

SONA

Symphony of Northwest Arkansas

Masterworks I: Bernstein & Brahms

November 3, 2018

Walton Arts Center

Paul Haas, *conductor*

***Come un sogno* (1994)**

Einojuhani Rautavaara

b 9 October 1928, Helsinki, Finland

d 27 July 2016, Helsinki

Einojuhani Rautavaara (pronounced AY-no-YOO-ha-nee ROU-tah-vah-rah) may be a new name to listeners in Northwest Arkansas, but he was one of Finland's most distinguished composers. His impressive career spanned more than half a century. He began formal study of music in his homeland, earning degrees in composition at the Sibelius Academy and musicology at Helsinki University. In the mid-1950s, at the recommendation of Sibelius himself, Rautavaara expanded his education abroad, working in this country with Vincent Persichetti at New York's Juilliard School and with Aaron Copland and Roger Sessions at Tanglewood. Subsequently he broadened his base further through study with Wladimir Vogel in Ascona, Switzerland and with Rudolf Petzold at Cologne's Staatliche Hochschule für Musik.

Rautavaara returned to Finland in 1959, where he taught and composed for decades. Many of his protégés have risen to prominence, including Esa-Pekka Salonen, Kalevi Aho and Magnus Lindberg. In addition to Rautavaara's eight

symphonies, more than eighty of his works have been recorded.

Rautavaara's diverse experiences gave him a thorough grounding in various contemporary *milieux*. His music includes works that draw on medieval chant and the twelve-tone method. Some of his compositions were influenced by the German composer Paul Hindemith and the 20th century Russian school. No clear categorization suggests itself, but there is a recurrence of romantic mysticism implied by many of his work titles and substantiated by their musical context.

Come un sogno [Like a Dream] is a representative example. It originated as the third movement of Rautavaara's Symphony No. 7, subtitled *Angel of Light*. This slow movement unfolds not so much in melodies as in chords, gentle clouds of sound that envelop the listener. Woodwinds and French horn emerge in gentle conversation, escalating to a brief, intense climax before subsiding to the weightlessness of total relaxation: a peaceful dream state.

The composer once said, "If you wish to surrender to the music, as to a lover, then experience the message whole, not as a narrative description, but as the creation of the world

itself.” His words are a thoughtful guide to this mesmerizing movement.

Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*

Leonard Bernstein

b 25 August 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts
d 14 October 1990, New York City

For those of us who grew up on the familiar tunes of *West Side Story*, it is difficult to imagine a world in which Leonard Bernstein is not a household name. In the early 1940s, however, he was not yet world famous. Bernstein enjoyed a reputation as a talented young pianist and composer whose interests were leaning more and more toward conducting. Still, his career showed tremendous promise: at age 25 he was assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, and the exciting young choreographer Jerome Robbins had asked him to collaborate on a wartime ballet entitled *Fancy Free*.

The ballet’s plot concerns three sailors on shore leave in pursuit of the perfect girl – in this case, most likely, the first available attractive female. Bernstein’s sophisticated, jazzy dance score was a big success at its 1944 premiere. Oliver Smith, the set designer, recognized its potential for the more commercial venue of Broadway. Bernstein worked with Smith, George Abbott, Betty Comden and Adolph Green to develop the ballet into a full-fledged musical called *On the Town* that opened in December 1944 and ran for nearly 500 performances. Purely escape theatre, the upbeat, fun show was a natural for a nation weary of war and hungry for lighthearted diversion.

On the Town’s music is more sophisticated than most other contemporary musicals. As John Briggs has written:

Bernstein’s lively, unself-consciously jazzy score was attuned to the rhythm and tempo

of the times...The man who could employ jazz idioms for abstract musical purposes could also use the devices of symphonic rhetoric to make a theatrical point.

Nowhere is this gift more evident than in the three dance episodes from *On the Town*, where Bernstein’s instrumental gift has free rein. New York City’s vibrant pulse courses through this music, bringing to life its diversity and humanity through three vignettes: *The Great Lover*, *Lonely Town: Pas de Deux*, and *Times Square, 1944*. The last of the three was the finale of the musical’s first act.

The score calls for flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, three clarinets, two horns, three trumpets and three trombones; timpani and percussion including suspended cymbal, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, traps, wood block and xylophone; piano and strings.

Music Director Paul Haas is excited to bring you this music, in part, as a celebration of the 100th anniversary of Bernstein’s birth.

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68

Johannes Brahms

b 7 May 1833, Hamburg, Germany
d 3 April 1897, Vienna, Austria

The moniker “Beethoven’s Tenth” has been attached to Brahms’s First Symphony almost since before it was completed in 1876. Hans von Bülow (1830-1894), the eminent conductor, pianist and composer, is responsible for thus dubbing the C Minor Symphony. He was recognizing Brahms’s fulfillment of a prophecy articulated nearly a quarter century before, when Robert Schumann hailed then 20-year-old Johannes Brahms as the great Beethoven’s successor.

Brahms took the legacy of Beethoven very seriously, and the spectre of Beethoven lay heavily on his shoulders. He was a brutal critic of his own compositions, and destroyed a large number of sketches and completed works that did not satisfy him. Nowhere was his self-criticism more merciless than in the realm of orchestral music, because he was keenly aware that his first symphony would be compared to Beethoven. "You do not know what it is like hearing his footsteps constantly behind one," Brahms wrote.

In that sense, everything orchestral that Brahms composed up until the First Symphony was a form of preparation for him to fulfill the daunting legacy Schumann had bequeathed to him. He produced four large, symphonic works while he honed his orchestral skills: the D Minor Piano Concerto, Op. 15 (1854-58), the two Serenades, Opp. 11 (1857-58) and 16 (1858-59, revised 1875), and the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Op. 56a (1873). The orchestral fabric of the major choral works he worked on during the 1860s and early 1870s was also significant in strengthening Brahms's command of symphonic resources. *A German Requiem*, Op. 45 (1857-68), was followed by the dramatic cantata *Rinaldo*, Op. 50 (1869), the *Alto Rhapsody*, Op. 53 (1869), *Schicksalslied*, Op. 54 (1868-71), and *Triumphlied*, Op. 55 (1870-71). Each of them became a repository for important instrumental as well as vocal ideas.

All along, Brahms had the goal of a symphony in mind. As early as 1854, probably with Robert Schumann's encouragement, Brahms was at work on symphonic sketches. Two decades elapsed before that music found its way into any permanent form. Clara Schumann and Albert Dietrich both saw a draft of the first movement in 1862, in a version not yet preceded by slow introduction. Some five years later, Brahms wrote a letter to Clara including the famous horn theme that became the transition to the hymn of the finale. Not until 1873, however, did he concentrate seriously on the completion of his First Symphony. He waited until the age of 43 to contribute to the symphonic canon.

Brahms completed his Opus 68 at Lichtenthal during the autumn of 1876. The premiere took place at Karlsruhe in November. Brahms chose the smaller town because it was a less politically stressful musical community than Vienna or Leipzig. He wrote to Otto Dessoff, conductor of the Karlsruhe orchestra:

It was always my cherished and secret wish to hear the thing first in a small town which possessed a good friend, a good conductor, and a good orchestra.

Dessoff was delighted by the honor accorded his orchestra. Brahms foresaw that the symphony might not have direct popular appeal, writing to Carl Reinecke of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra:

And now I have to make the probably very surprising announcement that my symphony is long and not exactly amiable.

He need not have worried. Dessoff's first rendition was successful enough to warrant repeat performances under the composer's direction in Mannheim and Munich shortly thereafter. The First Symphony cured Brahms's orchestral writer's block. For the next 11 years, his orchestral harvest was bountiful: three additional symphonies, three more concerti and two overtures.

Von Bülow had good reason to hail the symphony as "the Beethoven Tenth." Because of its heroic stance and C Minor tonality, the work is most often compared with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Both pieces have a general progression from tragic struggle to triumph and victory. Brahms's First bears equal comparison to the Beethoven Ninth (Beethoven's other minor mode symphony), primarily because of the obvious parallel in hymn-like finales.

Brahms's good friend Theodor Billroth likened the C Minor symphony's first movement to "a kind of Faustian overture" that might be thought of as a grand introduction to the whole work. Indeed, its complicated chromatic themes and inexorable

timpani at the opening are hardly the stuff of which popular “singable” tunes are made. Hans Gál offers an insightful commentary as to why the consistently anti-Brahmsian Wagner and his followers would have experienced impatience listening to the opening movement.

The nobility of this first movement rests on qualities that were alien to the dramatic composer: a thematic interplay worked out to the smallest detail and based on polyphonic structure; a delicate balancing, from beginning to end, of tonal relationships; and a formal design whose grandiose dimensions only become apparent when one experiences the whole movement as a single, great continuum.

The perspective is significant because Wagner’s followers comprised a major portion of the listening public in the 1870s, and the battle between Wagner’s and Brahms’s camps raged for years.

One unusual feature of this very large symphony is the presence of two slow introductions, one for each of the outer movements. Slow introductions are rare in Brahms’s music in any case, and this double occurrence is unique among his compositions. Both introductions signal something portentous and monumental. It is a measure of Brahms’s genius that the effect

is entirely different in the two: ushering in heroic conflict in the opening movement; introducing serene exaltation in the conclusion. By contrast, the inner movements are both shorter and lighter in emotional weight. In the slow movement, Brahms indulges in some orchestral decoration, embroidering his already rich music with a rare, breathtakingly lovely violin solo. Here and in the graceful *Un poco allegretto* we have a welcome emotional breather between the mighty pillars of the outer movements.

If there were any shortage of melodies early on, Brahms compensates with abundance in the expansive finale. From the magical horn call to the majestic closing chords, unforgettable tunes vie with one another, providing this noble movement with some of his most beloved original themes.

Brahms scored his First Symphony for woodwinds in pairs, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

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