JULY 1, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Prelude
JULIA PERRY

Born: 1924
Died: 1979
Composed: 1946

Gershwin may have a worldwide reputation, but Julia Perry does not. In fact, many in this audience will be encountering her name and music for the first time. Born in 1924, Perry studied at Juilliard and then in Europe with Luigi Dallapiccola and Nadia Boulanger. Her Short Piece for Orchestra was the first piece by an African-American woman ever performed by the New York Philharmonic, which then took it on a tour of Europe. A stroke left Perry debilitated over the final years of her life, and she died at 55. She composed her Prelude in 1946, when she was still in college. Less than two minutes long, it makes clear how original a composer Perry was. Even at age 22 she writes music of subtle rhythmic fluidity, a complex harmonic language, and the ability to evoke a mood of unsettling beauty.

Rhapsody in Blue
GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born: 1898
Died: 1937
Composed: 1924

Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue needs no introduction, yet this much-loved music has come in for a great deal of criticism. Jazz purists point out that it is not really jazz. Classical purists sniff that it is not really a concerto. There may be truth to these criticisms, yet none of it matters. This music sweeps all before it, and–flawed or not–Rhapsody in Blue has become part of the American DNA. It is heard at this concert in a version for solo piano.

CONCERT

Piano Trio No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 11
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770
Died: 1827
Composed: 1798

I. Allegro con brio
II. Adagio
III. Tema: Pria ch'io l'impegno. Allegretto

Beethoven wrote this gentle trio in 1798, during his first years in Vienna. Aware that this unusual combination of instruments might mean infrequent performances, Beethoven also prepared a version in which violin replaces the clarinet.

The Allegro con brio opens with a jaunty unison statement four octaves deep. The music seems so innocent and straightforward that it is easy to overlook Beethoven's harmonic surprises: when the second theme arrives, it is in the unexpected key of D Major, which sounds striking after the F-major cadence that preceded it. The Adagio is based on one central idea, heard immediately in the cello and marked con espressione. This song-like melody is quickly picked up by the clarinet and embellished as the movement proceeds.

The finale, marked Allegretto and titled Tema: Pria ch'io l'impegno, is a set of variations on a theme announced at the beginning by the piano. This sprightly tune was originally a vocal trio in the opera L'amor marinaro (also known as Il Corsaro, or The Corsair) by the Austrian composer Joseph Weigl, and that title translates: "Before I begin work, I must have something to eat." The opera had something of a vogue in Vienna at the time, and Hummel and Paganini later wrote variations of their own on this same theme. Beethoven's movement consists of the theme, nine variations, and a coda. The first variation is for piano alone, but the second is for clarinet and cello duet, virtually the only time in the entire trio when the piano is silent. Subsequent variations alternate between major and minor keys, and a coda based on Weigl's theme brings the trio to a quick-paced conclusion.

Duo for Violin and Viola, A. 463
HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS

Born: 1887
Died: 1959
Composed: 1946

I. Allegro
II. Adagio
III. Allegro agitato

Villa-Lobos composed his Duo for Violin and Viola in Rio de Janeiro in 1946. Villa-Lobos was a vastly prolific composer–he wrote over 2000 works–but the Duo is his only work for this combination of instruments. He dedicated it to the great Brazilian violinist and teacher Paulina d'Ambrosio, though she did not give the premiere. That was given in New York City in February 1948 by the brother-and-sister duo Joseph and Lillian Fuchs.

Composers who write for the violin-viola duo face particular problems, and the number of works for this combination is relatively rare. Mozart wrote two excellent duos for violin and viola in 1783, but few composers have been ready to take on the challenges this combination presents. The violin and viola are both linear, lyric instruments, and that combination lacks the harmonic resources a piano would provide. Villa-Lobos–like Mozart before him–can suggest a harmonic framework by having the instruments occasionally play chords, but for the most part both composers choose to write linear, contrapuntal music. We tend to think of Villa-Lobos' music as opulent and colorful, but the Duo for Violin and Viola is exceptionally lean and focused music.

The Duo is in three concise movements that span a total of about fifteen minutes. Viola leads the way in the opening Allegro as the violin provides busy accompaniment, though it is the violin that has the second subject. The two instruments occasionally make what sound like fugal entrances, though Villa-Lobos does not develop these as strict fugues. In the central Adagio, both instruments are muted throughout, which contributes to the somber cast of this music. Once again, the viola leads the way with a subdued melody as the violin accompanies, and then the instruments exchange roles. The concluding Allegro agitato is aptly named, for this is the most animated movement in the Duo. It gets off to a spiky opening, as the two instruments interweave staccato passages, and this mood of sharply etched energy continues throughout.

Piano Trio in A minor
ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born: 1841
Died: 1904
Composed: 1887

I. Allegro ma non tanto
II. Dumka. Andante con moto
III. Scherzo (Furiant). Molto vivace — Poco tranquillo
IV. Finale. Allegro

In the summer of 1887 Antonín Dvořák took his large family to their summer home at Vysoka, in the forests and fields south of Prague. It was a very good time for the 46-year-old composer. After years of struggle and poverty, he suddenly found himself famous: his Slavonic Dances were being played around the world, and his Seventh Symphony had been premiered to acclaim in London two years earlier. Dvořák found time to relax at Vysoka that summer, and he also found time to compose. Dvořák was usually one of the fastest of composers, able to complete a work quickly once he had sketched it. That August he began a new work, a Piano Quintet, but this one took him some time–he did not complete it until well into October, and it was premiered in Prague the following January.

Dvořák was now at the height of his powers, and the Quintet shows the hand of a master at every instant. This is tremendously vital music, full of fire and soaring melodies–it is a measure of this music's sweep that the first violin and piano are often set in their highest registers. As a composer, Dvořák was always torn between the classical forms of the Viennese masters like his friend Brahms and his own passionate Czech nationalism. Perhaps some of the secret of the success of the Piano Quintet is that it manages to combine those two kinds of music so successfully: Dvořák writes in classical forms like scherzo, rondo, and sonata form, but he also employs characteristic Czech forms like the dumka and furiant. That makes for an intoxicating mix, and perhaps a further source of this music's appeal is its heavy reliance on the sound of the viola. Dvořák was a violist, and in the Quintet the viola presents several of the main ideas–its dusky sound is central to the rich sonority of this music.

It is the cello, though, that has the opening idea of the Allegro, ma non tanto. This long melody–Dvořák marks it espressivo–suddenly explodes with energy and is extended at length before the viola introduces the sharply-pulsed second theme. In sonata form, this movement ranges from a dreamy delicacy to thunderous tuttis, and sometimes those changes are sudden. The

music is also is full of beautifully-shaded moments, passages that flicker effortlessly between different keys in the manner of Schubert, a composer Dvořák very much admired.

The second movement is a dumka, a form derived from an old Slavonic song of lament. Dvořák moves to F-sharp minor here and makes a striking contrast of sonorities at the opening episode. For the first forty measures, Dvořák keeps both the pianist's hands in treble clef, where the piano's sound is glassy and delicate; far below, the viola's C-string resonates darkly against this, and the rich, deep sound of the viola will be central to this movement. This opening gives way to varied episodes: a sparkling duet for violins that returns several times and a blistering Vivace tune introduced by the viola.

Dvořák gives the brief Molto vivace the title Furiant, an old Bohemian dance based on shifting meters, but–as countless commentators have pointed out–the 3/4 meter remains unchanged throughout this movement, which is a sort of fast waltz in ABA form. Its dancing opening gives way to a wistful center section, marked Poco tranquillo.

The Allegro finale shows characteristics of both rondo and sonata form. Its amiable opening idea–introduced by the first violin after a muttering, epigrammatic beginning–dominates the movement. Dvořák even offers a brisk fugato on this tune, introduced by the second violin, as part of the development. The full-throated coda, which drives to a conclusion of almost symphonic proportions, is among the many pleasures of one of this composer's finest scores.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger