

Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra
ADM Concert, February 24, 2018

PROGRAM NOTES
By Geoffrey Decker

Overture to Ruy Blas, Op. 95, by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

After being asked to compose an overture and song for a March 1839 production of Victor Hugo's play *Ruy Blas*, Felix Mendelssohn declared the play "detestable." Having come from a family well-cultured in literature, art and philosophy, the high body count, murder, and intrigue in Hugo's play may not have been the only things leading to the composer's declaration. Mendelssohn overcame his feelings, though, when he learned that the production was a fund raiser for the Leipzig Theater Pension Fund.

At first, Mendelssohn agreed only to write the song until he heard it suggested that he couldn't produce an overture in the short time available. But, being Mendelssohn, he was challenged to prove his detractors wrong and he wrote the overture in just three days!

What he produced seems to have little to do with the grim subject of Hugo's play. Although in C minor, the carefree energy of much of the overture sounds more like the magical moments of his own *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream* of 13 years earlier than of seventeenth-century Spanish court intrigue and murder.

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

Completely disillusioned by the suffering and destruction of the First World War, and appalled by the horrible loss of life, Sir Edward Elgar withdrew from almost all composing during the first four years of the war. A child of Victorian England, he knew that life in the world – and especially in the British Empire – would be very different afterwards. All of this affected him very deeply as it did most of the rest of the world.

Finally, though, Elgar began pouring out his feelings beginning in August 1918 and, over the course of the next 12 months, he composed four major works, each of which ranks among his finest ever. The end of the war was, at that time, nowhere near and Elgar returned to composing, producing three chamber works, each very concise and more subdued than anything he had composed before, and each pushing his musical voice into new territory. The last of the four, composed in 1919, is his Cello Concerto, a work that many believe to be his lament to a lost world.

The work premiered in London on October 19, 1919, with soloist Felix Salmond and the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by the composer himself.

Valse Triste, Op. 44, No. 1, by Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Although a minor work in comparison to his Violin Concerto, tone poems, and symphonies, Finnish composer Jean Sibelius is perhaps best known for his Valse Triste, Op. 44. The beautiful but haunting orchestral work, in waltz form, is most often played as a concert work – as it is this evening – but was one of six works comprising the incidental music Sibelius composed for his brother-in-law Arvid Järnefelt's 1903 play *Kuolema* (*Death*).

The waltz was written during a very difficult time in Sibelius' life. His alcohol abuse had reached a peak and the sounds coming from his piano as he composed the waltz – for a play named *Death* – led his innermost circle and family to fear he was dancing a real waltz of death himself. So fearful was he that his brother Christian wrote him in November 1903, "Janne (*sic*), you must give up alcohol! You must!"

Having finished it and the public having heard it as part of the incidental music, Sibelius revised the waltz in 1904 and the stand-alone work was first performed in Helsinki on April 25, 1904. The composition was received so well and enthusiastically that it has become one of Sibelius' most popular works.

Death and Transfiguration, Op. 24, by Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Having grown up in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the late nineteenth century, a time in which love and death were the most captivating of peoples' imaginations, it is hardly surprising that German composer Richard Strauss' first major orchestral work, *Don Juan*, Op. 20, involves both. Begun late in the summer of 1888, his second, *Tod und Verklärung* (Death and Transfiguration), Op. 24, also involves both subjects. But this time, the theme is a dying man recalling his former loves.

For the form and architecture of these first two major works, Strauss took his cue from Franz Liszt, the composer who invented what became known as the symphonic – or tone – poem. Wikipedia defines the musical form as, "a single continuous movement, which illustrates or evokes the content of a poem, short story, novel, painting, landscape, or other (non-musical) source." Strauss took the form much further than Liszt's original conception, though.

But, even though the score is subtitled *Tondichtung* (tone poem), it is interesting that Strauss asked his friend, Alexander Ritter, to write its "poem" – or program – *after* the work's completion. Ritter's program is over-the-top, though, and we get a better understanding from one of Strauss' letters in which he writes that he had in mind the aforementioned program for the work all the while composing it; he just had not put the words on paper.

Written for large orchestra, the work musically describes, in order, as Strauss wrote, "... [a] sick man lies in bed asleep, breathing heavily and irregularly; agreeable dreams charm a smile onto his features in spite of his suffering; his sleep becomes lighter; he wakes; once again he is racked by terrible pain, his limbs shake with fever – as the attack draws to a close and the pain subsides he reflects on his past life, his childhood passes before him, his youth with its striving, its passions, and then, while pain resumes, the fruit of his path appears to him, the idea, the Ideal which he has tried to realize, to represent in his art, but which he has been unable to perfect, because it was not for any human being to perfect it. The hour of death approaches, the soul leaves the body, in order to find perfected in the most glorious form in the eternal cosmos that which he could not fulfill here on earth." You will hear the man's faint heartbeat in the work's beginning in the very quietly played timpani beats. Later, when the work reaches its climax, ending in a series of beats on the gong, the man has achieved death and the transfiguration begins.

Dedicated to his friend, Friedrich Rosch, Strauss himself conducted the premiere of *Death and Transfiguration*, Op. 24, in Eisenach – the birthplace of both Lutheran Protestantism and composer Johann Sebastian Bach – on June 21, 1890.

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