Concerts of February 20 and 21, 2015

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Overture to Der Schauspieldirektor (The Impresario), K. 486 (1786)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria, on January 27, 1756, and died in Vienna, Austria, on December 5, 1791. The first performance The Impresario took place at the Schönbrunn Palace, Vienna, on February 7, 1786. The Overture to Impresario is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Approximate performance time is five minutes.

1786 was incredibly productive for Mozart, even by his lofty standards. During that year, Mozart completed his opera buffa masterpiece, Le nozze di Figaro, the singspiel, Der Schauspieldirektor, and a revision of his earlier opera seria, Idomeneo. Mozart also composed several chamber pieces, solo vocal works, his Fourth Horn Concerto, K. 495, and three Piano Concertos—No. 23 in A Major, K. 488, No. 24 in C minor, K. 491, and No. 25 in C Major, K. 503.

Der Schauspieldirektor (The Impresario), alternating spoken dialogue and sung music, tells the story of an impresario’s struggles to control the egos of two operatic divas. With its humorous depiction of operatic backstage intrigue, The Impresario is a predecessor to Richard Strauss’s Ariadne auf Naxos (see, below).

While The Impresario is rarely performed as a complete work, its vibrant Overture has long enjoyed a favored place in the concert hall.

Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme (Der Bürger aus Edelmann), Suite, Opus 60 (1918)

Richard Strauss was born in Munich, Germany, on June 11, 1864, and died in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, on September 8, 1949. The first performance of the Suite from Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme took place in Vienna on January 31, 1920, with the composer conducting. The Suite from Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, cymbals, triangle, snare drum, harp, piano, and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty-six minutes.

After the triumphant premiere of their opera, Der Rosenkavelier (1911), author Hugo von Hofmannsthal proposed a new stage project to composer Richard Strauss. An adaptation of Molière’s 1670 play, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme would serve as prologue to the chamber opera, Ariadne auf Naxos. Hofmannsthal provided the texts for the both the Molière adaptation and the ensuing opera. Strauss composed the incidental music for Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme and the score of Ariadne auf Naxos.
The first performance took place at the Court Theater in Stuttgart on October 25, 1912. The premiere was not a success. The King of Württemberg held a 50-minute reception between the play and opera, protracting an already lengthy evening. Further, as Strauss later commented: “a public that goes to the theater does not want to hear an opera, and vice versa.”

Strauss and Hofmannsthal revised the work, converting the Molière play into a sung operatic prologue. The revised version of *Ariadne auf Naxos* premiered at the Hofoper in Vienna on October 4, 1916. Strauss and Hofmannsthal also collaborated on a revised version of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. Strauss added ten musical numbers for the Berlin performances of the play.

In 1920, Strauss created a concert Suite from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. The Suite, containing some of Strauss’s most charming music, was a favorite of the composer’s.

I. *Ouvertüre*—The Overture sets the stage for the play. *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* takes place in the Paris home of Monsieur Jourdain, a nouveau-riche who aspires to the aristocracy.

II. *Menuett* (Minuet)—In order to climb the social ladder, Monsieur Jourdain retains the services of various artists to teach him the necessary skills. First is a Dancing Master.

III. *Der Fechtmeister* (The Fencing Master)—The Fencing Master arrives for Monsieur Jourdain’s lesson.

IV. *Auftritt und Tanz der Schneider* (Entrance and Dance of the Tailors)—The Tailor and his apprentices appear, bearing Monsieur Jourdain’s exotic clothing.

V. *Das Menuett des Lully* (Lully’s Minuet)—French composer Jean-Baptiste Lully provided the music for Molière’s original 1670 play. Strauss uses music by Lully as the basis for movements V-VII.

VI. *Courante*

VII. *Auftritt des Cleonte* (Entry of Cléonte)—Cléonte is in love with Monsieur Jourdain’s daughter. But as Cléonte is from the middle class, Jourdain refuses his suit.

VIII. *Vorspiel zum 2. Aufzug* (Intermezzo, Prelude to Act II)—Monsieur Jourdain prepares to greet his guests for a dinner preceding the performance of the opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

IX. *Das Diner* (The Dinner)—Dinner is served, and the menu provides Strauss the opportunity for several musical jokes. Rhine salmon inspires a quote from Richard Wagner’s opera, *Das Rheingold*. Saddle of Mutton is accompanied by sheep music from Strauss’s orchestral tone poem, *Don Quixote*. Dishes comprising various fowl lead to the dawn birdsong from *Der Rosenkavalier*, and a quotation from the aria “La donna è mobile” from Giuseppe Verdi’s opera, *Rigoletto* (“Woman is as changeable as a feather..."
in the wind”). A kitchen-boy entertains the guests with hearty dance, in the spirit of a Viennese waltz.

Concerto No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra in B-flat Major, Opus 83 (1881)

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna, Austria, on April 3, 1897. The first performance of the B-flat Piano Concerto took place at the Redoutensaal in Budapest, Hungary, on November 9, 1881, with the composer as soloist and Sándor Erkel conducting the Budapest Philharmonic. In addition to the solo piano, the B-flat Concerto is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Approximate performance time is forty-four minutes.

Johannes Brahms completed his First Piano Concerto (D minor, Opus 15) in 1858. The premiere took place the following year. The epic, stormy and complex work did not easily win public acceptance. Brahms himself was philosophical: “It will please, once I have improved its anatomy, and a second one will sound quite different.” Brahms was correct on both counts, although twenty years would elapse before that Second Concerto materialized.

Brahms first sketched thematic material for his B-flat Concerto in the spring of 1878, following a trip to Italy with his friend, Viennese surgeon, Theodor Billroth. It appears that Brahms did no further work on the Concerto for three years. At the conclusion of another journey to Italy, Brahms resumed composition. Two months later, on July 7, 1881, he completed the score.

In a letter to a friend, Brahms announced, with typically self-deprecating humor, the creation of the epic four-movement Concerto: “I don’t mind telling you that I have written a tiny, tiny, pianoforte concerto with a tiny, tiny, wisp of a scherzo.” A similar letter to the superb pianist, Clara Schumann—widow of composer Robert Schumann—elicited the following response: “I don’t really trust your word ‘little.’ However, I wouldn’t mind a bit (if it were little) because in that case I might even be able to play it myself.”

Brahms forwarded the score of the B-flat Concerto to Billroth on July 11 with the following explanation: “I am sending you enclosed a couple of little pieces for the piano(!)” Billroth replied that very day, comparing the Second Piano Concerto to the First as “that of the grown man to the youth; unmistakably the same, yet in every way sturdier, more mature.”

Brahms was the soloist for the premiere, which took place on November 9, 1881, at the Redoutensaal in Budapest. A few weeks later, Brahms again performed the work at Meiningen, with his friend, Hans von Bülow, conducting. Unlike the D-minor, Brahms’s Second Piano Concerto was an instant success with the critics and public.

Billroth’s comparison of the B-flat Concerto to its predecessor as “that of the grown man to the youth” is quite apt. Whereas the D-minor is filled with storm and stress,
Second Concerto radiates an autumnal glow and proceeds with an inevitability that are hallmarks of the mature Brahms.

Despite their differences of style, the D-minor and B-flat Piano Concertos do share a symphonic conception that places them in a special category among 19th-century works. The First Piano Concerto was created from sketches for what Brahms initially planned to be his first symphony. Brahms had no similar aspirations for the B-flat Concerto. Still, the close partnership of soloist and orchestra, as well as the use of four movements as opposed to the traditional three, prompted critic Eduard Hanslick to term the work “a symphony with piano obbligato.” That, however, is a characterization offered by someone who did not have to surmount the supreme technical and interpretive demands placed upon the soloist in this extraordinary work.

The first movement (Allegro non troppo) opens with a dialogue between the horn and piano, finally leading to the introduction of the principal thematic material. The second movement (Allegro appassionato) is a vigorous scherzo, with a brilliant major-key “trio” section. The slow third movement (Andante) is based upon a poignant and beautiful melody introduced by the solo cello. Brahms returned to that melody five years later in his melancholy song, *Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer* (“My Sleep Becomes Ever Lighter”), Opus 105, No. 2. The rondo finale (Allegretto grazioso) offers a light touch and high spirits virtually throughout, culminating in a grand final statement.