

# SoNA

Symphony of Northwest Arkansas

## Masterworks II: Verdi & Chopin

January 26, 2019  
Walton Arts Center  
Paul Haas, *conductor*

### **Overture to *La Forza del destino* (*The Force of Destiny*)**

Giuseppe Verdi

*b* 10 October, 1813, Le Roncole, near

Busseto, Parma, Italy

*d* 27 January, 1901, Milan, Italy

Opera overtures fall into two broad categories. One type adapts themes from the opera, often in a successive medley, like many overtures to Broadway musicals. A well-known example in the concert hall is the overture to Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, which concludes with the famous can-can music. Other overtures, such as Mozart's to *The Marriage of Figaro*, use completely original music that does not recur in the opera, generally in a sonata form that approximates the first movement of a symphony. Verdi's well-known overture to *La Forza del destino* ("The Force of Destiny") is the first type. Four major melodies from the opera are incorporated into this movement. In Verdi's capable hands, they compress romance, lyricism, action and drama into seven thrilling minutes.

*La Forza del destino* is among Verdi's most important middle-period works. It followed *Un ballo in maschera* ("A Masked Ball," 1859) by just three years. Verdi had signed a contract

with the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg for a new opera to be presented during the 1861-62 season. Because the intended *prima donna* fell ill, it became necessary to postpone the premiere until the following autumn. Verdi and his wife made a second trip to Russia to supervise rehearsals. The first performance took place on 10 November, 1862.

At the time of the premiere, an orchestral prelude preceded the opera. Verdi composed the well known overture we hear in 1869, when he revised *La Forza del destino* for a production at Milan's fabled opera house, the Teatro alla Scala. It is a frank compendium of big tunes from the opera, drawing on both lyrical and dramatic elements for contrast and interest. The fate motive associated with the heroine Leonora serves both as main theme and as an underlying, unifying musical "glue" binding the rest of the overture together.

Unison brasses establish an atmosphere of somber significance at the outset. Their function remains important throughout the overture, though Verdi certainly knows when to leave them to the background in order to emphasize the music's tender and lyrical moments. Leonora's fate theme, outlining the ascending minor triad,

serves as an important accompaniment figure to the other melodies. There are some lovely orchestral touches, such as the *Andantino* ensemble of flute, oboe and clarinet declaiming the melody of the hero Alvaro's Act IV aria and, later, a solo clarinet theme accompanied by harps. Intervening between them is a sweeping string phrase that recurs in the opera at the climax of Leonora's Act II prayer. Brass returns as a major component of the momentous excitement that propels this movement forward, with Verdi superimposing his themes to achieve a spine-tingling conclusion.

Verdi's orchestra consists of piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, bass trombone, timpani, bass drum, two harps and strings.

## Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21

Frédéric François Chopin

b 1 March, 1810, Zelazowa Wola, near Warsaw, Poland

d 17 October, 1849, Paris

Some composers undergo marked changes in their style and approach to their art in the course of a long career: Beethoven and Stravinsky are obvious examples. Others, like Brahms, seem to have burst forth fully formed, with a unique and personal musical language that is instantly identifiable as their own and remains consistent in early, middle and late works.

Hallmarks of Chopin's style are identifiable even in his earliest compositions. We are exceedingly unlikely to mistake his music for that of any of his contemporaries. His two piano concertos are the finest of his so-called "apprentice" works. Both demonstrate his incomparable flair for solo display.

Chopin began work on the F Minor concerto in autumn 1829. It was actually his first concerto, but was not published until 1836, three years

after the publication of his Piano Concerto in E Minor, Op. 11. Consequently the F Minor work bears a later opus number.

The relationship between orchestra and piano is different in Chopin from the conversational balance in a Mozart concerto. Chopin took Johann Nepomuk Hummel as his model, rather than Mozart. The F Minor Concerto is more an accompanied solo than a concerted discussion. Everything is geared to highlight technical virtuosity, beautiful tone, and the expressive capability of the pianist. The mood of the music changes rapidly, showing every face that the composer has, from warrior to poet. But, these transformations are never at the expense of continuity, and Chopin sustains a convincing forward drive in spite of his unconventional approach to sonata form. As Peter Gould has observed:

The development section of the F Minor concerto is not a true development as understood by Beethoven. Chopin seldom argued. He was not naturally an intellectual, his greatest attribute being that of sensitivity, and in his development he wrote what could be better described as a commentary on what had gone before.

Chopin had a lifelong love of opera that exercised a powerful influence on his sense of melodic line and inimitable ornamentation. That influence is most readily perceived in his lyrical slow movements. The F Minor concerto's central *Larghetto* (originally *Adagio*) was an expression of Chopin's love for a singer, Konstancja Gładkowska, during the last year he spent in Warsaw. In October 1829 he wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski:

To my misfortune, perhaps, I have found my ideal. I venerate her with all my soul. For six months now I have been dreaming of her every night and still I have not addressed a single word to her. It is thinking of her that I have composed the *Adagio* of my Concerto.

Chopin remained very fond of performing this slow movement long after other women (notably Countess Delphine Potocka of Paris, the eventual dedicatee of the concerto) had replaced Konstancja in his affections. It is easy to understand why. With its lavish ornamentation and delicate embroidery, this movement blurs the distinction between melody and decoration, weaving a magical seductive spell.

Nationalism finds its way into the finale as a mazurka, a Polish country dance in triple meter, often with the principal emphasis on the second or third beat, rather than the first. Chopin favored this dance, composing nearly 60 mazurkas for solo piano over the course of his career. This colorful early example incorporates a number of unexpectedly deft orchestral touches, such as *col legno* strings (striking the strings with the wood of the bow, rather than the horsehair), and a horn signal. Both gestures contribute to its energy. A virtuoso coda reminds us that the concerto, ultimately, belongs to the soloist.

Chopin's score calls for woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; bass trombone, timpani, solo piano and strings.

## Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 97, Rhenish

Robert Schumann

b 8 June, 1810, Zwickau, Saxony, Germany

d 29 July, 1856, Endenich, near Bonn, Germany

We live in an era of Prozac, Zoloft and Cymbalta, where depression is not only accepted as a legitimate medical disorder, but also can be treated successfully in all but extreme cases. Sadly, Robert Schumann was unable to benefit from modern psychiatry or pharmaceuticals. He suffered from what we now call acute bipolar disorder, experiencing severe manic/depressive attacks that led him to attempt suicide in February 1854. He was moved to an asylum in Endenich (near Bonn), where he died in 1856.

As his mental illness progressed through the 1840s, it took a debilitating toll on his personal life and musical creativity. Still, occasional periods of lucidity eased his torment. Such times invariably followed a move or change of scenery. In late summer 1850, Robert and Clara Schumann left Dresden for Düsseldorf, the capital of the Rhineland and frequent site of the important Lower Rhenish Festival. The reason was Robert's promising new appointment. The conductor and composer Ferdinand Hiller had recommended Schumann to succeed him as conductor of the excellent Düsseldorf orchestra.

Matters began promisingly. The community and the orchestra both welcomed the Schumann family, and Robert was pleased with the high caliber of the orchestra and chorus he was to lead. New surroundings and the change of venue bolstered his enthusiasm for composing. In practically no time, Robert had written a Cello Concerto. Almost immediately on its heels, he began work on the E-flat Major symphony, Op. 97. (It was actually his fourth symphony, but because it was published earlier than the D Minor Symphony, Op. 120, it has become known as the third.)

## Cruise on the Rhine

To be sure, Robert remained in precarious mental health. He was always vulnerable to the stress of his two-pronged career as both conductor and composer. Clara Schumann's journal entries from that autumn describe his "highly nervous, irritable, excited mood." She blamed his condition on street noise. He wanted to change their domicile to a quieter neighborhood. They did take a river excursion on the Rhine that September, during which they observed the installation ceremonies for Archbishop Johannes von Geissel, who was being elevated to Cardinal at Cologne's magnificent cathedral, which was then an unfinished sanctuary. The ceremony had an enormous impact on Schumann. Two months later, he had incorporated an extra slow movement into the symphony as a direct response to the Cologne experience.

## A Burst of Inspiration

The symphony recaptures the immediacy that imbues Schumann's brilliant piano works from the 1830s: *Carnaval*, *Novelletten*, *Dauidsbündlertänze*, *Kreisleriana*, and many others. He completed it, including the orchestration, in barely over a month, swept along on a surge of enthusiasm that produced his highest quality music in many years. Writing to his friend the conductor Josef von Wasielewski, he observed:

I cannot see that there is anything remarkable about composing a symphony in a month. Handel wrote a complete oratorio in that time. If one is capable of doing anything at all, one must be capable of doing it quickly — the quicker the better, in fact. The flow of one's thoughts and ideas is more natural and more authentic than in lengthy deliberation.

Perhaps he knew how good the music he had written was. The *Rhenish* Symphony is an exuberant work, filled with rich melodies and a formal mastery that eluded Schumann too often in his later years. Certainly that was not the case here. So strong is his opening theme in the first movement that he dispensed with slow introduction — the only time he did so in any of his symphonies — and also chose to forego a repeat of the exposition. Schumann's biographer Joan Chissell has described the youthful energy of the opening theme as "the most subtle of all his rhythmic experiments ... a tug-of-war between triple and duple time ... [that] gives the movement an extraordinary rhythmic virility."

Schumann's second movement is folk-like and innocent, at a relaxed pace that belies its title of Scherzo. His original title was "Morning on the

Rhine." The movement epitomizes the joyous simplicity of German peasant songs, and has a bit of the magic of Rhenish legend that was later to inspire Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle. The ensuing *Andante* functions as a traditional slow movement, and is consistent with Schumann's restrained, poetic *Intermezzi* elsewhere in his compositions.

## An Extra Slow Movement

With the fourth movement, Schumann broke with tradition. Although five-movement symphonies had precedent in works by Beethoven and Mendelssohn, four movements was still the norm. Schumann's extra is a slow movement originally subtitled "In the style of an accompaniment to a solemn ceremony." It was clearly precipitated by his trip to Cologne earlier that autumn. The introduction of trombones into the orchestration for the first time in the symphony, and the overall ecclesiastical atmosphere of this imposing movement lend it a spiritual quality that has earned this movement the sobriquet "Cathedral Scene," in spite of the fact that Schumann withdrew subtitles for this and for the Scherzo prior to publication.

With his exuberant finale, Schumann returns to his finest symphonic form. References to themes from earlier in the symphony make the movement cyclic, and a fitting conclusion to this vivacious and joyous work.

Schumann scored the *Rhenish* Symphony for woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

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