Brahms, Schumann & Strauss

Friday, November 16 – 7:30 pm
Saturday, November 17 – 8 pm

José-Luis Gomez, conductor
Karen Gomyo, violin

Afterthoughts, Friday post-performance, Main Lobby with José-Luis Gomez & Karen Gomyo
Symphony Prelude, Saturday 7 pm, Upper Circle (Third Level) Lobby with D.T. Baker

J. STRAUSS II
An der schönen blauen Donau ("On the Beautiful Blue Danube"), **Op.314** (10')*

BRAHMS
Violin Concerto in D Major, Op.77 (41')*
Allegro non troppo
Adagio
Allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

SCHUMANN
Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op.97 "Rhenish" (32')*
Lebhaft
Scherzo: Sehr mässig
Nicht schnell
Feierlich
Lebhaft

program subject to change
*indicates approximate performance duration

An der schönen blauen Donau ("On the Beautiful Blue Danube"), **Op.314**
Johann Strauss II
(b. Vienna, 1825 / d. Vienna, 1899)

First performed: February 13, 1867 in Vienna
Last ESO performance: Sobeys Symphony Under the Sky 2007

Aside from the revolutionary Richard Wagner, the reigning kings of music in late 19th-century Vienna were Johann Strauss II and Johannes Brahms. Strauss was The Waltz King, the great entertainer, the man whose musical empire had the entire city dancing. Brahms was the great, august guardian of German classical tradition. And yet the two were friends, and admired each other's work. The famous story tells of the party at which Strauss' daughter Alice asked the great Brahms for his autograph. He took her fan, and upon it sketched out the opening bars of one of her father's works, under which he wrote, "Unfortunately, not by yours truly, Johannes Brahms." The work he excerpted was *The Blue Danube Waltz*, which was published with the German title *An der schönen blauen Donau* ("On the Beautiful Blue Danube").

This most celebrated of the hundreds of waltzes composed by Strauss begins with an extended slow introduction: shimmering strings over which a horn slowly presents one of the main themes to be heard in the waltz proper. Once the actual dance begins, the famous melodies flow out like the river for which it is named, in a perfectly scaled and proportioned orchestration that was ever Strauss' strength. At the annual New Year's Day concert held in Vienna to this day, *The Blue Danube* is always presented as an encore, and it is the only work in the canon at which it is expected to have its introductory notes interrupted by such applause that the work must be stopped and begun again.

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op.77
Johannes Brahms
(b. Hamburg, 1833 / d. Vienna, 1897)

First performed: January 1, 1879 in Leipzig
Last ESO performance: March 2014

Two violinists played major roles in the career of Johannes Brahms. A major boost to the start of his life as a public artist came from Eduard Reményi (1828-1898), a violinist who made something of a career as a touring virtuoso, specializing in a crowd-pleasing faux gypsy style. Beginning in 1853, Reményi took Brahms on tour with him as accompanist, and it was certainly during this time that Brahms got the inspiration for the famous *Hungarian Dances* which proved quite lucrative for the blossoming composer. And it was Reményi who introduced Brahms to another Hungarian expatriate – and the other violinist so central to Brahms' art – Joseph Joachim.

In Joachim (1831-1907), Brahms found a kindred artistic spirit, and probably his best friend (other than Clara Schumann), and it was for him that Brahms composed his only *Violin Concerto*. The process of the work's composition was a taxing one for both men; Brahms constantly cajoled Joachim for advice on writing the violin part – and would then unceremoniously ignore nearly every suggestion Joachim made. Joachim demonstrated amazing patience and restraint, as he knew that his patience would be rewarded

with a masterpiece. The work's premiere in Leipzig, with Brahms conducting for his friend, met with a cool response, so Brahms declined to conduct the Viennese premiere. That was a pity, as the work was rapturously received there. It took several years for the concerto to take its place as the third great pillar in the German romantic violin concerto pantheon (alongside Beethoven's and Mendelssohn's), however. Even the conductor of the Viennese premiere, Josef Hellmesberger, famously described the work as, "a concerto not for, but against the violin."

As ever with his concertos, Brahms assigns the orchestra and violin equal importance in the *Violin Concerto*. The orchestral introduction is long, with several important musical ideas presented in an opening filled with passion and dignity. When the violin enters, while it is certainly to the fore, it is often accompanist to ideas in the orchestra as much as it is the instrument presenting the main melodic material. This is a lyrical movement (and longer than the next two combined), but its gentle melodies are often interrupted by disquieting interjections and unsettled tonalities. There are moments of grandeur amid the violin's intense flights with and around the lyrical main ideas, with particular emphasis on the violin's upper register (the better to be heard above the orchestra – a factor of which Brahms was particularly conscious). Brahms relied on Joachim (who was also a composer) to fashion his own cadenza.

The second movement is a set of variations on a theme first presented by – the oboe? "Does anyone imagine I'm going to stand on the stage, violin in hand, and listen to the oboe playing the only tune?" huffed no less than the great Sarasate as to why he did not take up Brahms' concerto. The violin is key to the movement, however, presenting embellishments on the oboe's song. In the final movement – not quite a rondo, not quite sonata form – Brahms gives a bit of a nod, perhaps, to his old friend Reményi, with a gypsy-tinged dance in which both orchestra and soloist take some rough and tumble delight. Brahms labeled the movement Allegro giocoso ("happy and jocular"), though it was Joachim who pressed him to add ma non troppo vivace ("but not too lively"), adding cursively that without that qualifier, it is "otherwise difficult."

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op.97 "Rhenish"
Robert Schumann
(b. Zwickau, 1810 / d. Endenich, 1856)

First performance: February 6, 1851 in Düsseldorf
Last ESO performance: March 2005

Even in the dark cloud that was so much a part of the life of Robert Schumann, there were silver linings. His sunny *Third Symphony* reflects that as no other orchestral work of his does. In 1850, Schumann, his wife Clara and their children moved to Düsseldorf, where he was to become conductor of the orchestra. The boat trips down the Rhine near the town greatly inspired Schumann, particularly the view of the Gothic cathedral in Cologne. It was these happy vistas which provided Schumann the inspiration for the symphony, which premiered in February the following year.

The work is cast in the unusual, but not unique, template of five movements, and is the only one of Schumann's symphonies that does not begin with an introduction. Instead, the first main theme bursts from the orchestra as if it cannot wait to be heard, and proceeds for a full 90 measures before it steps aside to allow a second theme to enter. This entrance may be brief, but both themes are given equal weight in the development. As the movement nears its close, the Recapitulation brings back the opening theme in the four horns – a splendid moment. The second movement, the symphony's Scherzo, has a folk-like feel in its Ländler tempo and rustic nature. The sweet song of the third movement calls to mind Schumann's more tender work for solo piano in its simplicity and charm.

The fourth movement is cast in the tonic minor, and was initially given an inscription by Schumann reading, "in the manner of an accompaniment to a solemn ceremony." It is both a tone poem in miniature and a rich polyphonic religiously-inspired movement, one which noted scholar Donald Tovey declared, "one of the finest examples of ecclesiastical polyphony since Bach." The movement's inspiration was the solemn occasion of the elevation of Cardinal Archbishop Geissel in the very Cologne Cathedral Schumann so admired. This dramatic heart of the entire symphony might make the final movement seem anti-climactic, but Schumann instead takes us from the cathedral into a bright city festival, full of bustle and cheer. There are also sly references to music from the preceding movements, bringing this happy work to an appropriately cheerful conclusion.