

## PROGRAM NOTES

If music's Classical period is considered to represent the birth of the symphony, the Romantic era could well be characterized as its rebellious adolescence. 19<sup>th</sup>-century composers were influenced greatly by legendary symphonists like Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, but also turned to other art forms for inspiration. Many strove to include literary references to their works, a trend which inspired some, and incensed others: after all, does a piece of instrumental music need to have a program, or narrative, in order to be enjoyed, appreciated, or understood? For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed as if the music world was bitterly divided between supporters of traditional, or "absolute," music and those who favored the storytelling of "programmatic" music. The three pieces presented in today's concert showcase three different approaches to symphonic writing during this exciting era.

### *Roman Carnival Overture*, Op. 9 by Hector Berlioz (1803-1865)

When Berlioz's masterful *Symphonie Fantastique* was composed in 1830, it made history as being what historians consider to be the first truly programmatic symphony. His many symphonic works to follow, mostly concert overtures, further demonstrate the composer's gift for pictorial music, and in turn, paved the way for the symphonic tone poems of Liszt and even the music dramas of Wagner. Storytelling requires a cast of characters, and Berlioz deftly utilized the instruments of the traditional orchestra to enhance the musical imagery in his compositions and to further the programmatic associations of his music. His lasting contribution to music is not only his compositional style, but also a famous treatise on orchestration, in which techniques are outlined for exploiting orchestral colors for programmatic purposes.

The *Roman Carnival Overture* was written in 1843, just as this remarkable treatise was being published. In many ways, the work serves as a companion to the book such that Berlioz's recommendations are put to use. For instance, he advocates emphasis on lesser-used instruments, like the viola and English horn, each of which are featured prominently in the overture. After a twice-interrupted opening, the tempo slows from a brisk allegro to a soaring andante, and the English horn states the main theme. Viola melodies are frequently accompanied by violins, cellos, flutes, clarinets, and horns – quite the opposite of how traditional orchestration treats these instruments. Clear melodies, dance-like rhythms, and lush sonorities are evident throughout and fans of Berlioz's opera *Benvenuto Cellini* will also recognize the two main themes taken from the grand chorus and the carnival scene. All in all, the work is an excellent example of 19<sup>th</sup> century programmatic ideals.

### *Concerto in E Minor for Cello and Orchestra*, Op. 85 by Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

In contrast to the programmatic style of Berlioz is the traditional compositional style of England's Edward Elgar. The soloist begins the four-movement Concerto with a simple theme that is both heroic and melancholy. As it is passed to the violas and through the cellos before returning to the soloist, the melody takes many subtle turns. An additional

melody is introduced by the clarinet and bassoon and again passed back to the soloist. The manner in which these themes are passed through the instruments demonstrates an elegant, yet traditional relationship between the soloist and the orchestra. Providing contrast to the brooding first movement, the second movement is a light and lively scherzo that gives way to the Schumann-esque *Adagio*. After a brief cadenza, the fourth movement completes the piece with march-like regularity and recurring themes, reminiscent of the emotional displays of the previous movements.

Although Edward Elgar's compositions mark the first major symphonic works by an English composer, the premiere of his Cello Concerto in 1919 was practically a disaster – the orchestra was under rehearsed and the audience was unresponsive to the new work. Compounding the tragedy, a week after the premiere of the piece, Elgar's beloved wife Alice became very ill and died five months later. Scholars point to this event as essentially ending Elgar's career, as he seemed unable to finish commissions projects after her death. In the words of Michael Steinberg, in many ways, this Cello Concerto became a type of "farewell" for both Elgar's wife and career, and also to the end of Romantic music as we know it.

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 97, "The Rhenish" by Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

When it came to programmatic music, Schumann's own advice on the subject was "We must not show our heart to the world. A general impression of a work of art is better. At least no preposterous comparisons can be made," and his protégé, Brahms, was an absolutist as well. Yet Schumann's interests in vocal music and poetry were practically impossible to separate from his instrumental works. Unlike the previous two works, each representing a different Romantic ideal, Schumann's Third Symphony demonstrates an unusual mix between the absolutism of traditional symphonic composers and the colorful alliterations of the programmatic ones. This symphony is in fact based on a program, according to the diaries of his wife, Clara, who wrote that their life together in Düsseldorf was filled with a rich folk life that her husband wanted to capture in the score.

Most notable is that the Third Symphony contains five movements, rather than the typical four-movement format. In this way, Schumann bridges the ever-increasing gap between the traditional symphony and the newly-indoctrinated tone poem by flanking colorful, descriptive middle movements around authentic symphonic music. The outer two movements are significantly traditional in form, mood, and orchestration, whereas the middle three movements form a set of descriptive tone poems meant to depict life on the Rhine. The first movement is a standard sonata allegro form with clearly marked themes and a strong rhythmic component, pronounced by the alternation of duple and triple patterns. In contrast to the regularity of that style are the middle movements. According to his wife Clara, the second movement, a hybrid between a waltz and a scherzo, was meant to recreate a morning on the Rhine. Schumann's brilliant gift for German Lieder, or songs, is demonstrated in the all-too-brief middle movement, full of elegance, grace, and simplicity, in many ways reminiscent of his countless song cycles. The fourth

movement, originally titled “In the Manner of an Accompaniment to a Solemn Ceremony,” and was inspired by the installment ceremony of Archbishop von Geissel as Cardinal. Creating a bookend effect, the final movement resumes the “typical” symphonic style, with an emphasis on recurring intervals from the first movement and a return of various themes used throughout.

It is through his treatment of these movements that presents Schumann’s marriage of the “absolutists” to the “programists.” It further displays his talent for combining various styles within his abundant writing. Sadly, this work also marks an end for Schumann: it was written in 1850 during the last of the composer’s many prolific outbursts – he had suffered from manic-depression his entire life and would die in an asylum only a few years later. And just as Elgar’s magnificent Cello Concerto serves as a farewell to an era, so the Rhenish symphony bids adieu to the brilliance of Schumann’s writing.

Program Notes by Julie Hobbs, D.Mus.