

Brahms & Barber

Saturday, May 12 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Bernd Glemser, piano

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

MILLER

Palimpsest

(17')*

BARBER

First Symphony (In One Movement), Op.9

(21')*

Allegro ma non troppo – Allegro molto – Andante tranquillo – Con moto

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op.83

(47')*

Allegro non troppo

Allegro appassionato

Andante

Allegretto grazioso

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Palimpsest

Jared Miller

(b. Los Angeles, 1988)

First performed: May 2016 in Victoria, B.C.

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Program note by the composer:

Although the term “palimpsest” specifically refers an old manuscript whose contents have been effaced beyond recognition, it can also be thought of as something that has changed over time and shows evidence of that change.

In the fall of 2015, I was helping my parents downsize their home, which involved me going through all of my musical scores from childhood and my teenage years and deciding what I wanted to keep and what I wanted to discard.

Although I initially saw this task as being a bit of a chore, I was surprisingly moved when I opened up a box that contained some of my favourite scores by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky that I studied when I was a child and teenager. On one hand, I was affected by the fact that such beautiful music on the page had degenerated over time. Ink was running and fading, which distorted the music to an almost unrecognizable degree. Consequently, this also made me feel my own passage through time and the changing impressions that this orchestral music had on me throughout. As a child, I always thought of the orchestra as this whimsical circus of sounds where as an adolescent, classical music was the catharsis to my teenage angst.

I hoped to bring both of these impressions of a palimpsest to life in this piece. As a result, you will hear quotations from Beethoven’s *Seventh* and *Ninth Symphonies* and Tchaikovsky’s *First Piano Concerto* in various guises: sometimes directly quoted, sometimes fading away, and sometimes distorted and re-imagined in a new musical context. In doing this, I ultimately hoped to convey the angst, catharsis, whimsy, and eventual nostalgia that classical music has expressed to me throughout my life thus far.

First Symphony (In One Movement), Op.9

Samuel Barber

(b. West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1910 / d. New York, 1981)

First performed: July 25, 1937 in Salzburg

This is the ESO premiere of the piece

Of American composer Samuel Barber, Donal Henahan states (in his *New York Times* obituary on Barber), "Probably no other American composer has ever enjoyed such early, such persistent and such long-lasting acclaim." And yet, in his much-discussed *Classical Music in America – A History*, Joseph Horowitz dismisses Barber cavalierly. "His melodic gift – corollary to a musical sweet tooth – set him above other contemporaries," he states. "...with its fat theme song, tangy harmonies, and discreetly clangorous orchestration...Barber...would fit a Goldwyn biblical epic."

Depending on where your point of view is along the gulf separating the avant garde from the traditional, either statement is truer than the other. Barber was unapologetically old-fashioned; a neo-romantic whose traditional tonal harmonies and rich melodies earned him no small measure of disdain, yet twice won him the Pulitzer Prize for Music. He won the American Prix de Rome in 1935, enabling him to travel to Europe. In fact, it was while staying in Rome that he wrote *Symphony No. 1*, which would become the first American work ever played at the Salzburg Festival, where it premiered in 1937.

The symphony, as its subtitle reveals, is cast in a single, long movement, but is clearly divided into four separate sections. The passionate theme which opens the work forms a linking element to the entire piece. There is a restless, searching energy in the *Allegro ma non troppo*, which settles into a quieter passage dominated by strings. Brass and timpani rouse the music once again, leading to the second section, an *Allegro molto*, which begins as a nervous fugato and scurries around the orchestra. This ebbs away to a haunting oboe melody as the *Andante tranquillo* begins, one based on the same material as the symphony's opening. The orchestration expands as this section continues, building to a powerful and sweeping climax, ebbing away to usher in the final section, marked *Con moto*. It is in a *Passacaglia*, with a ground theme again based on the opening moments. The variations of this theme increase in emotional intensity, and the final moments are grand and sweeping. Barber would write only one more symphony – a programmatic work for the U.S. Air Force he later rejected and tried to have destroyed.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat Major, Op.83

Johannes Brahms

(b. Hamburg, 1833 / d. Vienna, 1897)

First performed: November 9, 1881 in Budapest

Last ESO performance: January 2008

“I maintain that when a soloist is set on the stage he must be given the main role and not be treated as a soloist within the orchestra. If the solo genre displeases the composer, then let him write symphonies or something else for the orchestra alone, but don't let him bore me with fragments of solo constantly interrupted by the orchestra.” So said no less a composer than Édouard Lalo, upon hearing Brahms' *First Piano Concerto* at least five times. And to Lalo's mind – and to others of a similar bent – entirely fair. Brahms never set out to write virtuosic showpieces in the mold of the typical Romantic concerto style. His two piano concertos date from opposite ends of his compositional career, yet each is very deliberately a work that puts the orchestra on an equal footing with the soloist.

The *Second Concerto* came from a period during which Brahms produced a steady stream of masterpieces. Following his first two symphonies came, in short order, the *Violin Concerto* (1879), the *Second Piano Concerto* (1881), two more symphonies (1883 and 1885), and the *Double Concerto* (1887).

While his *First Piano Concerto* actually began life as a planned symphony rewritten, Brahms' second was conceived from the outset as a concerto, though built along symphonic proportions and even templates. For one thing, the work is in four movements, with a Scherzo as the second movement. Throughout the work, the piano's role ranges from that of an almost accompanist's part, to one of truly orchestral proportions all on its own. It's not that the piano part is made “easier” for the performer because it is not a flashy soloist's showcase; the challenge for the player is in fact extremely daunting.

Brahms begins his concerto with a horn call – rich and introspective. Indeed, the whole work is imbued with an autumnal air, punctured by moments of joviality. The piano rhapsodizes in between the opening horn signals, and brief theme stated by it becomes the basis for the first movement's principal section proper. While the movement's development section is quite compact, the recapitulation is long and richly detailed.

The Scherzo second movement, from a dramatic standpoint, is no mere nod to symphonic form. Octave leaps play about in this dancing movement, and joyous nature of it lends a poignant contrast to the long slow movement which follows. The most striking feature of the third movement, besides a demonstration of Brahms at his lyrical best, is the involved and ruminative extended role for solo cello.

The mood shifts once again in the vivacious, almost capricious final movement. Not a classically-structured rondo, the principal theme nonetheless does return again and again, in a whirling and happy conclusion.

Program notes © 2018 by D.T. Baker, except as noted