

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Overture to *Tannhäuser* Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Composed in 1843-1845.

Premiered on October 19, 1845 in Dresden, conducted by the composer.

Though Richard Wagner is universally known as a composer, he also considered himself — as the author of the librettos for all of his operas, a huge autobiography and an avalanche of theoretical and philosophical tracts voluminous enough to literally fill a shelf — a poet and a man of letters. The sources of inspiration for his librettos were invariably the history and myths of Germany, and during a vacation in the early summer of 1842 at the northern Bohemian town of Teplitz, he devoured a wide variety of 19th-century retellings of the ancient tales of the legendary medieval singing contests in search of an operatic subject. The accounts, by E.T.A. Hoffmann, the Brothers Grimm, Heine, Ludwig Tieck and others, concerned a historical 13th-century Minnesinger (i.e., a German poet-musician of noble birth) named Heinrich von Ofterdingen, a contest of song held in 1208 at the Wartburg Castle, near Eisenach (today remembered as Bach's birthplace), and a (perhaps) mythical character called Tannhäuser who succumbed to the seductions of Venus in her mountain enclave and sought forgiveness through a pilgrimage to Rome and the love of a pure woman. Before he left Teplitz, Wagner had sketched an operatic scenario from these sources, and the following spring worked it into a full libretto originally titled "The Mountain of Venus," but later renamed *Tannhäuser* to thwart lascivious comment. The three acts of the opera were composed in 1844, while he was conductor of the Royal Opera House in Dresden; the orchestration was completed on April 15, 1845. Wagner directed the work's premiere in Dresden on October 19, 1845 to an audience initially bemused by his attempts to weld together the individual numbers of the opera through accompanied narratives and instrumental transitions. By the third performance, however, *Tannhäuser* proved to be a success. It was repeated in Dresden, with some revisions to clarify its dramatic structure, in 1846 and 1847, and was introduced into the repertoires of the major European opera houses over the next decade. *Tannhäuser* was the first of Wagner's operas to be staged in America (Stadt Theatre, New York, April 4, 1859; the Overture was played here as early as 1853, in Boston).

The opera opens in a grotto in the Venusberg, a mountain where Venus, the goddess of love, is said by German legend to have taken refuge after the fall of ancient civilization. Tannhäuser has forsaken the world to enjoy her sensual pleasures, but after a year he longs to return home and find forgiveness. He invokes the name of the Virgin Mary, and the Venusberg is swallowed by darkness. Tannhäuser finds himself in a valley below Wartburg Castle, where he is passed by a band of pilgrims journeying to Rome. His friend Wolfram recognizes him, tells him how Elisabeth has grieved during his absence, and invites him to the Wartburg to see Elisabeth and to take part in a singing contest. Elisabeth is joyous at Tannhäuser's return, and they reassure each other of their love. At the contest, however, Tannhäuser sings a rhapsody to Venus and the pleasures of carnal love which so enrages the assembled knights and ladies that Elisabeth must protect him from their threats of violence. Tannhäuser agrees to join the pilgrims to atone for his sins. Several months later, he returns from Rome, alone, haggard and in rags. He tells Wolfram that the Pope has said it is as impossible for someone who has dwelled in the Venusberg to be forgiven as for the Papal staff to sprout leaves. He considers going again to Venus, but withstands that temptation when Wolfram mentions Elisabeth's name. Elisabeth, however, not knowing of Tannhäuser's return and despairing of ever seeing her lover again, has died of grief. Her bier is carried past Tannhäuser, who kneels next to it, and also dies. As morning dawns, pilgrims from Rome arrive bearing the Pope's staff, which has miraculously grown leaves.

The Overture to *Tannhäuser* encapsulates in musical terms the dramatic conflict between the sacred love of Elisabeth and the profane love of Venus. For a series of orchestral concerts of his music in Zurich in 1853, Wagner wrote a grandiloquent synopsis of the Overture's emotional progression, which reads in part: "At first the orchestra introduces us to the 'Pilgrims' Chorus' alone. It approaches, swells to a mighty outpouring, and finally passes into the distance. As night falls, magic visions show themselves. A rosy mist swirls upward, and the blurred motions of a fearsomely voluptuous dance are revealed.... This is the seductive magic of the Venusberg. Lured by the tempting vision, Tannhäuser draws near.

It is Venus herself who appears to him.... His heart and senses glow, the blood in his veins takes fire, an irresistible attraction draws him nearer, and he steps before the goddess. In drunken joy the Bacchantes rush upon him and draw him into their wild dance.... The storm subsides. Only a soft, sensuous moan lingers in the air over the spot where the unholy ecstasy held sway. Yet already the morning dawns: from the far distance the pilgrim's chorus is heard again. As it draws ever nearer and day repulses night, those lingering moans are transfigured into a murmur of joy so that at last, when the sun rises in splendor and the pilgrims' chorus proclaims salvation to all the world, the joyous murmur swells to the mightiest, noblest rejoicing. Redeemed from the curse of ungodly shame, the Venusberg itself joins its exultant voice to the godly chant."

**Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54Robert Schumann
(1810-1856)**

Composed in 1841 and 1845.

Premiered on December 4, 1845 in Dresden, conducted by Ferdinand Hiller with Clara Schumann, the composer's wife, as soloist.

Schumann's Piano Concerto occupied a special place in his loving relationship with his wife, Clara. In 1837, three years before their marriage, Schumann wrote to her of a plan for a concerted work for piano and orchestra that would be "a compromise between a symphony, a concerto and a huge sonata." It was a bold vision for Schumann who had, with one discarded exception, written nothing for orchestra. In 1841, the second year of their marriage, he returned to his original conception, and produced a *Fantasia* in one movement for piano with orchestral accompaniment. That memorable year also saw the composition of his Symphony No. 1 and the first version of the Fourth Symphony, a burst of activity which had been encouraged by Clara, who wanted her husband to realize his potential in forms larger than the solo piano works and songs to which he had previously devoted himself. Schumann had really drawn up his own blueprint for the piano and orchestra work in a prophetic article he wrote in 1839 for the journal he edited, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* ("New Music Journal"): "We must await the genius who will show us, in a newer and more brilliant way, how orchestra and piano may be combined; how the soloist, dominant at the keyboard, may unfold the wealth of his instrument and his art, while the orchestra, no longer a mere spectator, may interweave its manifold facets into the scene." The *Fantasia* seemed to satisfy the desires of both husband and wife. Clara ran through the work at a rehearsal of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra on August 13, 1841, and Robert thought highly enough of the piece to try to have it published. His attempts to secure a publisher for the new score met with one rejection after another, however, and, with great disappointment, he laid the piece aside.

In 1844, Robert had a difficult bout with the recurring emotional disorder that plagued him throughout his life. After his recovery, he felt a new invigoration, and resumed composition with restless enthusiasm. In May 1845, the *Fantasia* came down from the shelf with Schumann's determination to breathe new life into it. He retained the original *Fantasia* movement, and added to it an *Intermezzo* and *Finale* to create the three-movement Piano Concerto, which was to become one of the most popular of all such works in the entire keyboard repertory. The public's initial reaction to the new Concerto, however, was cool. The composition did not have any of the flamboyant virtuosity that was then routinely expected from a soloist (Liszt dubbed it "a concerto without piano"), and the originality of its formal conception put audiences off. Clara, undeterred, was convinced of the work's value, and she was determined to have it heard. The style of the Concerto even helped her to find a new direction for her concertizing, since she thereafter left behind the vapid virtuoso showpiece, and concentrated instead on the more substantive music of Bach, Beethoven and her husband. As Victor Basch wrote, she felt that this change in attitude and repertory "reconciled the discrepancy between her aspiration as an artist and her duties as a wife." Clara's perseverance had its reward — she lived to see not only this magnificent Concerto but all of her husband's music become accepted and loved throughout the world.

Schumann's Piano Concerto is memorable not only for the beauty of its melodies and the felicity of its harmony, but also for the careful integration of its structure. Were the manner in which the work was composed unknown, there would be no way to tell that several years separate the creation of the first from the second and third movements. The Concerto's

sense of unity arises principally from the transformations of the opening theme heard throughout the work. This opening motive, a lovely melody presented by the woodwinds after the fiery prefatory chords of the piano, pervades the first movement, serving not only as its second theme but also appearing in many variants of tone color, harmony and texture in the development section. Even the coda, placed after a stirring cadenza, uses a double-time marching version of the main theme.

The second movement, the “very essence of tender romance” according to Eugene Burck, is a three-part form with a soaring melody for cellos in its middle section. The movement’s initial motive, a gentle dialogue between piano and strings, is another derivative of the first movement’s opening theme.

The principal theme of the sonata-form finale is yet another rendering of the Concerto’s initial melody, this one a heroic manifestation in energetic triple meter; the second theme employs extensive rhythmic syncopations. After a striding central section, the recapitulation begins in the dominant key (a technique borrowed from Schubert) so that the movement finally settles into the expected tonic major key only with the syncopated second theme. The soloist is granted another rousing cadenza before the conclusion of this most satisfying work.

Of this Concerto, with its masterful balance of sentiment and vigor, Professor Donald Tovey wrote, “It attains a beauty and depth quite transcendent of any mere prettiness, though, like all Schumann’s deepest music, it is recklessly pretty.”

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68.....Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Composed in 1855-1876.

Premiered on November 4, 1876 in Karlsruhe, conducted by Felix Otto Dessoff.

Brahms, while not as breathtakingly precocious as Mozart, Mendelssohn or Schubert, got a reasonably early start on his musical career: he had produced several piano works (including two large sonatas) and a goodly number of songs by the age of nineteen. In 1853, when Brahms was only twenty, Robert Schumann wrote an article for the widely distributed *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, his first contribution to that journal in a decade, hailing Brahms as the savior of German music, the rightful heir to the mantle of Beethoven. Brahms was extremely proud of Schumann’s advocacy and he displayed the journal with great joy to his friends and family when he returned to his humble Hamburg neighborhood after visiting Schumann in Düsseldorf, but there was the other side of Schumann’s assessment as well, that which placed an immense burden on Brahms’ shoulders.

Brahms was acutely aware of the deeply rooted traditions of German music extending back not just to Beethoven, but even beyond him to Bach and Schütz and Lassus. His knowledge of Bach was so thorough, for example, that he was asked to join the editorial board of the first complete edition of the works of that Baroque master. He knew that, having been heralded by Schumann, his compositions, especially a symphony, would have to measure up to the standards set by his forebears. At first he doubted that he was even able to write a symphony, feeling that Beethoven had nearly expended all the potential of that form, leaving nothing for future generations. “You have no idea,” Brahms lamented, “how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven.”

Encouraged by Schumann to undertake a symphony (“If one only makes the beginning, then the end comes of itself,” he cajoled), Brahms made some attempts in 1854, but was unsatisfied with the symphonic potential of the sketches, and diverted them into the First Piano Concerto and the *German Requiem*. He began again a year later, perhaps influenced by a performance of Schumann’s *Manfred*, and set down a first movement, but this music he kept to himself, and even his closest friends knew of no more than the existence of the manuscript. Seven years passed before he sent this movement to Clara, Schumann’s widow, to seek her opinion. With only a few reservations, she was pleased with this C minor sketch, and encouraged Brahms to hurry on and finish the rest so that it could be performed. Brahms, however, was not to be rushed. Eager inquiries from conductors in 1863, 1864 and 1866 went unanswered. It was not until 1870 that he hinted about any progress at all beyond the first movement.

The success of the superb *Haydn Variations* for orchestra of 1873 seemed to convince Brahms that he could complete his initial symphony, and in the summer of 1874 he began two years of labor — revising, correcting, perfecting — before

he signed and dated the score of the First Symphony in September 1876. He was at work right up to the premiere, making alterations after each rehearsal. The C minor Symphony met with a good but not overwhelming reception. It was considered by some to be stern and ascetic, lacking in melody (!). One critic suggested posting signs in concert halls warning: "Exit in case of Brahms." But Brahms' vision was greater than that of his audiences, and some time was needed by listeners to absorb the manifold beauties of this work. It is a serious and important essay ("Composing a symphony is no laughing matter," according to Brahms), one which revitalized the symphonic sonata form of Beethoven and combined it with the full contrapuntal resources of Bach, a worthy successor to the traditions Brahms revered. In the century since its premiere, it has become the most performed of Brahms' symphonies and one of the most cherished pieces in the orchestral literature.

The success and popularity of the First Symphony are richly deserved. It is a work of supreme technical accomplishment and profound emotion, of elaborate counterpoint and beautiful melody. Even to those who know its progress intimately, it reveals new marvels upon each hearing. The first movement begins with a slow introduction in 6/8 meter energized by the heart-beats of the timpani supporting the full orchestra. The violins announce the upward-bounding main theme in the faster tempo that launches a magnificent, seamless sonata form. The second movement starts with a placid, melancholy song led by the violins. After a mildly syncopated middle section, the bittersweet melody returns in a splendid scoring for oboe, horn and solo violin. The brief third movement, with its prevailing woodwind colors, is reminiscent of the pastoral serenity of Brahms' earlier Serenades.

The finale begins with an extended slow introduction based on several pregnant thematic ideas. The first, high in the violins, is a minor-mode transformation of what will become the main theme of the finale, but here broken off by an agitated pizzicato passage. A tense section of rushing scales is halted by a timpani roll leading to the call of the solo horn, a melody originally for Alphorn that Brahms collected while on vacation in Switzerland. The introduction concludes with a noble chorale intoned by trombones and bassoons, the former having been held in reserve throughout the entire Symphony just for this moment. The finale proper begins with a new tempo and one of the most famous themes in the repertory, a stirring hymn-like melody that resembles the finale of Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony. (When a friend pointed out this affinity to Brahms he shot back, "Any fool can see that!") The movement progresses in sonata form, but without a development section. The work closes with a majestic coda in the brilliant key of C major featuring the trombone chorale of the introduction in its full splendor.

Of Brahms' symphonies, and this one in particular, Lawrence Gilman wrote, "The essential fact to remember and to celebrate about Brahms is that he possessed not only the mechanisms of the grand style, but that he was able to exert it as a vehicle for ideas of authentic greatness, and he achieved this miracle with a continence, a sense of balance and proportion, an instinct for the larger contours as well as the finer adjustments of musical design, that were almost unerring."

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