

Brahms' First Symphony

Wednesday, October 4 – 7:30 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Marlène Ngalissamy, bassoon

Allene Hackleman, horn

WEBER

Bassoon Concerto in F Major, Op.75

(17')*

Allegro ma non troppo

Adagio

Rondo: Allegro

R. STRAUSS

Horn Concerto No. 2 in E-flat Major

(20')*

Allegro

Andante con moto

Rondo

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

BRAHMS

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op.68

(46')*

Un poco sostenuto – Allegro – Meno allegro

Andante sostenuto

Un poco allegretto e grazioso

Adagio – Piu andante – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio – Piu allegro

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Bassoon Concerto in F Major, Op.75

Carl Maria von Weber

(b. near Lübeck, 1786 / d. London, 1826)

First performed: December 28, 1811 in Munich

Last ESO performance: January 1989

Weber was born 16 years after Beethoven, in the last flowering of the classical era as it made way for the more personal expressions of early Romanticism. While Weber would find his true Romantic voice in his operas, his works for orchestra, particularly his concertante works, were more conservative, and much more classically constructed.

He was 25, and already a well-known composer, when the bassoonist for the Munich court orchestra, Georg Friedrich Brandt, asked him for a concerto. The work was performed in its original version in 1811. A decade or so later, Weber revised the work.

Following the classical tradition, the orchestra presents the two main, highly contrasting themes of the first movement before the entry of the solo bassoon, which takes no time demonstrating itself as a formidable bravura soloist, playfully and virtuosically expanding on the march-like first theme. It is no surprise that the tender second movement could be a Weber opera aria with the bassoon as the singer and the orchestra scored so as to support, not overwhelm, the bassoon's aria. As one would expect, the finale is a Rondo, giving the bassoon first say of the main theme, and important interspersed passages that incorporate the formidable span of the bassoon's range. In the admittedly slim catalog of concertos for this instrument, Weber's contribution counts among the most important.

Horn Concerto No. 2 in E-flat Major

Richard Strauss

(b. Munich, 1864 / d. Garmisch-Partenkirchen, 1949)

First performed: August 10, 1943 in Salzburg

Last ESO performance: November 1988

Richard Strauss' relationship to the horn was singular, and started with his father. When Richard was born, Franz Strauss was one of the most celebrated horn players in Germany – a conservative who felt that Wagner's music was extreme – yet played in the Munich orchestra with which both *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* premiered. Needless to say, Richard knew the sound of the instrument intimately. And each of the works came at opposite ends of the composer's career. *Concerto No. 1* dates from his teen years, when he was still finding his own voice as a composer. The *Second Concerto* was written six decades later, in 1942. By then, many felt, Strauss' best days as a composer were behind him. He was 78, and wrote now for his own fulfillment.

The brief, interconnected work is in the standard three movements. Its opening movement challenges the soloist with wide leaps, and the development of the main thematic material has a definite lyrical sense born no doubt from a composer known for his operas. The second movement follows straight on from the first without a pause; an A-flat Andante with an almost intimate, chamber music-like sensibility in which the horn's texture is interwoven with the sparse instrumental accompaniment. The final movement playfully references past works by Strauss, and is painted from a more conservative tonal

palette. One of its signature touches comes near the end, where the horns of the orchestra join with the soloist. This movement, the elder master said happily, “turned out quite nicely.”

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op.68

Johannes Brahms

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

First performed: November 4, 1876 in Karlsruhe

Last ESO performance: November 2012

The pressure on Brahms to produce a symphony worthy as a successor to Beethoven (which is how he was regarded by the European musical world) was, to put it succinctly, enormous. It resulted in a 20-year span in which Brahms second-guessed himself, writing several works for orchestra (some originally intended as possible symphonies) before finally unveiling his first, with the entire musical world watching, in 1876. The fact that the work has taken its place among the great symphonies, despite this expectation and hype, is a testament to the effort its creator invested in it.

The work is in some respects a journey from darkness to light, opening with harrowing timpani beats and ominous orchestral colour. The main theme of the rest of the first movement is given several guises, from the relentless opening, to majestic, and even calm. The second movement is in ternary (A-B-A) form, in which the A section recalls the first movement, and presages the finale. The brief, bucolic third movement is dominated by rich writing for woodwinds.

The final movement opens with almost the same darkness as the first, but gives way to a rich, and now famous, theme first heard in the strings, which many at the time compared to the “Ode to Joy” theme of Beethoven’s *Ninth* (“Any fool can hear that,” Brahms growled at the comparison, “and every fool has!”). This new theme dominates the rest of the movement, growing in grandeur and brightness, leading to a thrilling and triumphant climax.

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