

Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra
Program Notes for Concert February 27, 2016

by Geoffrey Decker

Overture to *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat)
by Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825-1899)

Nothing screams "Vienna!" like Johann Strauss, Jr.'s, operetta *Die Fledermaus*. Memorable tunes, one following another, have made it an audience favorite since its première at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on April 5, 1874. Today the work is popular around New Year's Eve when waves of champagne make their way into glasses all over the world. There is a basis for the seasonal popularity of the operetta, though. One of its sources is the French play *Le Réveillon*, the plot of which involves the traditional dinner and festivities celebrated in French-speaking countries on both Christmas and New Year's Eve. The play, by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, the librettists of Bizet's opera *Carmen*(!), was translated to German and eventually ended up in Strauss' hands where he molded it into the sparkling stage work it is.

Strauss' music successfully transports the comedy from Paris to Vienna, a belief enthusiastically endorsed by the Earl of Harewood. As editor of *The New Kobbé's Opera Book*, he writes, "The work as a whole – plot as well as score – is a masterpiece, the finest product of the Viennese operetta school, and a cornucopia of fresh, witty, pointed, memorable melody."

The operetta's overture – performed tonight – has become a part of the standard orchestral repertoire. In his essay about the entire operetta, the Earl of Harewood writes, "The overture, a potpourri, is one of the most popular ever written." Indeed, it is both a potpourri, or collection, of melodies from the operetta itself and very popular. If you have never seen *Die Fledermaus*, do so. It is guaranteed that you will love it. You will find it very difficult not to either jump up from your seat and start dancing or hum or whistle a melody, or perhaps even do both!

As an aside, the waltzes, polkas of various types, and operettas of Johann Strauss, Jr., who, by the way, was THE musical sweetheart of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's capital city, were not only all the rage at the dance halls and theaters but, surprisingly, were also the envy of his good friend and fellow citizen of Vienna, the inimitable and curmudgeonly Johannes Brahms! You can even see the two of them together in the wonderful 1894

photograph (Strauss on the left) shown below.

[Insert photograph about here.]

Recommended Recordings: There are quite a few recordings of the complete *Die Fledermaus* and of its overture alone, but several of each stand out. Two favorites of the operetta were both recorded by Decca, and both feature the Vienna Philharmonic truly in their element. The first is a monophonic recording from September 1950 with conductor Clemens Krauss, and the second is a stereo recording from June 1960 with conductor Herbert von Karajan. A more recent recording that is highly recommendable is that with conductor Carlos Kleiber and the Bavarian State Orchestra recorded by Deutsche Grammophon in Munich in October 1975. Carlos Kleiber himself claimed that his own favorite – and the one that he studied the most – was the 1950 recording with Clemens Krauss.

As for recordings of the overture by itself, none can displace the live recording made during the 1987 New Year's Day Concert in Vienna with, of course, the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan. It's truly wonderful and, although the Viennese oboe timbre during the solo might not be to everyone's taste, the piece is beautifully and idiomatically played. In fact, the entire album is magical and cannot be more enthusiastically recommended.

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47 by Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Finnish composer Jean Sibelius is probably best known for his patriotic hymn, *Finlandia*, but he did in fact produce many memorable compositions during his very long life. His popularity has waned since the 1950s, though, when at some point American audiences voted his music even more favored than that of Ludwig van Beethoven! Sibelius composed his Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47, in 1903. Although now very popular with violinists and audiences alike, the work suffered a disastrous premiere in Helsinki. Desperate, Sibelius completely revised the work for a "real" premiere with the dedicatee, the noted German violinist Willy Burmester (1869-1933).

Famed German composer and conductor Richard Strauss (1864-1949) led the Berlin Court Orchestra in the so-called "real," or "second," premiere of the revised work on October 19, 1905. Because his schedule did not allow him time to premiere the work, Burmester was replaced by the orchestra's concertmaster, the Czech violinist Karel Halíř (1859-1909). Offended, Burmester promised to never play the concerto, and so Sibelius re-dedicated

it to the Hungarian *wunderkind* Ferenc von Vecsey (1893-1935). Although only 12 years old at the time(!), von Vecsey went on to champion the work for the remainder of his life.

At first quiet but dark, cold, and brooding, the concerto's opening gives way to a soaring and gloriously dark romantic melody for the violin with a powerful and often-punctuating orchestral accompaniment. The first movement, marked *Allegro moderato* (moderately fast), is most noted for its extended cadenza for the solo violin. Extended is right! It makes up the entire and most significant section of what musicians know as the development section of the traditional sonata form! (Sonata form is a sort of map by which composers from Mozart's time often designed their concerto and symphony first movements.)

A beautiful wind choir opens the second movement, marked *Adagio di molto* (with much slowness). The strings, woodwinds, and horns stay very much in the background. Their dark and rather quiet accompaniment maintains focus on the emotionally powerful solo violinist. Although there are several rather climactic moments in which the trumpets and trombones make their entrance, the movement ends in quiet contemplation.

The third movement, marked *Allegro, ma non tanto* (fast, but not too much), sort of snarls and growls its way at an almost jubilant pace to the concerto's ending. Snarling and growling is not only this writer's thoughts on the movement. Indeed, British musicologist Sir Donald Tovey (1875-1940) labeled the movement a "polonaise for polar bears." He was not dissing the work, because he also wrote, "I have not met a more original, a more masterly, and a more exhilarating work than the Sibelius violin concerto." On a side note, it is in the very high violin notes near this movement's conclusion where Heifetz's recording mentioned below really stands out among others.

Being fairly conventional in his orchestration, Sibelius scored the work for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings. Except for the trombones, it is the same orchestra used by Brahms for his Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77.

Recommended Recordings: Great recordings of Sibelius' Violin Concerto are abundant, but two that stand out above all others are those recorded by Jascha Heifetz, the first accompanied by Sir Thomas Beecham conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra recorded by HMV in November 1935, and the second with Walter Hendl conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded by RCA for their Living Stereo series in January 1959. A personal favorite is with Christian Ferras accompanied by Herbert von Karajan and

the Berlin Philharmonic recorded by Deutsche Grammophon in October 1964, a recording that, when released, won both the coveted *Grand prix du disque* of Paris and the Dutch Edison Award.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73 by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

While vacationing in the beautiful Austrian lakeside resort of Pörtlach am Wörthersee in the summer of 1877, German composer Johannes Brahms composed his Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73. Perhaps inspired by the stunning Carinthian, or southern, side of the Austrian Alps, he was able to work quickly. In fact, the speed with which he worked is nothing less than a miracle when compared to the more than two decades it took him to write his Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68!

Of course, like many composers, Brahms lived and worked in the shadow of the great monolith, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). In fact, when he started composing what became – through three periods of gestation(!) – his Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15, in 1854, it was originally a sonata for two pianos. Upon the advice of several mentors, he orchestrated it and it evolved into what he planned to be a four-movement symphony, his first attempt at the genre. But, his self-doubts and Beethoven got the best of him and it was soon transformed into the three-movement piano concerto we know today. So, from now on, whenever you hear the powerful orchestral accompaniment and the power and weight of much of the soloist's music in the piano concerto, you will know why it is as it is.

Anyhow, when Brahms came to the composition of his actual first symphony, he was still feeling the spirit of Beethoven lingering over him. As stated above, it took more than 20 years to shake off the self-doubt. His Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, was premièred in 1876 and to great acclaim. After that, he had the confidence necessary to do what he dedicated his life to do.

One might agree with parallels drawn in how the seriousness of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony relates to his Sixth, the mostly-gentle "Pastorale," and how the seriousness of Brahms' First relates to his Second, also a sort of "Pastorale." As he was preparing the work for publication, Brahms must have realized the parallels himself and, as a joke, he wrote a letter to his publisher, Simrock, on November 22, 1877, stating that his new symphony "is so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it. I have never written anything so sad, and the score must come out in mourning."

Brahms' Second Symphony saw its première with the Vienna Philharmonic under the direction of his good friend, the venerated Hans Richter, in the Golden Hall of the Musikverein in Vienna on December 30, 1877. As an interesting sidenote, the orchestra was so preoccupied learning Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold* for its Viennese première at the Hofoper (Court Opera) that the first performance of Brahms' new symphony had to be postponed from December 9th to the 30th!

In the standard four movements, fast – slow – scherzo(-ish) – fast, Brahms' Symphony No. 2 is in the sunniest key of all, D major, the same key used to signify "Glory unto God" by J. S. Bach! Only the Second and Third Symphonies, the latter in F major, are in major keys but, when listening to the Third, it doesn't seem much more melancholic than sunny. Not counting any of the chamber or piano works, we can truly say that the happier side of Brahms is pretty much completely displayed in this Second Symphony, in his Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat major, Op. 83, to some degree in his Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77, in his Haydn Variations, Op. 56a, and in his Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80. He was much more the serious and melancholic man we see in most photos of him than the fun-loving, beer-guzzling, cigar-chain-smoking jokester described by his close friends. But once in a while we hear it, and especially in his Second Symphony.

Except for the tuba, the symphony is scored for the typical augmented late Beethovenian orchestra. It includes 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings. Enjoy tonight's performance of one of the great musical masterpieces of Western civilization!

Recommended Recordings: Every great conductor feels their career incomplete without recording a cycle of the four Brahms symphonies along with his Haydn Variations, Op. 56a, Tragic Overture, Op. 81, and Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80. Therefore, there are many versions to pick from when it comes to Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73, even some on period instruments! But, I recommend that you stick to the modern instrument versions. Bruno Walter recorded his so-called "Indian Summer" version with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra in January 1960. It has always been a favorite because of the wonderful singing quality Walter brought to his reading, although the recording quality is such that the strings do not have the oomph we want in Brahms. Sir Georg Solti's Chicago Symphony recording is superbly presented on Decca, but his interpretation is on overdrive and is pushed a bit too hard in the wrong way. Herbert von Karajan's three Deutsche Grammophon stereo cycles of the Brahms symphonies with the Berlin Philharmonic are each great in their own way, but the Brahms Second in the second cycle, recorded in Berlin in January

1978, is special. It is a truly great performance with all of the sunshine and singing and spit-and-polish needed for this work. The quiet moments are truly quiet throughout, and the trombone chorales are gorgeous. There may be a trumpet fluff in the closing bars, but the final coda is pure white-hot energy. A recent re-discovery is a fantastic recording made by Decca in Vienna's Sofiensaal in May 1964 with the Hungarian conductor István Kertész and the Vienna Philharmonic. It's pushed hard, but the playing of the Vienna orchestra is able to show restraint when necessary and raw intensity when called for. Besides, the horn solo near the end of the first movement is the best I've ever heard. We perceive that the orchestra and Kertész have great rapport. In fact, when Kertész died in a swimming accident off the coast of Israel before he and the Vienna Philharmonic had completed their recording of Brahms' Haydn Variations, they finished the recording in his memory and without a conductor!

© 2016 Geoffrey D. Decker