale, and the first theme of the opening movement gradually emerges in the strings. All of the harmonic obscurity is gone, and the movement closes in a mood of quiet benediction.

Virtuosos in the 19th century were expected to write their own concertos, and Chopin wrote two piano concertos as a very young man, his only works for orchestra.



Frédéric Chopin

Born: March 1, 1810, Żelazowa Wola, Poland.

Died: October 17, 1849, Paris, France.

Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra in E minor, Op. 11

- **Composed:** 1830.
- **Premiere:** Chopin was the soloist at the first performance, in Warsaw, on October 11, 1830.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This work has been played previously at these concerts by James Tocco (1972), Emanuel Ax (1979), and Horacio Gutierrez (1987 and 2006).
- **Duration:** 39:00.

The piano concertos were important in securing Chopin's international reputation as a virtuoso pianist.

"I best understand the piano and laugh at those who think that I am a fool because I reject 'higher' perspectives and write only for the piano. That is my solid ground—on that ground I stand the strongest."

- Chopin

Background

Writing these words to his friend Delfina Potocka, Chopin went a long way towards describing his character as a composer and his legacy to today's audiences. There are few composers from any era that had such a thorough understanding of their chosen medium and did as much to advance the repertoire of their instrument as did Chopin. Chopin's two piano concertos—his only works involving large orchestral forces—reflect the same interest in the expressive and

technical possibilities of his instrument shown in his numerous works for solo piano. The concertos date from early in his career and played a large part in securing an international reputation for the young Chopin. The F minor concerto was written when he was nineteen years old and the E minor concerto heard on this program was completed a year later. [Note: The E minor concerto is known as “No.1” because it was published in 1833, three years before the F minor.] The concerto was premiered by Chopin at a concert in Warsaw on October 11, 1830. In a letter written on the following day, Chopin enthusiastically described the event:

Yesterday’s concert was a success—I haste to let you know. I must tell you that I was not a bit, *not a bit* nervous, and I played the way that I play when I’m alone. The hall was full, and we first heard Goerner’s symphony, and then my noble self’s E minor *Allegro* [the first movement of the concerto], which I just reeled off--one can do that on a Streicher piano. Furious applause! Soliwa, the conductor was delighted. His aria with chorus was sung beautifully by Panna Wolkow, who was dressed like a cherub in a sky blue gown. After the aria came the *Adagio* and *Rondo* ...big applause, after which—the usual farce—I was called up. No one hissed, and I had to bow four times. (I can do this properly now that Brandt has shown me how!) ...I assure you, I have never succeeded in playing so comfortably with the orchestra.

The concerto is laid out in three movements:

- An opening movement set in a conventional sonata form.
- A dreamy slow movement that resembles his later nocturnes for solo piano.
- A lively rondo based upon a Polish folk dance.

What You’ll Hear

It is worth noting that the original score is marked “Concerto for piano with the accompaniment of the orchestra,” rather than the conventional “Concerto for piano and orchestra.” It is apparent in the *Concerto No. 1* that Chopin had little interest in the traditional balance between soloist and orchestra. The orchestra usually plays the role of a light background for the expressive playing of the piano, and even the forceful *tutti* sections seem to serve primarily as moments for the soloist to catch his breath. However, the very simplicity of the accompaniment is instrumental in achieving an intimate quality that is seldom heard in such works, giving the soloist rhythmic liberty and the freedom to explore the full expressive range of the piano.

Chopin follows classical tradition by setting the first movement (*Allegro maestoso*) in sonata form, but his romantic nature is heard in his free treatment of the form and his sensitive melodies. The concerto opens with an extended orchestral exposition in which Chopin presents all of the first movement's main themes. The piano enters with the forceful opening theme and an ornamented version of its more passionate answer. The second theme, a flowing *cantabile* melody, is set in E Major. An orchestral passage ends the lengthy exposition and signals the development, which begins with a treatment of the second theme and continues with flashy piano passages. After a full recapitulation, the movement ends with a final orchestral statement of the opening themes.

Chopin described the second movement (*Romanze: Larghetto*), the most pianistic of the three, as having “a romantic, calm, and partly melancholy nature. It is intended to convey the impression one receives when the eye rests on a beloved landscape that recall beloved memories—for example, a fine moonlit spring night.” The form of the movement is simple: two lengthy sections are separated by a brief *agitato* minor-key episode. Throughout the movement, the piano weaves a rhythmically free melody above a sparse accompaniment. Near the end of the movement, there is a wistful interruption by the soloist, and a quick return to the quiet character of the opening.

The main theme of the final movement (*Rondo: Vivace*), presented by the piano after a short orchestral introduction, is based on the Krakowiak, a Polish folk dance that is supposed to have originated near the Polish capital. The theme returns in various guises throughout the movement, but its lively rhythms surface in almost all of the contrasting episodes, giving a Polish flavor to this brilliant finale.