

PROGRAM NOTES

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Arturo Márquez, Danzón No. 2

Arturo Márquez is a Mexican composer, now of international stature. Born in 1950, the son of a mariachi musician, he displayed musical talent and interest early and attended the Mexican Music Conservatory. Later he studied in the United States at the California Institute of the Arts and has worked to create contemporary classical music that incorporates traditional forms and styles from Mexico. Danzón No. 2, perhaps his most well-known composition, reflects the composer's interest in Mexico's musical heritage. Opening with a lovely, wistful duet between clarinet and piano, Danzón No. 2 evokes the sexy feel of the tango though in a form that recalls salon music in Mexican cities in the early 1900s. The composition makes use of full orchestra, interspersed with solos for clarinet, piccolo, violin, trumpet, not to mention the claves, whose regular staccato rhythm provides the heartbeat throughout much of the piece. His body of work includes music for various solo instruments, string and saxophone ensembles, chamber orchestra, full orchestra; he has also written scores for a number of ballets.

Márquez has won a number of awards, both in Mexico and abroad; his work has been the focus of music festivals in Venezuela and the US.

Johannes Brahms, Double Concerto Op. 102

Johannes Brahms, 1833-1897, was a German composer, pianist, and conductor. The Double Concerto for Violin and Cello was Brahms' final work for orchestra, completed in Switzerland in the summer of 1887 when the crusty bachelor was 54. Brahms wrote the piece for cellist Robert Hausmann and for Brahms' estranged friend, the world-renown violinist Joseph Joachim. Wracked by self-doubt as he strove to write the concerto, Brahms wrote to Clara Schumann that he might not be up to the task of composing music for strings (and this from the composer of the spectacular Violin Concerto in 1878!), and he presented a copy of the solo parts to Joachim for advice. His self-doubt must have had its limits, though, since Brahms paid attention to almost none of Joachim's remarks. This concerto is not as much concertized as others of Brahms' works, undoubtedly owing to the difficulty (financial as well as artistic) of finding two virtuosi who are willing to share the musical limelight in this challenging musical tour-de-force.

The Double Concerto was not terribly well-received at the time; critics found the work to be too cerebral and lacking in vitality. Happily, the world does not always heed the maundering pontification of critics, and the Double Concerto has taken its place as a mainstay in the Romantic canon. A more recent and more sympathetic evaluation of the Concerto is given here by Richard Rodda: “The concerto, rich in harmony, elaborate in counterpoint and filled with melody, is a product of Brahms’ fullest maturity, imbued with the burnished autumnal glow that marks the masterworks of his later years.”

Movement I, Allegro, opens with a brief opening statement of the orchestra before the solo cello takes off in what can only be called a cadenza. After another brief orchestral statement, the violin enters, echoing the final three notes of the ensemble; the violin is soon joined by the cello as they pass phrases back and forth before racing together to the upper reaches of their range where they are joined by the orchestra. The luscious main theme of the second movement, Andante, should be known to most listeners; it is sung by the soloists playing in octaves (surely a challenge for intonation). A standard three-part composition, the Andante repeats this soaring theme as it concludes. The final movement of the concerto is a lively rondo, rhythmic and energetic. As he was writing this concerto, Brahms was also working on a group of Gypsy Songs for voice and piano, the *Zigeunerlieder*;

perhaps the frenetic fiddle playing associated with the Gypsies informed this final of Brahms' major works.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64

Tchaikovsky, arguably the most celebrated Russian composer of all time, was born in 1840; he died suddenly in 1893 from cholera. Yet in his relatively short lifetime he composed seven symphonies, 11 operas, three ballets (including the well-known “Nutcracker” and “Swan Lake”), five suites, three piano concertos, a violin concerto, 11 overtures, four cantatas, 20 choral works, three string quartets, a string sextet, and more than 100 songs and piano pieces. Works of his are among the most popular music in the classical repertoire, and his influence on the development of western music can be seen in the works of composers as stylistically different as Jan Sibelius and Sergei Prokofiev. He became an international musical star of his time, appearing often as conductor in Europe and the United States. At the same time, he benefited from the largesse of patrons—Nadezhda von Meck and, later, Emperor Alexander III, champion of Russian

cultural expression, who guaranteed a lifetime pension to his friend Tchaikovsky in support of the musician's genius.

As a youth Tchaikovsky had been groomed as a future civil servant in a boarding school. Yet, happily, the opening of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory in 1862 provided an existential escape for the musically talented—and bureaucratically unsuited--youth. Tchaikovsky graduated from the Conservatory in 1865—a significant year in the history of various nations—and began the difficult task of supporting himself as an artist. Soon thereafter he developed an epistolary relationship with Madame von Meck (the two never met), and her financial backing allowed the young composer to devote himself fully to his work.

The Symphony No. 5 in E minor was composed in 1888. Throughout his career, Tchaikovsky found that his work rarely pleased the critics, and this symphony was no exception. Part of the reason that ten years had elapsed since the completion of his Fourth Symphony had to do with the hostility of critics'—not public—reaction. To his patroness Tchaikovsky wrote: “I'm now terribly anxious to prove not only to others but also to myself that I'm not played out. I often have doubts about myself, and ask myself—hasn't the time now come to stop, haven't I always overstrained my imagination too much, hasn't the source dried up?”

That source had clearly not dried up, and, happily, Symphony No. 5 today stands as one of Tchaikovsky's—and western music's—greatest romantic

accomplishments. The first movement, Andante—Allegro con anima, introduces a theme that recurs throughout the symphony, the “fate” theme as it has been called. The following movement, Andante cantabile, is well-known to listeners of orchestral music; its melody is introduced movingly by the horns, and the movement builds to a triumphant conclusion. Movement III is a waltz that features light and fast string playing. Finally, the Andante maestoso-Allegro vivace develops to a thrilling conclusion in the major key, triumphant and consonant, of the symphony’s brooding beginnings in E-minor. Interestingly enough, this work—which moves from somber and serious to a surprisingly uplifting finale—was very popular during World War II. Among other performances, most well-known is that of the Leningrad Radio Orchestra, performed during the Siege of Leningrad, which lasted from 1941 until an unimaginable 1944.