

## Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

### **Overture from the Incidental Music ..... Felix Mendelssohn to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 21 (1809-1847)**

*Composed in 1826.*

*Premiered on February 20, 1827 in Stettin, conducted by Carl Loewe.*

Berlin in the 1820s was a populous, densely packed city with few open spaces, “a city without lungs,” wrote the art historian Karl Scheffler. Abraham Mendelssohn, father of Felix and a wealthy banker, was one of those who could afford to live beyond the city gates, where the open country made life more pleasant. The Mendelssohn home was a mansion, a small palace really, set on ten verdant acres. The residence boasted a hall for theatrical productions, while the garden house was arranged so that its large interior could be used for concerts with an audience of several hundred. There were, in fact, regular Sunday afternoon musicales in the Mendelssohn household, with Felix and his older sister, Fanny, being regular participants. (It was for these events that Mendelssohn composed and — a luxury rare among composers — heard his early music performed immediately, including the dozen lovely Symphonies for Strings.) Also on the grounds was a beautiful garden, a magical place for young Felix, where the warm days of summer were spent reading and dreaming. In later years, he told his friend the English composer William Sterndale Bennett about an evening in July 1826, “It was in that garden one night that I encountered Shakespeare.”

Felix and Fanny were enamored in those years of reading the works of Shakespeare, who, next to the arch-Romantic Jean-Paul, was their favorite writer. Shakespeare’s plays had been appearing in excellent German translations by Ludwig Tieck and August Schlegel (father Abraham’s brother-in-law) since the turn of the century, and the young Mendelssohns particularly enjoyed the wondrous fantasy world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play inspired the already accomplished budding composer, and plans began to stir in his imagination. Early in July, he wrote in a letter, “I have grown accustomed to composing in our garden. Today or tomorrow I am going to dream there [the music to accompany] *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. This is, however, an enormous audacity....” Within a few days, however, he had embarked on his “audacity,” and was writing an Overture to the play. By August 6th, the work was done. On November 19th, Felix and Fanny played the original piano duet version of the score on one of their Sunday musicales, and a private orchestral performance followed before the end of the year. In February, the work was first played publicly in Stettin. It immediately garnered a success that has never waned.

By 1842, Mendelssohn was the most famous musician in Europe and in demand everywhere. He was director of the superb Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, a regular visitor to England, and Kapellmeister to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia in Berlin. For Mendelssohn’s Berlin duties, Friedrich required incidental music for several new productions at the Royal Theater, including Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, Racine’s *Athalie* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This last would, of course, include the celebrated Overture which Mendelssohn had written when he was seventeen, exactly half his age in 1842. He composed the twelve additional numbers of the incidental music the following spring, creating a perfect match for the inspiration and style of the Overture. The premiere of the new production in November was an enormous triumph.

Franz Liszt wrote of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* music, “Mendelssohn had a real capacity for depicting these enchanted elves, for interpolating in their caressing, chirping song the bray of the donkey without rubbing us the wrong way.... No musician was so equipped to translate into music the delicate yet, in certain externals, embarrassing sentimentality of the lovers; ... no one could paint as he did the rainbow dust, the mother-of-pearl shimmering of these sprites, could capture the brilliant ascent of a royal wedding feast.” The Overture is the greatest piece of orchestral music ever composed by one so young, including Mozart and Schubert. Woven into its sonata form are thematic representations of the woodland sprites, the shimmering light through forest leaves, the sweet sighs of the lovers, even the “ee-ah” braying of that memorable Rustic, Bottom, when he is turned into an ass. In matters of formal construction, orchestral color and artistic polish, this Overture is, quite simply, a masterpiece.

Of this beautiful music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Charles O’Connell wrote, “There is a magic in it ... an elfin

gaiety, a diaphanous delicacy, an ethereal quality compounded of dew and honey and the nectar of flowers, the scents of flowers on warm midnight airs, the rhythm of flowers and tiny feet dancing 'neath the towering blades of grass. There are pranks and clowning, true love and black magic, pathos and the pleasant, impossible conceits of a poet's imagination."

**Cello Concerto in C minor, Op. 66 ..... Nikolai Miaskovsky  
(1881-1950)**

*Composed in 1944-1945.*

*Premiered on March 17, 1945 in Moscow, with Sviatoslav Knushevitzky as soloist.*

The birth of Nikolai Miaskovsky, in 1881, lies midway between those of Rachmaninoff (1873) and Prokofiev (1891). Unlike his older colleague, however, who was driven from Russia by the Revolution of 1917, or the younger one, who lived for many years in the West before returning to espouse the Soviet cause, Miaskovsky spent his entire life in his homeland, buffeted by and reflective of its history. Miaskovsky was born into the family of a military engineer stationed at the Russian fortress of Novogeorgiyevsk in the Polish town of Plock, near Warsaw, on April 20, 1881. When Nikolai was seven, his father was promoted to the rank of General and transferred first to Orenburg, in southeastern Russia, and a year later to Kazan, where the boy's mother died. The General placed Nikolai and his four siblings into the care of an aunt, a singer who nurtured the boy's interest in music and taught him piano. Following the family tradition, Miaskovsky was educated at military schools in Nizhny-Novgorod and St. Petersburg; he graduated from the Academy of Military Engineering in 1902 and was assigned to a post in Moscow. Miaskovsky's studies did not discourage his musical talents, however, and he continued to play violin and piano while in school, and began composing as early as 1896. He took advantage of his posting in Moscow to study with Glière, and continued composition lessons with Ivan Kryzhanovsky, a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, after he was transferred to St. Petersburg in 1903. In 1906, Miaskovsky resigned from the army to enter the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where his teachers included Liadov and Rimsky-Korsakov, and where he formed a lifelong friendship with Prokofiev. In 1908, he wrote his first (of 27) symphonies and gained some recognition with a performance of a song cycle optimistically titled *On the Threshold*. After graduating in 1911, he subsisted as a music journalist and teacher until the outbreak of World War I three years later, when he was reactivated into military service. He served at the Austrian front, built military fortifications at Reval (now Tallinn, Estonia), joined the Red Army in 1917, and filled an administrative job in the Maritime Headquarters in Moscow before being demobilized in 1921. After a brief period as assistant director of the Music Division of the Peoples' Commissariat of Education, Miaskovsky was appointed to the faculty of the Moscow Conservatory, where he remained until his death in Moscow in 1950.

Miaskovsky was a musician of talent, dedication and superb craftsmanship who composed prolifically and with seriousness of purpose throughout his life — he was often called "The Thinker" or "The Philosopher," and even his friend Prokofiev once allowed that "Miaskovsky never exchanges winks with the audience." His large creative output includes 27 symphonies and a variety of orchestral works, concertos for violin and cello, pieces for wind band, thirteen string quartets and much other chamber music, nine piano sonatas, cantatas and many songs, as well as an autobiography, articles and reviews. He was also highly regarded as a teacher, and numbered Kabalevsky, Khachaturian and Shebalin among his students. Miaskovsky's music ranges across a broad spectrum of styles, though he was most strongly drawn to a conservative idiom grown from the Russian 19th-century tradition (which did not, however, prevent his condemnation in Zhdanov's purges of 1948 that also caught Shostakovich so painfully in their infamous maw). Boris Schwarz, a leading scholar of Soviet music, summarized Miaskovsky's musical personality: "Though he was associated with a circle of progressive musicians, Miaskovsky was a stabilizer rather than an innovator, and this despite the boldness of his music of the 1920s. In his own words, 'the tireless quest for the "last word" in musical technique and invention did not constitute an end in itself for me.' High-principled and classically disciplined, he was rooted in Russian tradition. He developed from complexity to clarity, from extreme chromaticism to simpler diatonicism, from polyphony to homophony.... His lifelong aim was to achieve 'objectivity, to transmute personal experiences into universal communications.'"

Miaskovsky composed his Cello Concerto between October and December 1944, when Russian victory in World War II was appearing increasingly imminent. While finishing the Concerto, he wrote to a friend, "Today the eclipse of the sun is ending ... tomorrow we shall have a triumphant parade ... and I am swamped with work." The score was revised in early

1945 with the help of the Soviet cellist Sviatoslav Knushevitzky, who gave its premiere on March 17th in Moscow; the Concerto received the Stalin Prize in 1946. (Miaskovsky's Symphonies No. 21 [1940] and No. 27 [1950] also won Stalin Prizes.) The Concerto is in two movements, the second of which is divided into several large structural paragraphs. The opening movement, slow throughout, takes as its main theme a melancholy strain sung by the bassoon and then by the cello over a somber, pulsing accompaniment. The music's mood brightens for the subsidiary subject, an arching melody introduced by the violins in octaves. In place of the usual development section, the cello supplies a thoughtful solo cadenza. An abbreviated recapitulation of the earlier themes rounds out the movement. The second movement consists of several sections, played without pause: an animated scherzo, a broad, lyrical melody led by the solo cello, a dancing triple-meter episode, and the return of the scherzo and the lyrical melody. Another cadenza serves as the bridge to the Concerto's expansive coda, which is occupied by a full recapitulation of the principal themes of the first movement.

**Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, .....Ludwig van Beethoven**

**Op. 55, "Eroica" (1770-1827)**

*Composed in 1803-1804.*

*Premiered in December 1804 in Vienna.*

The year 1804 — the time when Beethoven finished his Third Symphony — was crucial in the modern political history of Europe. Napoleon Bonaparte had begun his meteoric rise to power only a decade earlier, after playing a significant part in the recapture in 1793 of Toulon, a Mediterranean port that had been surrendered to the British by French royalists. Britain, along with Austria, Prussia, Holland and Spain, was a member of the First Coalition, an alliance that had been formed by these monarchical nations in the wake of the execution of Louis XVI to thwart the French National Convention's ambition to spread revolution (and royal overthrow) throughout Europe. In 1796, Carnot entrusted the campaign against northern Italy, then dominated by Austria, to the young General Bonaparte, who won a stunning series of victories with an army that he had transformed from a demoralized, starving band into a military juggernaut. He returned to France in 1799 as First Consul of the newly established Consulate, and put in place measures to halt inflation, instituted a new legal code, and repaired relations with the Church. It was to this man, this great leader and potential saviour of the masses from centuries of tyrannical political, social and economic oppression, that Beethoven intended to pay tribute in his majestic E-flat Symphony, begun in 1803. The name "Bonaparte" appears above that of the composer on the original title page.

Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor of France in 1804, and was crowned, with the new Empress Josephine, at Notre Dame Cathedral on December 2nd, an event forever frozen in time by David's magnificent canvas in the Louvre. Beethoven, enraged and feeling betrayed by this usurpation of power, roared at his student Ferdinand Ries, who brought him the news, "Then is he, too, only an ordinary human being?" The ragged hole in the title page of the score now in the library of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna bears mute testimony to the violent manner in which Beethoven erased Napoleon from this Symphony. He later inscribed it, undoubtedly with much sorrow, "To celebrate the memory of a great man."

The "Eroica" ("Heroic") is a work that changed the course of musical history. There was much sentiment at the turn of the 19th century that the expressive and technical possibilities of the symphonic genre had been exhausted by Haydn, Mozart, C.P.E. Bach and their contemporaries. It was Beethoven, and specifically this majestic Symphony, that threw wide the gates on the unprecedented artistic vistas that were to be explored for the rest of the century. In a single giant leap, he invested the genre with the breadth and richness of emotional and architectonic expression that established the grand sweep that the word "symphonic" now connotes. For the first time, with this music, the master composer was recognized as an individual responding to a higher calling. No longer could the creative musician be considered a mere artisan in tones, producing pieces within the confines of the court or the church for specific occasions, much as a talented chef would dispense a hearty roast or a succulent torte. After Beethoven, the composer was regarded as a visionary — a special being lifted above mundane experience — who could guide benighted listeners to loftier planes of existence through his valued gifts. The modern conception of an artist — what he is, his place in society, what he can do for those

who experience his work — stems from Beethoven. Romanticism began with the “Eroica.”

The Symphony’s first movement, by far the largest sonata design composed to that time, opens with a brief summons of two mighty chords. At least four thematic ideas are presented in the exposition, and one of the wonders of the Symphony is the way in which Beethoven made these melodies succeed each other in a seemingly inevitable manner, as though this music could have been composed in no other way. The development section is a massive essay progressing through many moods which are all united by an almost titanic sense of struggle. It is in this central portion of the movement and in the lengthy coda that Beethoven broke through the boundaries of the 18th-century symphony to create a work not only longer in duration but also more profound in meaning. The composer’s own words are reflected in this awe-inspiring movement: “Music is the electric soil in which the spirit lives, thinks and invents.”

The beginning of the second movement — “Marcia funebre” (“*Funeral March*”) — with its plaintive, simple themes intoned over a mock drum-roll in the basses, is the touchstone for the expression of tragedy in instrumental music. The mournful C minor of the opening gives way to the brighter C major of the oboe’s melody in a stroke of genius that George Bernard Shaw, during his early days as a music critic in London, admitted “ruins me,” as only the expression of deepest emotion can. A development-like section, full of remarkable contrapuntal complexities, is followed by a return of the simple opening threnody, which itself eventually expires amid sobs and silences at the close of this eloquent movement.

The third movement is a scherzo, the lusty successor to the graceful minuet. The central section is a rousing trio for horns, one of the earliest examples (Haydn’s “Horn Call” Symphony is an exception) of the use of more than two horns in an orchestral work.

The finale is a large set of variations on two themes, one of which (the first one heard) forms the bass line to the other. The second theme, introduced by the oboe, is a melody which appears in three other of Beethoven’s works: the finale of the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, the *Contradanse No. 7* and the *Variations and Fugue*, Op. 35 for piano. The variations accumulate energy as they go, and, just as it seems the movement is whirling toward its final climax, the music comes to a full stop before launching into an extended *Andante* section which explores first the tender and then the majestic possibilities of the themes. A brilliant *Presto* led by the horns concludes this epochal work.

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