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## PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey D. Decker

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### **Vorspiel und Liebestod from the opera *Tristan und Isolde*, by Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**

As they took their seats in the Royal Court Theater in Munich on June 10, 1865, the audience attending the première of Richard Wagner's latest work, *Tristan und Isolde*, expected a good drama set to exciting music as Wagner did earlier with his operas *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Little did they know that they were about to hear music made up of such imaginative harmonic structure and torsion that it would change the direction of all music to come.

Within the first few bars of the four-hour opera's *Vorspiel*, or Prelude, anyone with – and many without – discerning ears knew that something very different lay before them. In describing the opera's music, Hans Redlich, the German musicologist, wrote, "The orchestral Prelude alone, in which the implicit tonality of A minor is never so much as touched upon, is to all intents and purposes the first piece of practical atonalism, conceived half a century before Schoenberg and Busoni had drafted their first tentative experiments in the direction of a music of undefined tonality."

For those who may not understand the concept of tonality, think of the music of Haydn or Mozart and how, for the most part, movements of their music are centered on a distinct note of the musical scale and how their harmony is built traditionally and squarely around that note. For example, take Mozart's Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K. 543. It is said to be "in E-flat Major," which means that all the harmony is built upon the note E-flat and notes related to it based on traditional intervals. Of course, Mozart transitions in a traditional manner away from E-flat but always returns to it before finishing what he has to say. In contrast, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* begins in what on paper looks like A minor but really is not. And, before the opera ends four hours later, he has transitioned forwards, backwards, upside down, you name it, all the time building anticipation in the listener's mind and ear. It only heightens the level of excitement and involvement in the action.

Even mentioned in Dante's *Inferno*, early troubadours sang of the Tristan legend and Gottfried von Strassburg set down his own version of the romance in the 12th century. Wagner altered the original so that, instead of the story being about a developing love between Tristan and Isolde, they are in love from nearly the beginning. And it is the trouble caused by their love – Isolde is betrothed to Tristan's employer, King Mark of Cornwall – that leads to Tristan's fatal injury. After dying in her arms, the opera ends with Isolde's *Liebestod*, or Love-death as Wagner called it when preparing an 1862 concert performance without voices of just the opera's beginning and very ending to last about 20 minutes, which is what we hear tonight.

## **Concerto for Double Bass and Orchestra No. 2 in D Major, Krebs 172, by Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739 - 1799)**

Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739 - 1799) was born August Carl Ditters in Vienna, to a middle-class family whose primary breadwinner was the tailor for several regiments in the Austrian Army. Through the father's hard work and ingenuity, this tailor's son was provided an excellent education. Young August Carl attended Jesuit school and took private lessons in music, violin, religion, and French, things quite unusual for a middle-class child in mid-18th-century Vienna.

Ditters later held several posts in which he gained enough recognition that Austrian Empress Maria Theresa's conductor of her court theater hired him as violinist for the court orchestra. In 1762, he became the conductor of that orchestra and soon became acquainted with Christoph Willibald Gluck, a composer who had recently gained fame with his opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*. The two traveled to Italy together, where Ditters learned about contemporary Italian music styles, some of which he eventually adopted for his style of composition. After meeting the famed composer Joseph Haydn, who soon became his best friend, Ditters began associating with the best and most famous musicians in Vienna. Haydn and he, both playing violin, soon joined Mozart on viola and Ditters' student Johann Vanhal on cello, playing string quartets by both Haydn and Mozart!

In 1765, the Prince-Bishop of Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) hired Ditters, who in 1771 became Kapellmeister (court composer) at the somewhat isolated Château Jánký vrch (known then as Schloß, or Castle, Johannesberg) in Javorník, now part of the Czech Republic. The 24 years he spent there were his most productive, and it was the Prince-Bishop who offered Ditters a job requiring a noble title in order to entice him to stay in his post in such a remote area so far from the music scene in Vienna. With his new title as a Knight of the Golden Spur, August Carl Ditters became known as Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf.

Most historians believe Dittersdorf composed his two double-bass concertos with the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Viennese school of virtuoso double-bass playing in mind. His Concerto for Double Bass and Orchestra No. 2 was originally written in E Major. To better accommodate the modern bass, though, the version most often performed is in D Major as it is tonight. And, because it was composed for a three-stringed bass of the era, and today's double bass has four strings, Mr. Hanna will change his instrument's string tuning from the usual E-A-G-D to Viennese tuning of A-F#-D-A, known as "scordatura tuning."

As in most concertos of the Classical period, the Dittersdorf Double Bass Concerto No. 2 has three movements with traditional speed designations: The first is an *Allegro moderato*, or moderately fast, the second is an *Adagio*, or slow, and the third is an *Allegro*, or fast.

## **Symphony No. 2 in D-flat Major, Op. 30 ("Romantic"), by Howard Hanson (1896-1981)**

American composer Howard Hanson directed and taught for 40 years at what he built into the premier music school in the United States, the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, New York. Born in Wahoo, Nebraska, and earning his doctorate at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, Hanson won the first *Prix de Rome* awarded by the American

Academy in 1921 and, after conducting his own Symphony No. 1 in Rochester in 1924, came to the attention of George Eastman, inventor of roll film and the Kodak camera, who chose Hanson to lead his newly-endowed school of music.

When Serge Koussevitzky, the beloved Russian-born music director of the Boston Symphony between 1924 and 1949, asked Hanson to write a new work in celebration of the orchestra's 50th anniversary, the composer answered the commission with his Symphony No. 2, premièred with Koussevitzky on the podium in Boston's Symphony Hall on November 28, 1930. It soon became Hanson's best-known work, one he recorded himself for the Mercury label conducting the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra in April 1958. The symphony also gained distinction by being one of the few American works conducted by Arturo Toscanini while music director of the New York Philharmonic.

Appropriately subtitled "The Romantic," it is not in the composer's usual harmonic style. Hanson often said that he considered himself a composer of "the major third" or "the perfect fifth." but Symphony No. 2 is a work of "the perfect fourth." It is in three movements and scored for a full orchestra of piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets in B-flat, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns in F, three trumpets in C, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbals, harp, and strings.

Of the work, Hanson said, "[I] produced a popular concert work which is the epitome of the twentieth-century symphony that could have been written by an American." Famous for his verbal and written missiles, composer and music critic of *The New York Times*, Virgil Thomson, rather derisively wrote of Hanson's music in general stating, "I have never yet found in any work of his a single phrase or turn of harmony that did not sound familiar." About the Second Symphony, he wrote, "It is as standardized in expression as it is eclectic in style. Not a surprise from beginning to end, nor any adventure." Could it be that Thomson was a bit jealous of Hanson's talent and popularity?

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