

Concerts of March 14 and 15, 2014

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

***Chacony* in G minor, Z. 730 (arr. Britten, 1948, rev. 1963)**

Henry Purcell was born in Westminster, England, on September 10, 1659, and died there on November 21, 1695. Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft, England, on November 22, 1913, and died in Aldeburgh, England, on December 4, 1976. The Britten arrangement of the Purcell *Chacony* is scored for strings. Approximate performance time is seven minutes.

The 20th-century English composer Benjamin Britten maintained a lifelong admiration for the works of his 17th-century predecessor, Henry Purcell. Britten's most famous orchestral work, "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra", Opus 34 (1946), is a series of variations and a fugue on a melody from Purcell's Incidental Music to the play, *Abdelazar*, or *The Moor's Revenge* (1695). Britten also created performing versions of Purcell works, including the *Chacony* in G minor, Z. 730.

Purcell composed the *Chacony* for an ensemble of viols, a bowed stringed instrument with frets, typically held vertically (like a cello or double bass). Britten arranged the Purcell *Chacony* for performance by string quartet, or string orchestra.

A *chacony* (Fr. *chaconne* It., *ciaccona*) is a series of variations over a repeated bass figure. In the Purcell/Britten *Chacony*, the eight-measure bass figure, introduced by the lower strings, serves as the foundation for 18 variations. In some of the variations, the bass figure appears in the higher-voiced instruments. According to Britten, the work concludes with "a pathetic variation, with dropping semi-quavers (sixteenth notes), and repeated 'soft'—Purcell's own instruction."

Concerto in A minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 54 (1845)

Robert Schumann was born in Zwickau, Germany, on June 8, 1810 and died in Endenich, Germany, on July 29, 1856. The first performance of the Piano Concerto took place on December 4, 1845, at the Hall of the Hôtel de Saxe in Dresden, Germany, with Clara Schumann as soloist and Ferdinand Hiller, conducting. In addition to the solo piano, the Concerto is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty-one minutes.

Robert Schumann composed the Piano Concerto for his beloved wife, the pianist and composer Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896). The work originated in May 1841, as a *Fantasy in A minor* for piano and orchestra. In 1845, Schumann added two movements to the *Fantasy*. Clara Schumann wrote in her diary: "(The *Fantasy*) has now become a concerto that I mean to play next winter. I am very glad about it for I have always wanted a great bravura piece by him." The following month, Clara enthused: "I am happy as a king at the thought of playing it with orchestra."

Clara Schumann was the soloist in the December 4, 1845 premiere of Robert's Concerto in A minor for Piano and Orchestra. The first performance took place in Dresden at the

Hall of the Hôtel de Saxe, led by the work's dedicatee, conductor Ferdinand Hiller. On New Year's Day, 1845, Clara Schumann played the new Concerto with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, under Felix Mendelssohn's direction. In many subsequent performances of the Schumann Piano Concerto, it was Robert who served as conductor/accompanist for his wife.

In a letter written to Clara a few years before their marriage, Robert Schumann described his conception of a piano concerto as: "a compromise between a symphony, a concerto and a huge sonata. I see I cannot write a concerto for the virtuosos—I must plan something else." And, despite the considerable technical hurdles for the soloist, there is always an admirable sense of partnership between pianist and orchestra. Further, it is remarkable that while four years separate the composition of the first movement and the final two, the Concerto is an organic composition that proceeds unerringly from start to finish. These admirable qualities, coupled with Schumann's inspired lyrical gifts, produce a sublime work, certainly one of the finest piano concertos of the Romantic era.

The Concerto is in three movements. The first (*Allegro affettuoso*) opens in dramatic fashion, with a *forte* orchestral chord, immediately followed by an emphatic descending passage for the soloist. The oboes, supported by the clarinets, bassoons and horns, sing the *espressivo* principal theme, soon repeated by the soloist. The brief second movement (*Intermezzo. Andantino grazioso*) is in A—B—A form. The soloist, in dialogue with the strings, presents the charming opening theme, derived from the ascending portion of the principal melody of the first movement. The cellos launch the more rhapsodic "B" section. In the finale (*Allegro vivace*), the soloist introduces the joyous principal theme, again related to the principal melody of the opening movement. The finale concludes with an expansive coda, in which the soloist takes center stage, closing with a dazzling, ascending flourish.

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Opus 88 (1889)

Antonín Dvořák was born in Mühlhausen, Bohemia (now Nelahozeves, the Czech Republic), on September 8, 1841, and died in Prague on May 1, 1904. The first performance of the Symphony No. 8 took place in Prague on February 2, 1890, with the composer conducting the Prague National Theater Orchestra. The first performance of the Symphony No. 8 took place in Prague on February 2, 1890, with the composer conducting the Prague National Theater Orchestra. The Eighth Symphony is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings. Approximate performance time is thirty-four minutes.

While working on his Piano Quartet, Opus 87, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák told his friend, Alois Göbl: "It's going unexpectedly easily and the melodies simply pour out of me." On August 26, 1889, one week after finishing the Piano Quartet, Dvořák began work on his Symphony in G Major. And it appears a similar level of inspiration attended the new orchestral work. Dvořák began to note ideas for the Symphony, and started the composition sketch on September 6. Dvořák completed the sketches for all four movements by September 23, and finished the orchestration on November 8.

On February 2, 1890, Dvořák conducted the Prague National Theater Orchestra in the premiere of his Eighth Symphony. A few months later, the composer again presented the Symphony in honor of his election as Member of the Franz Josef Academy for Science, Literature and Art in Prague. On June 16, 1891, the University of Cambridge bestowed an honorary Doctorate of Music upon Dvořák, who again offered his G-Major Symphony in commemoration of the event.

As with many of Dvořák's works, the G-Major Symphony is brimming with the influence of Czech folk melodies and rhythms. It is also in many ways highly innovative, suggesting new possibilities for traditional symphonic forms. According to Dvořák biographer, Otakar Sourek, the composer (by his own admission) consciously strove to create "a work different from his other symphonies, with individual thoughts worked out in a new way." This, Dvořák achieved in the context of energetic and optimistic music, brimming with unforgettable melodies.

I. *Allegro con brio*—The Symphony begins with a somber introduction, played by the winds and cellos. This music serves as a unifying force throughout the movement, returning as a bridge to the development and recapitulation of the principal themes. Out of the shadows emerges the sprightly main theme, first played by the solo flute and soon, triumphantly, by the full orchestra. The flutes and clarinets, over triplet string accompaniment, play the minor-key second theme. The woodwinds then introduce a *pianissimo*, chorale-like melody, played with great force by the entire orchestra. A stormy, contrapuntal development leads to the English horn's recapitulation of the initial theme. The other themes return in sequence. The movement concludes with a brief, dramatic coda, prominently featuring the brass and timpani.

II. *Adagio*—The slow movement, in rather free form, presents a series of episodes essentially based on upon the opening four-note motif, consisting of rising sixteenth-note triplets and a quarter note. Especially captivating is an extended C-Major episode with a shimmering *espressivo* violin solo. The *Adagio* explores a variety of moods and colors before achieving its peaceful conclusion.

III. *Allegretto grazioso*—Instead of the scherzo then in fashion, the third movement is in the character of a melancholy waltz. The first violins sing the principal melody, closely related to its counterpart in the *Adagio*. The lilting, major-key trio prominently features the woodwinds. The traditional repeat of the waltz leads to an unexpectedly joyful *Coda* (*Molto vivace*) in 2/4 time, serving as a bridge to the finale.

IV. *Allegro ma non troppo*—A trumpet call heralds the opening of the final movement. The cellos introduce the theme that serves as the basis for a series of diverse and often thrilling variations. In the midst of the variations, the trumpet-call motif returns. A series of lyrical variations finally yields to a jubilant coda (*Tempo I*), as the G-Major Symphony dashes to a rousing close.