Concerts of April 23, 24, and 25, 2015

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Suite No. 1 from Carmen (1875)

Georges Bizet was born in Paris, France, on October 25, 1838, and died in Bougival, France, on June 3, 1875. The first performance of Carmen took place at the Paris Opéra-Comique on March 3, 1875.

From the Archives: The first performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on November 26, 1947 with Guy Hutchins, Sr. conducting at Amory Auditorium. The ninth and most recent performance set took place on February 13 and 14, 1998 with Peter McCoppin conducting in Belk Theater.

Georges Bizet’s Carmen, along with Giuseppe Verdi’s Aida (1871) and Giacomo Puccini’s La bohème (1896), has long been known as a member of opera’s ABCs. But like Gioachino Rossini’s The Barber of Seville (1816), Verdi’s La traviata (1853), and Puccini’s Madama Butterfly (1904), Carmen was a failure at its premiere. Bizet died three months later, at age 36. Some have suggested that Bizet’s death was hastened by the failure of Carmen.

But the reasons for Carmen’s early lack of acceptance are clear. The plot, based on an 1847 novel by Prosper Mérimée, tells the story of a gypsy who has multiple affairs and is murdered on stage by one of her jealous lovers. Carmen shocked the audience of the Paris Opéra-Comique, a theater usually reserved for light opera and family entertainment.

Over time, the elements that caused such a stir at Carmen’s premiere made the opera a riveting theatrical experience. Bizet’s genius for melody and rich, inventive orchestral sonorities helped to make Carmen a mainstay not only in the opera house, but on the orchestral concert stage, and in popular culture.

The First Carmen Suite features instrumental excerpts from the opera, plus vocal selections, transcribed for orchestra.

I. Prélude

II. Aragonaise

III. Intermezzo

IV. Séguedille

V. Les dragons d’Alcala

VI. Les Toréadors
The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

Concerto No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra in F minor, Opus 21 (1829-30)

Frédéric Chopin was born in Żelazowa Wola, Poland, on March 1, 1810 and died in Paris, France, on October 17, 1849. The first performance of the F-Minor Piano Concerto took place at the National Theater in Warsaw, Poland, on March 17, 1830 with the composer as soloist.

From the Archives: The first performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on November 21, 1960 with Henry Janiec conducting at Ovens Auditorium. The seventh and most recent performance set took place on November 1 and 2, 2002 with Carl St. Clair conducting in Belk Theater.

During the period that Frédéric Chopin composed his F-minor Concerto, he was in the midst of an infatuation. The young pianist and composer had fallen hopelessly in love with a fellow student at the Warsaw Conservatory, a soprano, Constantia Gladkowska. He never revealed his feelings to the young woman. Instead, Chopin poured his heart out to his dearest friend, Tytus Wońciechowski.

In an October 3, 1829 letter to Woyciechowski, Chopin confessed:

Perhaps to my misfortune, I have met my ideal and have served her faithfully for six months, without speaking to her about my feelings. I dream about it: under her inspiration, the *adagio* (i.e., the slow movement, actually marked *Larghetto*) of my Concerto in F Minor and, this morning, the little waltz (Opus 70, No. 3 in D-flat) that I’m sending you, have been born. No one will know about it, except you.

The world premiere of Chopin’s Piano Concerto in F minor was at the National Theater in Warsaw on March 17, 1830. Making his Warsaw concert debut, Chopin was the soloist. The concert was a critical success. One writer, referring to the great Italian violinist, dubbed Chopin “the (Nicolò) Paganini of the piano.”

The F-minor Concerto is in three movements. The opening movement (*Maestoso*) is based upon two principal themes, first introduced by the orchestra, and later repeated more elaborately by the soloist. The central slow movement (*Larghetto*) was inspired by Chopin’s youthful infatuation with Constantia Gladkowska, and the finale (*Allegro vivace*) evokes the spirit of the Polish *mazurka*, a lively dance in triple time, serving as the basis for the numerous, engaging flights by the soloist.
In addition to the solo piano, the score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani, and strings.

Duration: ca. 32 minutes

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat Major, Opus 82 (1915, rev. 1916, 1919)

Jean Sibelius was born in Tavastehus, Finland, on December 8, 1865 and died in Järvenpää, Finland, on September 20, 1957. The first performance of Symphony No. 5 took place in Helsinki, Finland, on December 8, 1915, with the composer conducting.

From the Archives: The first and only prior performance of this work by the Charlotte Symphony took place on November 6, 1985 with Leo Driehuys conducting at Ovens Auditorium.

In July of 1914, the outbreak of World War I threw the lives of millions of Europeans into chaos. Sibelius was no exception. Finland, long a Grand Duchy of the Russian Tsarist regime, found itself allied with Britain, France, and Russia against Germany. As a result, Sibelius’s relationship with his Leipzig publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, was severed. Sibelius soon found himself in severe debt. In order to extricate his family from their dire circumstances, Sibelius composed numerous smaller pieces for various Finnish publishers.

Symphony No. 5 is Sibelius’s most important large-scale work from those wartime years. The start of composition was in close proximity to the outbreak of the conflict (although Sibelius may have been thinking about the work as early as 1912). Sibelius completed the first version of his Fifth Symphony in time for its premiere in Helsinki on December 8, 1915. The composer led the concert, given in honor of his fiftieth birthday.

Sibelius revised the score of his Fifth Symphony the following year. However, it was not until 1919 that Sibelius penned the familiar third, final version of his Symphony No. 5.

The period in which Sibelius composed his Fifth Symphony often found him in a reflective, somber mood. A few months after the war’s outbreak, he wrote, “My heart sings, full of sadness—the shadows lengthen.”

But there were moments of hope. In the spring of 1915, Sibelius wrote:

Today saw 16 swans at ten to eleven. One of the greatest impressions of my life! God, what beauty! They circled over me for a long spell. Disappeared in the solar haze like a silver ribbon. Their call the same woodwind type as that of cranes, but without tremolo. That of the swans closer to trumpet…A low refrain reminiscent of a small child sobbing. Nature’s mysticism and life’s lament. That this should have happened to
me, who has so long been outside of everything. Have thus been in the
sanctuary, today 21 April 1915.

Without question, Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony has moments of gloom and conflict.
However, like another famous Symphony No. 5—Ludwig van Beethoven’s C-minor,
Opus 67 (1808)—the struggle depicted in the Sibelius Fifth ends in triumph.

In September of 1915, shortly after he began work on the Fifth Symphony, Sibelius wrote
in his diary: “In a deep dell again. But I already begin dimly to see the mountain I shall
surely ascend…God opens his door for a moment and his orchestra plays the Fifth
Symphony.” Jean Sibelius died at age 91, in the evening of September 20, 1957. At the
moment of his passing, a concert was taking place in Helsinki. Conductor Sir Malcolm
Sargent and the orchestra were performing the music of Sibelius—his Symphony No. 5.

The opening movement of the Sibelius Fifth (*Tempo molto moderato; Allegro moderato;
Presto*) is based upon four principal themes. The first offers a varied second exposition
of the principal themes, followed by a mysterious development section. A quicksilver
episode in 3/4 time serves the dual function of the opening movement’s rather free
recapitulation and the work’s Scherzo. The coda gathers impressive momentum, bringing
the opening movement to a rousing close. The slow second movement (*Andante mosso,
quasi allegretto*) is a theme and set of variations, some of which offer hints of the ensuing
finale. The final movement (*Allegro molto; Misterioso*) opens with a flurry of activity in
the strings. This ultimately gives way to a majestic theme, introduced by the horns. The
two themes return throughout a movement notable for its energy and inexorable
momentum. In the closing measures, the second theme reigns supreme until the work’s
stunning conclusion—six “hammer-blow” chords.

*The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three
trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.*

Duration: ca. 30 minutes