

Winter Festival: Zukerman & Beethoven's Violin Concerto

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Barber: *The School for Scandal Overture*

An 18th-century comedy inspired this sparkling overture, which features three principal themes and a memorable oboe solo.

Beethoven: Violin Concerto

Five majestic timpani strokes set the tone. Their rhythm recurs frequently in the first movement. The Larghetto is lyrical and noble, at once transparent and richly layered. Beethoven reveals his flair for dance in the buoyant finale.

Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3, "Organ"

Organ does not play a solo role but is integrated into the sonic fabric of the orchestra. Quieter passages in the first section are subtle and reward careful listening. You will definitely know when the organ joins the fray for the triumphant finale.

BARBER: *The School for Scandal* Overture

SAMUEL BARBER

Born: March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died: January 23, 1981, in New York, New York

Composed: 1931

World Premiere: August 30, 1933, by the Philadelphia Orchestra

NJSO Premiere: 1961–62 season; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 8 minutes

Barber is best known for the emotional and popular Adagio for Strings, which is actually an arrangement of the slow movement to his string quartet. He has had a far greater impact on American music, however, writing two important operas (including the Pulitzer Prize winning *Vanessa*, 1958), a large quantity of vocal music and a superb violin concerto.

A brilliant young talent, Barber proved his mastery of the orchestra early. He wrote this overture as a graduation exercise from the Curtis Institute of Music. It was his first composition to be performed by a major American orchestra.

The School for Scandal is a satire by Robert Brinsley Sheridan, an 18th-century Irish playwright. Barber was well educated, and many of his instrumental works reflect his interest in literature. In addition to this overture, his Op. 7 (1935) is *Music for a Scene from Shelley*; and there are three *Essays* for Orchestra: Op. 12 (1938), Op. 17 (*Second Essay*, 1942) and Op. 47 (*Third Essay*, 1978).

Most of Barber's music is conservative. This piece is zesty and animated, with the kind of orchestral brilliance that characterizes Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* Overture. The music has three principal ideas, two of which are rhythmically vibrant. The middle one is a lovely oboe solo; this is the melody that will linger in our ears. All told, the overture makes an impression of American verve and energy successfully combined with European romanticism and tradition.

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel, celeste, harp and strings.

BEETHOVEN: Concerto in D Major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany

Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: July–December 1806

World Premiere: December 23, 1806, at the Theater an der Wien, Vienna; Franz Clement was the soloist.

NJSO Premiere: 1928–29 season. Philip James conducted; Mischa Elman was the soloist.

Duration: 42 minutes

The Violin Concerto and the “Emperor” Concerto: A Comparison

If the Fifth Piano Concerto is Beethoven’s “Emperor,” Op. 61 is its royal analogue among violin concertos: the king of them all. Like the “Emperor,” it dates from Beethoven’s middle period—approximately 1802 to 1812, the so-called “heroic decade.” These two works are pinnacles of his achievement during these richly productive years, and certainly his two finest concertos. Beyond that distinction, the Violin Concerto holds a special place in the hearts of violinists, orchestral players and music lovers. Yet how different in spirit it is from the “Emperor.” Instead of extroversion, we have thoughtfulness; instead of display and inventive methods of exploring virtuoso technique, Beethoven gives us subtle explorations of what the violin’s E string can deliver. In fact, one of the most astonishing aspects of this concerto is Beethoven’s instinctive understanding of both soloist and orchestra, despite the fact that he was a keyboard player.

Beethoven wrote his only violin concerto for Franz Clement (1780–1842), an Austrian violinist,

conductor and composer who led the violin section at the Vienna Opera. Clement is said to have sightread the piece at the premiere, because Beethoven finished writing it only at the last minute. If that apocryphal story is true, it may account in part for the fact that this concerto took a long time to win friends.

A struggle to enter the canon

After its premiere in 1806, the Violin Concerto received only one additional documented performance during Beethoven's lifetime, and that was in Berlin, rather than Vienna, Beethoven's adopted city. The 19th century favored flashy showpieces for its soloists, and this concerto does not focus on the violinist's brilliant technique. Beethoven studied repertoire of his contemporaries Giovanni Battista Viotti, Rodolphe Kreutzer and Jacques-Pierre Rode to become more conversant with the technical possibilities of the violin.

But display for its own sake never overtakes the broader musical architecture of his mighty work. Among Beethoven's own compositions, the Violin Concerto's closest spiritual sibling is the Fourth Piano Concerto, Op. 58, with which it shares serenity, absolute conviction in its own inherent balance and a lack of need for overt display.

About the music

The timpani taps that open the concerto become the work's leitmotif. From this pattern springs the entire first movement—its leisurely, unhurried pace, its emphasis on internal examination rather than external show, and the motivic cells from which Beethoven develops his ideas. These five beats are a stable foil to the woodwind theme, marked *dolce*, that answers them and eventually emerges as the principal melody of the movement. The same five strokes, understated yet inexorable, firmly anchor the first movement in the tonic key of D major. They are a welcome homing point in light of the disorienting and unexpected D sharps (significantly, repeating the same rhythm of the opening timpani strokes) that the first violins interject as early as the 10th measure.

Beethoven takes subtle liberties with form in this expansive first movement. For example, he reserves

the *cantabile* second theme for the orchestra until the coda, when his soloist finally has its turn at that lovely melody.

Built on variation principles, the Larghetto is sheer embroidery. It is lovingly scored: only muted strings and pairs of clarinets, bassoons and horns accompany the soloist. The mood is comfortable, intimate, friendly. Beethoven's geniality carries through to the Rondo finale, a foray into near-irresistible foot-tapping that wields its power even on those who have heard the music dozens of times. The double-stopped episodes are the only such occurrence in the concerto. Taking unusual and beguiling advantage of the violin's upper register, the finale provides wonderful opportunities for a soloist to display discerning taste and polished execution.

For these performances, Pinchas Zukerman plays the cadenza by Fritz Kreisler.

Instrumentation: flute; oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani; strings and solo violin.

SAINT-SAËNS: Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 78, “Organ”

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Composed: 1886

World Premiere: May 19, 1886, in London’s St. James Hall. The composer conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1936–37 season; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 34 minutes

FRENCH SYMPHONIC TRADITION: A WORK IN PROGRESS

When we think about symphonies, we don’t think of French composers right off the bat. Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven come to mind. So do Brahms and Schubert, perhaps Mendelssohn and Schumann, and definitely Bruckner and Mahler. If we break away from the Austro-German symphonists, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and Shostakovich get a good deal of exposure in our concert halls. These dozen composers probably account for 80% of the symphonies performed in any given season—and there’s not a French composer among them.

For centuries, opera has dominated French musical life. Instrumental music has had its proponents, however, and beginning with the works of François-Joseph Gossec (1734–1829), France has boasted a modest symphonic tradition of its own. While German influence dominated, it is worth noting that Beethoven thought highly of Étienne-Nicolas Méhul’s (1763–1817) symphonies. France’s first great 19th-century symphonist, Hector Berlioz, exerted a strong influence on his contemporaries in Germany, Austria and Russia. Ironically, his music remained largely misunderstood in his native land.

A concert series established by the conductor Jules-Étienne Padeloup in 1861 at Paris’ Cirque d’Hiver did much to bring instrumental music to a wider audience. Although Padeloup favored the Viennese symphonic classics, his introduction of Richard Wagner’s music had far-reaching impact

on contemporary French composers. Padeloup's series was continued by the conductors Charles Lamoureux and Édouard Colonne, who enabled some local composers to have their works performed.

During the 1880s, French composers (and Belgians who had settled in Paris) produced a rich harvest of symphonies, including a little-known Symphony in D Minor by Gabriel Fauré (1884), Vincent d'Indy's *Symphony on a French Mountain Air* (1885), Édouard Lalo's Symphony in G minor (1886), Franck's Symphony in D Minor (1886–88), Chausson's Symphony in B-flat Major, Op. 20 (1889–90) and, of course, the Saint-Saëns symphony (1886) that we hear at these performances.

These works have had uneven fates. Those of Franck and Saint-Saëns receive more performances than all the others combined, and for similar reasons. Both symphonies work recognizably within the symphonic tradition but impose bold structural ideas. Each adds a degree of chromaticism that shows an expanding harmonic palette. And both use principles of thematic transformation and development to provide a cyclic unity to a large structure. That stated, the Saint-Saëns is the more popular favorite, surely because of its gorgeous slow movement and splendid finale, both incorporating *obbligato* organ.

Camille Saint-Saëns enjoyed enormous success during his lifetime. (Hector Berlioz famously observed of his younger colleague, "He knows everything, but he lacks inexperience.") Critics of his music contend that a lack of obstacles and major life crises prevented him from bringing his undeniable talent to fullest bloom. That opinion has undergone reassessment, and Saint-Saëns' chamber music is appearing more frequently on concert programs, finding new enthusiasts.

The "Organ" Symphony never relinquished those audiences. It found champions at its premiere and has remained steadily in favor ever since. Its success is all the more remarkable when one considers that it was his first symphony in 27 years.

Saint-Saëns modified four-movement symphonic form for this piece. It consists of two large parts, each

of which is subdivided into two sections played without pause. Another unconventional feature is the inclusion of organ and piano in the scoring. The composer uses the organ to evoke the spirituality and reverence associated with church organs and to dramatize his musical climaxes with the sheer mass of sound an organ can produce with all its stops pulled. Piano provides punctuation in the scherzo with rapid scales and arpeggios.

Liszt and Saint-Saëns: an unlikely friendship

The Third Symphony was composed when Saint-Saëns was 50. It bears a dedication to the memory of Franz Liszt, who had died in July 1886 at the age of 75. The two men had admired each other greatly, and Saint-Saëns knew he had lost a great ally outside France when Liszt died. He was otherwise embroiled in a major mid-life crisis: his children had died, and his marriage had failed. These factors may account for the frank emotional character of the symphony. From a more strictly musical standpoint, Saint-Saëns' inclusion of the important role for organ is likely an imitation of Liszt's similar scoring in the symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht* (1877).

English commission

The work was commissioned by the London Philharmonic Society in conjunction with a piano solo appearance by Saint-Saëns. The English audience loved the new work, erupting into an uncharacteristic ovation. It is easy to understand their enthusiasm. This is music of immediate, poignant appeal that verges on but never descends to the sentimental. The agitated opening string theme, which bears a passing resemblance to the Dies Irae chant, introduces much of the material that will recur later in the symphony.

Saint-Saëns' adaptation of thematic transformation unifies the symphony. The familiar scherzo, opening Part II, exudes a rough masculine vigor that serves as an auditory appetizer for the no-holds-barred thrills of Saint-Saëns' finale. The French critic Augé de Lassus described the climax "like Napoleon hurling in the Imperial Guard at Waterloo." As in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Brahms' First, victory prevails after a lengthy struggle. Such a progression, while familiar in Germany and Austria, was new to France. Saint-Saëns was an innovator in that respect as well.

A French debut for program notes

Seven months after the English premiere, Jules Garcin led the Conservatoire Orchestra in a performance of the Third Symphony in Paris, introducing the work to French audiences. The London program notes were translated for that performance, marking the first time that notes were provided to the audience in a French concert hall.

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, triangle, bass drum, organ, piano and strings.

ORIGINS OF A UNIQUE NAME

The surname Saint-Saëns is surely one of the most problematic in all music. The family name dates to pre-medieval times, probably the sixth century AD, and is a contraction and corruption of Sanctus Sidonius—Latin for St. Sidonius.

A native of Lyon, Apollinaris Sidonius (full name Caius Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius) lived from 430 to ca. 489 AD. After serving as Senator and Roman Prefect in the Imperial Capital, he retired to Gaul. Eventually, he became a respected bishop in Clermont and sustained a reputation as a classical scholar, orator and poet. Apollinaris Sidonius remains an important example of late Roman Christianized classical culture. His unsuccessful leadership of the French against the invading Goths led to his subsequent canonization by the Catholic Church.

In the name's modern guise, all three S's are pronounced, and the "Saint" takes the French pronunciation, with the "t" silent and the compound vowel more like "can't" than "ain't." A rough approximation is "Sanh-Sahnz." Fortunately, Saint-Saëns' music is much easier to listen to than his name is to spell or pronounce.