Szymanowski Violin Concerto

Saturday, Mach 23 – 8 pm

Rune Bergmann, conductor
Tasmin Little, violin

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

MENDELSSOHN
The Fair Melusina Overture, Op.32   (9')*

FORSYTH
*Atayoskewin***: The Dance**   (5')*

SZYMANOWSKI
Violin Concerto No. 2, Op.61   (23')*
        Moderato, molto tranquillo – Andantino sostenuto – Allegramente, molto energico – Andantino,
molto tranquillo

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

BEETHOVEN
Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op.36   (32')*
        Adagio molto – Allegro molto
        Larghetto
        Scherzo
        Allegro molto

program subject to change
*indicates approximate performance duration

The Fair Melusina Overture, Op.32
Felix Mendelssohn
(b. Hamburg, 1809 / d. Leipzig, 1847)

First performed: 1834

Last ESO performance: November 2013

Like several subjects of European folklore, Melusina was a watersprite who fell in love with a mortal man (much like Dvořák's Rusalka). Condemned for one day a week to transform into an aquatic being, Melusina begs her love to leave her alone on that one day. Naturally, he cannot, and discovering the truth dooms her to death. Drawn to the myth's idea, Felix Mendelssohn attended an opera based on the subject by a musical footnote of a composer, Constantin Kreutzer. Irked that the opera's sub-standard overture was encored, Mendelssohn determined to write a better one. The result, to be heard tonight, is not one of his best-known orchestral scores, but remained a personal favourite of the composer and his circle.

Rather than follow a narrative arc, Mendelssohn's *The Fair Melusina* depicts the moods and landscapes of the Melusina legend. In fact, its depiction of the bubbling stream from which the nymph emerges was colourful enough that Wagner – who famously derided Mendelssohn, no doubt due to his Jewish heritage – adapted it as the music for the Rhinemaidens in his Ring Cycle. It is the first theme heard in the overture, gently rising on the woodwinds out of rippling strings. Soon after, the violins present the urgent, proud theme of Melusina's lover, the count who could not resist discovering the tragic truth. A third idea (a love theme, perhaps) is also introduced, and the three musical threads build to a passionate climax, and a tender, dénouement that brings us back to the springs from which Melusina, and the overture, arrived.

Atayoskewin: **The Dance**
Malcolm Forsyth
(b. Pietermaritzburg, 1936 / d. Edmonton, 2011)

First performed: November 16, 1984 at the Scotford Shell Canada Refinery
Last ESO performance: November 2004

South African-born, Edmonton-based composer Malcolm Forsyth was named "Canadian Composer of the Year" by the Canadian Music Council in 1989, and has received many other awards, including three JUNOs for "Best Classical Composition. *Atayoskewin*, or "Sacred Legends" in the Cree language, was commissioned by Shell Canada Ltd, and is dedicated to the composer's father, Claude Forsyth, who died on August, 1984, shortly before its completion.

The suite's three movements seek to evoke different aspects of the Canadian North. *The Dance,* a satire, concludes the suite by evoking the wide-open sound of country fiddling. The whirling theme is interrupted by a short interlude for clarinet with harp, and *col legno* string accompaniment. The piece ends boisterously. *Atayoskewin* was awarded the first-ever JUNO as "Best Classical Composition" by the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences in 1987.

Violin Concerto No. 2, Op.61
Karol Szymanowski
(b. Tymoszówka, part of Ukraine at that time, 1882 / d. Lausanne, 1937)

First performed: October 6, 1933 in Warsaw
This is the ESO premiere of the piece

It will surprise no one, to be sure, to note that Karol Szymanowski's influences included the Polish master of the generation right before him, Fryderyk Chopin, and the modernists of his day. That only makes sense. Szymanowski was probably the most important Polish composer as music turned the corner from the late Romantic to the avant garde 20th century. Many scholars divide his music output into three periods: the early period shows his admiration for Wagner and Scriabin, among others; the middle period sees his music take on the earmarks of impressionism and a wider tonal palette; the third saw him turn to his nation's folk traditions, particularly that of the Górale people. It is no coincidence that this new direction followed close on the heels of Poland's long-sought independence in 1919. His *Second Violin Concerto* dates from this last period.

Szymanowski spent quite a bit of time in the 1920s visiting the people of the Tatra Mountains, and becoming fascinated by their folk music. Several works came from this immersion, including this concerto which, like the *First Violin Concerto*, composed 16 years before, benefited from the advice of Szymanowski's friend, the violinist Pawel Kochanski. Performed as a single, continuous work divided into several sections, the haunting opening has the violin present a folk-like plaint over a rumbling accompaniment, which broadens out as it veers between major and minor. The violin's unbroken melodic line is replaced by a more agitated section as the music's tempo increases. A few march steps take us into a more lively and virtuosic passage in the violin's upper register, urged on by an insistent orchestra. A Tranquillo section restores the more ruminative feel of the opening – the violin's song seems unending and inexorable. After a range of moods are explored, a cadenza unexpectedly emerges and takes the field – double stops and folk-like drone harmonies amplifying the work's rustic roots.

With a splash, the orchestra returns in a rhythmic and invigorating Allegramente, aptly subtitled "molto energico." The violin engages in real dialog with the orchestra here, trading themes against each other in a high-spirited call and response. The music settles down again, in an Andantino again labeled "tranquillo." The violin's song here is even more haunting and tinged with sadness or resignation, but this brief moment of passion segues brilliantly as the violin's pace leads directly to the animated final section, never rushed but with a deliberately forward-thrusting pace to the concluding fortissimo notes. The violin almost never pauses throughout the concerto's entire length.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op.36
Ludwig van Beethoven
(b. Bonn, 1770 / d. Vienna, 1827)

First performance: April 5, 1803 in Vienna
Last ESO performance: January 2010

"Dear Beethoven! You are going to Vienna in fulfillment of a wish that has long been frustrated. Mozart's genius is still in mourning and weeps for the death of its pupil. It found a refuge with the inexhaustible Haydn but no occupation; through him it wishes to form a union with another. With the help of unceasing diligence you will receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn."

Count Waldstein, November 1792

With the *Second Symphony*, begun as early as 1800 and premiered in 1803, Beethoven took several giant strides toward making the symphony the form for which he would set the new standard. Yet this was also a time of great personal strife for Beethoven. The buzzing in his ears he had been suffering with for years was now clearly becoming deafness. In 1802, in a letter addressed to his brothers Carl and Johann but which begins with the words "O ihr Menschen" ("Oh, you people"), Beethoven poured out his despair, his suffering, and his belief that his only salvation lay in his art. Known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, it is a powerful and moving document.

Yet the symphony he produced in this most dark of personal times is one with broad strokes of affirmation and humour. The slow introduction in the first movement bears the stamp of Haydn, but the woodwind colours are quite Beethovenian. The Allegro which follows begins, in the words of scholar Irving Kolodin, "hardly with a theme, certainly not a tune; it is more akin to a nuclear cell of energy with which much can and will be done."

The second movement is marked Larghetto – a tempo indication Beethoven used rarely, for particularly lovely airs. This one has the stamp of Mozart in its melodic grace, but again, the colours and increasingly chromatic harmonies that mark Beethoven's mature sound palette bubble up not infrequently in this beautiful, graceful passage.

Much is made of the third movement, as here, Beethoven finally dispenses with any pretense of a Haydn-esque Menuet movement, and for the first time, Beethoven uses the word Scherzo, literally the Italian for "joke." Its bizarre and sudden shifts in dynamic, in tempo, in orchestral textures, are a declamatory announcement that the Beethoven symphony as a genre has arrived. That feeling spreads into the final movement, where rich sonorities stand alongside rough and tumble humour. There are elements here that we will find in other Beethoven symphonies to come. The youthful Beethoven of the works of Bonn is now prepared to take the place for which Count Waldstein and all the others knew he was destined all those years ago.

Program notes © 2019 by D.T. Baker