

## Masterworks 5 – May 21 & 22, 2018

### Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C major, BWV 1066

Johann Sebastian Bach  
1685-1750

Much of Bach's orchestral music has been lost, but what remains represents gems of creativity. The six Brandenburg Concerti, each one composed for a different set of instruments and combination of soloists, forged an entirely new direction for the Italian concerto grosso. Like the Brandenburg Concerti, each of the four orchestral Suites features a different combination of instruments. Although they form a standard group in modern recordings, they were not originally conceived or composed at the same time. Because these works are technically sets of dances, they have carried the misnomer "Suite" in modern programs and recordings. Bach called them "Ouvertüren," a clear indication of their debt to the French style.

All of the orchestral suites open with a slow, stately introduction followed by a fugal allegro. They owe their origin indirectly to the French *ouverture*, developed by Jean Baptiste Lully as an instrumental prelude to the extravagant operas and ballets performed at the French court of Louis XIV. Bach, as well as many other European composers of the period, combined the stately French *ouvertures* with a set of dances. Bach put his own stamp on the *ouverture*, however, by combining the principles of the Baroque dance suite with the use of soloists or solo ensembles as in the concerto.

In 1723, after a series of respectable, but not important, court positions, Bach was appointed as the *Cantor figuralis* of the Church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, a position he was to hold until his death. In addition to his responsibility for the entire musical program at St. Thomas where he produced weekly cantatas for the liturgical year, rehearsed the musicians, trained the boy choristers and taught Latin, Bach was also expected to put together the weekly concert of secular vocal and instrumental music for the Leipzig *Collegium Musicum*, a German university extra-curricular institution for which students and local musicians got together to perform at public gatherings. At least he got credit for this extra work since during his tenure in the post the institution was called the "*Bachisches Collegium*."

Bach's *Collegium* held its concerts in Zimmermann's Coffee House, a high-class bourgeois establishment spacious enough to accommodate a large ensemble. Apparently, Zimmermann did not charge for these concerts, assuming that enough money was coming in from refreshments. While Bach had probably already composed Suite No.1 while he was at his previous job as Princely *Kapellmeister* at the court of Cöthen (1717-23), the surviving performance material dates from about 1725, the Leipzig period. The four suites were certainly performed at the *Collegium* gatherings.

The Suite No. 1 is scored for two oboes, bassoon, strings and basso continuo. It opens with a stately and imposing introduction, which leads to a lively fugue before returning to the grand opening measures, a structural device dating back to Lully. Like the other Orchestral Suites, No. 1 also contains a number of dances not found in the standard Baroque lineup, including: the *Forlane*, a wild Venetian folk dance, the *Bourrée* and *Passepied*. Here, as in the other three suites, Bach reverts to a somewhat old-fashioned tradition of presenting certain dances in pairs, in this case, four of the dances, the *Gavotte*, *Menuet*, *Bourrée* and *Passepied*.

## *Siegfried Idyll*

Richard Wagner  
1813-1883

Composed as a “symphonic birthday gift” to his wife Cosima and their newborn son Siegfried, the *Siegfried Idyll* was premiered on the morning of December 25, 1870, Cosima's birthday. Wagner arranged the surprise performance on the staircase of their home in Switzerland, with the composer conducting the 13-member orchestra from the top of the stairs. Consequently, the *Idyll* acquired in Wagner's household the title *Treppenmusik* (staircase music).

The *Idyll* shows a side of Wagner rarely seen in his music dramas. Absent is the wild passion of *Tristan und Isolde* or the bombastic heroics of *The Ring*; rather, the *Idyll* is a gentle song of contentment and gratitude for the domestic bliss the composer found with his second wife. It is certainly a most personal and intimate expression of the composer's feelings while still calling to mind his heroic alter ego.

The *Siegfried Idyll* is built around a group of themes from various sources, including: the third act of the opera *Siegfried*, where Brünnhilde pledges her love to the hero; the Forest Bird's song from *Siegfried*; and a German lullaby "*Schlaf, Kindlein, schlaf.*" (Sleep, Child, Sleep).\* According to Wagner, the main theme from Brünnhilde's declaration of love, had originally been part of an unfinished string quartet from six years earlier, which he had promised to Cosima when the two had first become lovers. Known now as the "Starnberg theme," because Wagner composed it in a rented villa on Lake Starnberg, it clearly had a multifaceted musical and extra-musical significance for both of them. Richard and Cosima conjured a joint fantasy as Siegfried and Brünnhilde.

The themes are woven together in a loosely structured sonata form, the main theme being the "Starnberg theme" that begins and develops throughout the work. Recognizable to even the most casual operagoer is the theme of the Forest Bird, who leads Siegfried to Brünnhilde's rock, protected by a ring of magic fire. Here, Wagner combines it with one of Siegfried's horn motives, traditionally referred to in the canon of leitmotifs as "Love's resolution" and best recognized from its appearance in the orchestral interlude, "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" from *Götterdämmerung*. The *Idyll* ends with a freely structured recapitulation of all the themes, very gradually slowing down and fading to a whisper.

Although the *Siegfried Idyll* was intended strictly as a private gift, Wagner was forced to publish it in 1878 when he fell on hard times financially.

\* While Wagner had already completed the score of *Siegfried* earlier in 1870, it was actually premiered six years after the *Idyll*.

## **Symphony No. 2 in A minor, Op. 55**

Camille Saint-Saëns  
1835-1921

Composer, organist and pianist Camille Saint-Saëns was a man of wide culture, well versed in literature, the arts and scientific developments. He was precocious and gifted in everything he undertook. As a child prodigy, he wrote his first piano compositions at age three and at age ten made his formal debut at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, playing Mozart and Beethoven piano concertos. In his youth he was considered an innovator, but by the time he reached maturity he had become a pillar of the establishment, trying to maintain the classical musical

tradition in France and expressing open disdain for the new trends in music, including the “*malaise*” of Wagnerism. His visceral dislike of Debussy made endless headlines in the tabloid press. As a performer – he premiered his five piano concertos – his technique was elegant, effortless and graceful. But neither his compositions nor his pianism were ever pinnacles of passion or emotion. Berlioz noted that Saint-Saëns “...knows everything but lacks inexperience.”

Saint-Saëns was a consummate craftsman and compulsive worker. “I produce music the way an apple tree produces apples,” he commented. He was a proponent of “art for art's sake” but his views on expression and passion in art conflicted with the prevailing literary and emotive Romantic ideas. His large and diverse output includes chamber works for most orchestral instruments. Although his music was often perceived as *passé*, he was the first composer to write an original film score in 1908 for *L'assassinat du Duc de Guise* (The Assassination of the Duke of Guise).

In his student days, Saint-Saëns composed six symphonies, only one of which, Symphony No. 1, Op. 2, was published in his lifetime. Symphony No. 2, composed in 1859 when the composer was 24, recalls the musical ambiance of the German Romantics (The French were never great contributors to the symphonic literature.) Listeners will hear echoes of Beethoven, Schumann and Mendelssohn. Incidentally, The Third “Organ” Symphony belongs to an entirely different category, composed a quarter century later when the composer was at the height of his powers.

On the other hand, the work has some truly original elements. The first movement is built around two motives, one melodic, the other rhythmic. The symphony opens by introducing a arpeggio comprising a descending thirteenth that combines with a dotted rhythmic motive into a full-fledged fugue. The fugue is interrupted by an obligatory second theme, which, however, retains the dotted rhythm. All this within a context of sonata-allegro form.

The academic nature of the first movement completely vanishes in the brief *Adagio*, built on a halting melody with distinctly French folksong characteristics.

In the Scherzo, Saint-Saëns creates a few new takes on the standard scherzo/trio format, especially with irregular phrase length. He still sticks with dotted rhythms

The exuberant rondo/sonata finale is a tarantella – although not labeled as such – in a driving 6/8. Toward the end, the composer brings back the fugue subject from the first movement. The even faster coda is replete with Haydn-like surprises, a wild ride that brakes suddenly while Saint-Saëns brings back the French folksong.

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