

JULY 14, 2024

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Legend from the West

JEAN COULTHARD

Born: 1908
Died: 2000
Composed: 1996

Canadian composer Jean Coulthard studied with Ralph Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music in London and then taught at the University of British Columbia; she composed over 450 works during her long life. Her Legend of the West for solo bassoon is a late work—she wrote it in 1996, when she was 88.

Rhapsody for solo bassoon

WILLSON OSBORNE

Born: 1906
Died: 1979
Composed: 1952

Willson Osborne studied with Paul Hindemith at Yale and then taught at the New School of Music in Philadelphia. His Rhapsody for Solo Bassoon was originally sketched in 1952 as a Study for Bassoon, but Osborne revised what was an etude into a concert piece for solo bassoon. Marked Rhapsodically, the brief work proceeds along constantly shifting meters and takes the bassoon through a range of expression and techniques: fast runs, long cantabile passages, and episodes marked agitato.

Lapis Lazuli

JENNI BRANDON

Born: 1977
Composed: 2014

American composer Jenni Brandon is a singer and choral conductor in California who has written primarily for voice. But she also writes deftly for woodwinds—her Lapis Lazuli is the central movement of her Colored Stones for solo bassoon, which won the 2014 Bassoon Chamber Music Composers Competition. Of this work, Brandon says: “Prized for its colors, this deep blue stone was used by kings and queens in paintings and ceremonial robes. Believed to help foster truthful expression and communication, it supports the immune system and brings peace. The bassoon explores the luxurious blue color, mixing in flashes of gold found in the stone.”

Etudes for solo bassoon

JOHN STEINMETZ

Born: 1951
Composed: 1975

Foghorn
Presto. Flashy

John Steinmetz played bassoon in the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Oregon Bach Festival, and studio orchestras, and he taught bassoon and chamber music at UCLA. He composed his Three Etudes in 1975, noting “that each etude has a different kind of sound and feeling and all three call for free, even improvisatory playing.” This recital offers two of those etudes: Foghorn and Presto. Flashy.

CONCERT

44 Duos, Sz. 98 B. 104

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born: 1881
Died: 1945
Composed: 1931

Adults think of Bartók as one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century, but musical children know him as the composer of a great deal of music written specifically for them. For young pianists, Bartók wrote six books of Mikrokosmos, a series of increasingly difficult pedagogical pieces, and for young violinists he wrote a similar work, 44 Duos for Two Violins. These duos date from 1931, and in that same the year Bartók turned 50 and completed one of his finest works, the Second Piano Concerto—it is altogether characteristic of Bartók that he could at the same time write the most difficult virtuoso music alongside music for beginners.

The 44 Duos are of varying degrees of difficulty—some are quite simple, some much more demanding. Some of the duos have the violins in different keys, while others are in compound rhythms or require complex counterpoint. Throughout, Bartók’s intention is to make violinists (of all ages) listen more carefully and be willing to play with strict discipline and an alert ear. Almost all of the duos use themes from Bartók’s extensive research into the folk music of Eastern Europe, as a sampling of their titles makes clear: Transylvanian Dance, Ruthenian Song, Rumanian Dance, Arabian Song, Slovak Song, Serbian Dance, and Hungarian Song, among others. Some (Mosquito Dance and Teasing Song) show Bartók’s sense of humor, and all make clear his familiarity with the many styles of Eastern European peasant fiddling.

The 44 Duos last a total of nearly fifty minutes, and Bartók did not intend that they should be performed in their entirety; instead, he suggested that performers were free to choose and group these pieces as they wished. This recital offers a selection of the Duos.

Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56b

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Composed: 1873

Brahms spent the summer of 1873 in the village of Tutzing on the western shore of the Starnberger See south of Munich. He was 40 years old and his career was going well. Named conductor of the chorus and orchestra of the Vienna Gesellschaftskonzerte the previous fall, he had spent that first concert season training and leading these forces in a series of concerts. Now he came to this resort town to relax and compose.

Brahms loved it there. To the conductor Hermann Levi he wrote: "Tutzing is far more beautiful than we first imagined. We have just had a gorgeous thunderstorm; the lake was almost black, but magnificently green along the shores; usually it is blue, though of a more beautiful and deeper hue than the sky. In the background there is a range of snow-covered mountains—one can never see enough of it." That summer, after years of work, Brahms finally refined two string quartets to the point where he would allow them to be published, and he was still at work on his First Symphony. This most imposing of musical forms (with its inevitable comparison to Beethoven) had occupied him since he was in his twenties, but he was still plagued by self-doubt. In particular, he was worried about his ability to compose for orchestra, and during that summer at Tutzing Brahms planned to write a brief work for orchestra to give himself practice composing for orchestra.

This was a set of variations on a theme attributed to Haydn and shown to Brahms by his friend Carl Ferdinand Pohl, biographer of that earlier composer. The theme (which had never been published) appeared in the manuscript for a Feldpartita Haydn had composed for Prince Esterhazy's troops during the 1780s; as its name suggests, a Feldpartita is a piece designed to be played in open fields, usually by military band. Though Brahms gave his work the title Variations on a Theme by Haydn, subsequent research has shown that the original Feldpartita was not written by Haydn, but probably by his student Ignaz Pleyel, who in turn may have borrowed it from an old pilgrims' hymn: in the manuscript, the

theme is marked "Chorale St. Antoni." Brahms may have planned this project to give him practice writing for orchestra, but he was still so unsure of his abilities that he first composed the variations for two pianos, and only then did he orchestrate them. The triumphant premiere of the orchestral version took place in Vienna on November 2, 1873, but Brahms and Clara Schumann had already played through the two-piano version together the previous summer.

The structure of the Haydn Variations is simplicity itself: the theme, eight variations, and a finale that itself is a further variation. The original theme falls first into two five-bar phrases, followed by a series of phrases of irregular length. The eight variations, which stretch the theme in a range of ingenious ways, are all relatively brief. The finale is ingenious—and very impressive—music. Brahms derives a five-measure theme from the original theme and uses this new version as a ground bass, very much in the manner of a passacaglia or chaconne. This ground bass repeats seventeen times as Brahms spins out a series of further variations in the upper voices. All of this builds to a brilliant close full of swirling runs and one final, powerful restatement of the original theme.

Septet in E-flat Major, Op. 20

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1800

- I. Adagio — Allegro con brio
- II. Adagio cantabile
- III. Tempo di menuetto
- IV. Tema con variazioni. Andante
- V. Scherzo. Allegro molto e vivace
- VI. Andante con moto alla marcia — Presto

Some composers achieve such fame with an early work that they can never escape that music. Rachmaninoff made his name with the Prelude in C-sharp Minor but soon came to hate the piece because it was the only thing audiences wanted to hear. There is a famous story of the audience at one of his recitals clamoring so noisily to hear it as an encore that finally Rachmaninoff gave in, sat down at the piano, and groaned audibly in time with the famous first three chords: "Oh . . . my . . . GOD!"

Beethoven came to feel the same way about his Septet, his first major success in Vienna. The Septet—scored for clarinet, horn, bassoon, violin, viola, cello, and bass—was first performed on April 2, 1800, on a concert that

included the premiere of Beethoven's First Symphony. Audience loved the Septet, and soon it was performed throughout Europe and in England. Haydn, who admitted he could not understand Beethoven's later music, praised the Septet, and Viennese audiences were still flocking to hear it late in Beethoven's life at a time when he was deeply involved in writing his final string quartets. Beethoven was left protesting that he had written some other pieces.

It is easy to understand this music's popularity. The Septet is a six-movement instrumental suite somewhat in the manner of Mozart's serenades, which themselves had been composed for lighter occasions. Beethoven scholar Paul Bekker describes the Septet accurately when he says "Among all the works which Beethoven wrote before 1800, scarcely one is so filled with the gay courage, the pride of life that expressed his youth, as this number."

The first movement of the Septet opens with an elegant Adagio introduction that slowly gathers energy before the music rockets ahead at the Allegro con brio; in sonata form, this movement offers appealing themes and then subjects them to a vigorous development. The Adagio cantabile features a long-lined melody for clarinet over slowly-rocking strings; this amiable melody flows easily between different instruments as the movement progresses. The cheerfully-bubbling Tempo di Menuetto has a spirited trio section that requires some athletic playing from clarinet and horn.

The fourth movement is in theme-and-variation form. Beethoven's theme here is poised: strings have the first four bars, winds the second four, and Beethoven repeats each phrase. Five variations follow, and the movement concludes with a coda that is itself a further variation. Full of power and dancing rhythms, the Scherzo looks ahead to the scherzos of Beethoven's symphonies; cello leads the way in the sturdy trio section. The final movement opens ominously with a somber march, but then sunlight bursts through and the music rips ahead at the Presto. This sonata-form movement is shot through with a happiness and relaxation rare in Beethoven's music. A cadenza for violin leads to a return of the opening material, and the Septet races to its close.

Beethoven may have gritted his teeth over the popularity of this music and the fact that audiences would rather hear it than his subsequent (and better) music. But more than any of his other early works, it was the Septet that convinced Viennese audiences that the young Beethoven was not just a virtuoso pianist who happened to write music, but a composer to be taken seriously in his own right.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger