
PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey D. Decker

***Mazeppa*, S. 100, by Franz Liszt (1811–1886)**

Little more is known of the early life of Ukrainian leader, and later Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, Ivan Mazepa (1639-1709; also spelled Mazeppa) than the legend of how he became enamored with the wife of a Polish count and, after getting caught *in flagrante delicto*, was strapped naked to a horse and set off on a long and wild ride. The horse is said to have carried him all the way to Ukraine where the Cossacks rescued him from certain over-exposure. And, for one reason or another, they anointed him their military leader, or *Hetman*.

The fourth of Franz Liszt's 12 incredibly difficult *Transcendental Etudes* for piano is subtitled *Mazeppa* and depicts the wild ride of poor Mazepa. Published in 1837, the piano *Mazeppa* precedes the work we hear tonight by more than 17 years and is believed to have been inspired by Victor Hugo's poem of the same name and published in 1829 as part of a collection titled *Les Orientales*. Liszt, who actually invented the musical genre of the symphonic poem, composed what is his Sixth Symphonic Poem, subtitled *Mazeppa*, in Weimar between 1851 and 1854.

Although the two works share a main theme, they are vastly different. From the very beginning of the orchestral *Mazeppa*, where we hear a firm slap on the butt of the horse setting it off on its wild ride, we are taken along on the wild ride with the victim. As aptly described in the notes on the back of the LP of Herbert von Karajan's 1961 recording of the work (Deutsche Grammophon 138 692), "Mazeppa is tied to a horse by his enemies, and the horse is driven off across the Steppes. Vultures watch their apparently certain prey. As the steed finally falls exhausted, Mazeppa is rescued by his own people, as he had dreamed would be the case." It goes on to say that "Liszt depicted this story in music of great realism and illustrative power." It is the truth!

With Liszt himself conducting, the work premiered at the Court Theatre in Weimar on April 16, 1854.

Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61, by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven composed his *Violin Concerto* in 1806 during the period that saw the creation of his Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, his "Razumovsky" string quartets, his Fourth Piano Concerto, his piano sonata known as the "Appassionata," and others of his best-known works. Unlike anything that came before, Beethoven recreated the genre of the violin concerto by making it something more than just a chance for a violinist to display technical fireworks.

Commissioned by the young violinist Franz Clement, music director and concertmaster of the Theater an der Wien, the usually stubborn Beethoven worked closely with Clement to make revisions perfecting the work. Surprisingly, Beethoven composed no cadenzas for it. A cadenza

is an unaccompanied section near the end of a movement where a soloist can show off technical skills intertwining themes from the movement and pyrotechnics. It's probable that Clement improvised the cadenzas – one near the end of each movement in Beethoven's concerto – at the premiere on December 23, 1806 at the Theater an der Wien and conducted by Beethoven himself. It is worth noting that violinist Fritz Kreisler composed a cadenza for the concerto that is most often performed today.

Sadly, the performance was a failure due to Beethoven's only having completed the work two days before. Clement was basically sight-reading most of it, and the work is fiendishly difficult. It took almost 30 years for the concerto to receive a performance worthy of it. The 12-year-old German virtuoso Joseph Joachim put everything he had into studying and memorizing the work and writing his own cadenzas for his debut with the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 1844. Of that performance, one reviewer wrote, “[Joachim] is perhaps the first violin player, not only of his age, but of his siècle [era]. He performed Beethoven's solitary concerto, which we have heard all the great performers of the last twenty years attempt, and invariably fail in . . . its performance was an eloquent vindication of the master-spirit who imagined it.”

Scored for accompanying orchestra of one flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* is unlike any of his five concertos for piano. Where they feature dense chords and scalar fireworks, the violin solo is lyrical and graceful. Beethoven believed Clement's style of playing exemplified “an extremely delightful tenderness and purity,” qualities clearly abundant in the concerto.

Although the concerto is in the traditional three movements, its first, an *Allegro ma non troppo* (fast, but not too much so), opens unconventionally with five repeated timpani notes – almost like a heartbeat – and soon develops into one of the sweetest but noblest melodies Beethoven ever wrote, one with full orchestra lasting nearly three minutes before the soloist enters.

The second movement, a *Larghetto* (fairly slow), is one in which the solo violin floats gently over the orchestra and often plays in the high register with very little accompaniment, focusing squarely on the soloist. This movement moves seamlessly into the third, a rondo marked *Allegro* (fast). In a rondo, the opening theme is veered away from in several contrasting sections, changing keys and mood but, nearing the rondo's conclusion, it returns to the opening theme to close the movement and thus the concerto.

It should be noted that Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* holds a very special place in the violinist's repertoire. It's so highly revered that both Brahms and Tchaikovsky chose the same key of D Major for their single concertos for violin. Great recordings of the work abound, but several favorites are those of Itzhak Perlman with the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini on Warner (EMI), Anne-Sophie Mutter with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan on Deutsche Grammophon, and Jascha Heifetz with the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch on RCA.

Czech Suite in D Major, Op. 39, by Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

A bit of misrepresentation was offered up by Czech composer Antonín Dvořák when he gave his suite of five movements known as the *Czech Suite* in D Major to a publishing house other than Simrock. After his introduction to Simrock by Johannes Brahms, they had first dibs on everything new that Dvořák would compose and in which they were interested.

Simrock had published Brahms' first set of *Hungarian Dances*, and so successful were they that Herr Simrock himself pestered Brahms incessantly for another set. In desperation – and to appease Simrock – Brahms suggested that Simrock ask the young Dvořák for a set of dances, the first set of which were published in 1878 as the *Slavonic Dances*, Op. 42.

Now under contract to Simrock for anything newly composed, Dvořák gave his *Czech Suite* the opus number of 39 so that he could offer them to Simrock's rival, Schlesinger, in Berlin, even though they were composed *after* the op. 42 set of *Slavonic Dances*!

The *Czech Suite* comprises five movements of varying and mostly lively speeds. The first opens with the bassoon accompanied by cello and designated a *Preludium-Pastorale* marked *Allegro moderato* (moderately fast) with a slower middle section marked *quasi Andante* (somewhat slow). The second features the strings and is a *Polka*, marked *allegretto grazioso* (graciously fast and lively). The third is designated a *Sousedská-Minuetto*. The *Sousedská* is a Czech folk-dance introduced by the clarinets and bassoons in a style like one might hear in a local Czech folk ensemble. The fourth, a *Romanza*, is rather slow and features flute and English horn. Finally, the fifth movement is named *Furiant*, another lively Czech folk-dance. (Note that Dvořák also designated the third movement of his *6th Symphony* a furiant.)

Published in 1881, the *Czech Suite* was premiered by the Provisional Theatre Orchestra conducted by Adolf Cech in Prague on May 16, 1879. The work is scored for two flutes, two oboes, one English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.