Adams & Grieg

Saturday, September 16 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor
Katherine Chi, piano

Symphony Prelude, 7 pm on the Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with D.T. Baker

JANÁČEK
Taras Bulba (23')*
Smrt Andrijova ("The Death of Andriy")
Smrt Ostapova ("The Death of Ostap")
Proroctví a smrt Tarase Bulby ("The Prophecy and Death of Taras Bulba")

GRIEG
Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.16 (28')*
Allegro molto moderato
Adagio
Allegro moderato molto e marcato

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

ADAMS
Harmonielehre (42')*
I -
The Anfortas Wound
Meister Eckhardt and Quackie

program subject to change
*indicates approximate performance duration

Taras Bulba
Leoš Janáček
(b. Hukvaldy, Moravia, 1854 / d. Morava-Ostrava, 1928)

First performed: October 9, 1921 in Brno

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Born 13 years after his fellow Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček took Czech nationalism a step further, adapting his musical style to the patterns and rhythms of the Czech language itself. This is most apparent in his later operas (*Jenůfa*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *From the House of the Dead*, among others), but it infused his instrumental style as well. Toward the end of his life, the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 made him a national hero, which in turn seems to have lit a creative fire, as he turned out some of his finest works in his last years.

The symphonic rhapsody based on Gogol's *Taras Bulba* dates from the years of the First World War. Janáček began the work in 1915, before the Bolshevik Revolution, when he was still an admirer of Russia. Gogol's version of the legend, published in 1839, was revised in 1842 to make it more patriotically "Russian."

The title character of Gogol's story is a Cossack leader of long ago, who joins with others, including his sons Andriy and Ostap, to fight the invading Poles. Unfortunately, Andriy has already fallen in love with a Polish princess, and Janáček's rhapsody begins with Andriy's defection to the Polish side, to be with his beloved. The mournful English horn evokes his inner conflict, and his dread that his betrayal will be discovered. Organ and bells mark the prayers for salvation of the besieged Poles, and Andriy's reunion with his love follows. The battle that pits father against son ensues, with Taras Bulba himself slaying Andriy before riding off.

The second movement begins with another battle, at which Ostap his taken prisoner, and subsequently tortured. A mazurka (a Polish folk dance) depicts the victorious celebration of the Poles, while the E-flat clarinet is the cries of the imprisoned and tormented Ostap. The movement ends as Ostap is beheaded.

Tragedy, and the heroism arising from it, are the themes of the final movement, and the end of Taras Bulba's life. Following a titanic battle, the valiant Bulba is captured, and sentenced to death by fire. His despairing song, however, becomes one of patriotic fervor. Another Polish dance, a krakowiak, marks the triumph of the enemy, and as fanfares ring out in the distance, Taras Bulba has a vision of his nation's ultimate triumph as the flames engulf him, and in Janáček's words, bells and organ return in "a majestic apotheosis of Russia, like the arch of a rainbow of peace, encircling the earth."

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op.16
Edvard Grieg
(b. Bergen, Norway, 1843 / d. Bergen, 1907)

First performance: April 3, 1869 in Copenhagen
Last ESO performance: October 2014

Edvard Grieg is to music what Henrik Ibsen is to literature – the most visible Norwegian genius of the form. A humble, quiet man, Grieg was a reluctant national hero. “Orders and medals are most useful to me in the top layer of my trunk,” said the much-decorated composer, “the customs officials are always so kind to me at the sight of them.”

Grieg’s only piano concerto had its premiere in 1869, and it has maintained its foothold in the popular orchestral repertoire ever since. Shortly before he died, Grieg revised the score rather extensively, and it is in this new format that the work is almost always presented. From the now-famous timpani roll which ushers in the piano’s first thrilling arpeggios, melody holds sway in the work. “This is truly a romantic concerto,” noted scholar Everett Helm, “a concerto without contrapuntal passages, a work which emphatically stresses the melodic line.”

Following the famous introduction, the motif which will dominate the opening movement is heard first in woodwinds, soon taken up by the piano. A more playful, darting secondary idea is also presented by the piano, but is soon contrasted by a more romantic, quietly noble idea. Indeed, the music can scarcely keep up with the profusion of melodic ideas – but that first main motif returns to unify the work regularly. Pianistic challenges are there, but this is not a showcase for a fearless soloist (there’s the famous legend of Liszt sight-reading the concerto on the spot), but such music was never Grieg’s strength.

Indeed, Grieg is not known for his long-form pieces – this concerto excepted. He was a miniaturist, writing tender or merry songs and short piano pieces shot through with Norwegian folk sensibilities. The concerto’s slow movement, as a case in point, is a stirring Adagio where the piano creeps in tenderly following an orchestral introduction dotted with solo touches. The final movement springs out joyfully from the third movement’s whispered conclusion, and two themes utterly dominate. The first is a dancing, sparkling folk-tinged piano theme. The second is a haunting and beautiful melody first heard in an inspired flute solo before being given to the piano. These two ideas counter each other, leading to the second’s grand restatement at the concerto’s conclusion.

Harmonielehre
John Adams
(b. Worcester, Massachusetts, 1947)

First performed: March 21, 1985 in San Francisco
This is the ESO premiere of the piece

It’s not a surprise that works written immediately following a prolonged “writer’s block” would have a certain sense of triumph to them. It’s certainly the case with Rachmaninoff’s *Second Piano Concerto*, and so it is with *Harmonielehre*, composed by American John Adams in 1985 after some 18 months of inactivity. The work is named for the comprehensive harmony textbook by Arnold Schoenberg – a fascinating choice, and more revealing than it may appear.

For a composer from the “minimalist” school, Adams uses elements of minimalism, but only as one of many tools in the drawer. There are references, some more overt than others, to other composers, but the extra-musical influences are at least as important – including dreams. Adams’ writer’s block was finally broken by a dream he had, in which a giant tanker ship rose out of San Francisco Bay, turned upright, and streamed upward like a rocket. “As it rose out of the water, I could see a beautiful brownish-orange oxide on the bottom” of the ship, he said. In the work’s intensely powerful beginning, 39 repetitions of a huge E Major chord pound out of the orchestra (the tanker taking flight), following which the music follows a chromatic progression that at least nods in Schoenberg’s serial direction – Adams referred to the tonal transitions as “chord gates.” Schoenberg dedicated his book *Harmonielehre* to Gustav Mahler; whether that’s behind the climactic moment in Adams’ first movement, nearly halfway through, when a powerful fortissimo echoes an equally passionate moment in the Adagio of Mahler’s *Tenth* - ''what comes through is not, say 'Mahler', but rather John Adams's personal experience of Mahler,'' Adams himself has said.

A more material influence lies at the heart of the second movement. In Grail lore, Anfortas, “the Fisher King,” was the last in a line of guardians of the Grail, rendered impotent due to a wound, and unable to carry on the burden of his task. For Adams, this wound is a metaphor for his writer’s block, and the movement proceeds as a long unfolding melody (and so not really minimalist), and many have pointed to references in its bleak opening to Sibelius (the *Fourth Symphony*), and its shattering climax again to Mahler’s *Tenth*.

“Quackie” was the affectionate nickname Adams had for his infant daughter. Meister Eckhardts was a 13th century German mystic, theologian, and philosopher. In another dream Adams had, his daughter rode Meister Eckhardt’s back through the cosmos, as she whispered the secret a grace into his ear. Musically, the final movement’s progression is Wagnerian, as Adams says of the music of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*, “''The harmonies, restless and forever migrating to a new tonal center, moved between tension and resolution in an uncanny way that constantly propelled the listener forward … This was not just music about desire. It was desire itself.” As the work concludes, it does so in a clash of tonal centres, again as Adams explains, “I simply place the keys together, as if in a mixer, and let them battle it out. And finally E-flat wins through its strength, and this moment seems like an epiphany."