Program Notes: LSO Concert, Dec. 8, 2018

Macbeth, Op. 23

Richard Strauss

The post-Brahms, post-Liszt, and post-Wagner compositional world was consumed by composers searching for their own unique voices, but also grappling with musical forms left mastered by the previous generation.

Richard Strauss composed two symphonies before Macbeth and felt utterly dissatisfied with the products. He chose to focus his musical output in the Symphonic Tone Poem; a genre arguably initiated with Mendelssohn, but properly executed only by Franz Liszt. The young Strauss was composing during this time within the "New German School," which looked at the previous masters for inspiration and guidance. Macbeth precedes the somewhat "more" famous tone poems: Don Juan, Till Eulenspiegel, and Death and Transfiguration. It was not his first; that was Aus Italien.

Like the tragic anti-hero Macbeth, Strauss sought a new world, at the cost of the old. In the summer of 1888, Strauss described some of the conflicts he was encountering with the piece's conception: that there was "an ever-increasing conflict between the musical poetic content that I want to convey and the three-part sonata form that has come down to us from the classical composers." Strauss was trying to adhere to Liszt's previously articulated idea of music: that it must follow poetic and dramatic logic.

The only compositional character acknowledged by Strauss in the piece's score is text from Lady Macbeth towards the beginning of the piece, at the first moment of stillness:

"Lady Macbeth: Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;  
And chastise with the valour of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round,  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crown'd withal."

The legendary musicologist James Hepokowski said of the tone poem:

"Strauss makes no attempt whatever to cover the whole ground of Shakespeare's drama; no other character is introduced but Lady Macbeth - and she is really kept in the background of the picture - and absolutely nothing 'happens,' not even the murder of the king. The whole drama is enacted in the soul of Macbeth; apart from the comparatively few bars that depict his wife, the score is entirely concerned with the internal conflict of the three main elements of his character - his ambitious pride, his irresolution, and his love for Lady Macbeth."

The onset of Macbeth's downfall comes after three witches prophesied that he would become king. Later in the play, the three witches reappear and tell Macbeth (now king) of his future once again. One of the three prophecies state that once the local forest comes and marches upon his castle, Macbeth will be defeated. Although it was certainly not intentional by Richard Strauss, it's hard not to imagine the massive string-section chords that occur towards the end of the piece as somehow recalling this sentiment.

This is the first time the LSO has performed a full tone poem by Richard Strauss.

Note by Chelsea Gallo
Emperor Waltz

Johann Strauss, Jr.

Kaiser-Walzer Op. 437 was composed in 1889, and was originally titled Hand in Hand. It was intended to celebrate the occasion of the visit of the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef to the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, with the Waltz portraying a symbolic “toast of friendship” extended by Austria to Germany.

The title of the piece was changed after the suggestion of the publisher Fritz Simrock, who thought that Kaiser-Walzer might prove a more suitable title by not dedicating the work to either monarch -- providing the opportunity for the vanity of both to be satisfied.

The vast majority of Strauss' pieces were published in Vienna for solo piano in the year of their first performance, while some were published in arrangements for four hands, for violin and piano, or for orchestra. Thus, the wide popularity of the work was supported by the opportunity to be performed in the homes and halls of the city.

Vienna is considered the city of the waltz. This is often credited to Josef Lanner, who was born in 1801, and at the age of 17 formed his own ensemble, to which he recruited the 14-year-old Johann Strauss I, father of the Emperor Waltz's composer.

Thus, the Strauss dynasty emerged from the most authentic source: the orchestra that was destined to revolutionize dance halls everywhere.

The first performance of the Emperor Waltz took place in Berlin on October 29th 1889, under the baton of the composer. The waltz presents its danceable feature in the triple meter, however the Emperor Waltz starts with a march in a duple meter, which serve as the introduction of the series of waltzes in the piece and includes the main motive of the first waltz. The transition from the march to the waltz is provided by the cello solo, and the four waltzes are played without interruption.

The main character of the piece is triumphant, until the coda, where the mood turns very nostalgic and the cello solo reappears, reintroducing the principal theme of the first waltz as a sort of evocative memory. The triumphant character returns with the fanfare of the horns and trumpets, creating a path to the very bright ending of the piece.

The Emperor Waltz is with no doubt one of the most beloved waltzes, and it is usually performed in the New Year's Concert of the Wiener Philharmoniker or Vienna Philharmonic. With the New Year rapidly approaching, the LSO continues a long tradition the music of the Strauss family, and that Viennese personification of the waltz.

Note by Régulo Stabiliito

Watch the 2019 Vienna Philharmonic New Year's Concert on PBS stations at 9 p.m. on Jan. 1.
Piano Quartet in G minor, op. 25 (1861/1937)

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) orchestrated by Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

It is difficult to find a composer with whom Schoenberg did not interact during his lifetime. He famously met with and spoke with Gustav Mahler, Jean Sibelius and Richard Strauss; his genius led to the creation of the Second Viennese School of composition where he would guide the musical minds of Anton Webern and Alban Berg.

Johannes Brahms, at the end of his life, came to learn of the young Viennese genius. Brahms, after seeing a score of Schoenberg's first string quartet, offered to pay for his education; the latter declined, but never forgot the kindness.

Around thirty years after the passing of Brahms, Schoenberg declared of Brahms that he "moved toward an unrestricted musical language," and that Brahms "would have been a pioneer if he had simply returned to Mozart, but he did not live on inherited fortune; he made one of this own."

The orchestration of Brahms' Piano Quartet in G minor is a masterpiece. Two years after he completed his orchestration, Schoenberg contacted a music critic at the San Francisco Chronicle. He said that he composed the arrangement because he liked the piano quartet, and that "it is always very badly played, because the better the pianist, the louder he plays and you hear nothing from the strings. I wanted at once to hear everything, and this I achieved." He also maintained that he had intended "to remain strictly in the style of Brahms and not go farther than he himself would have gone if he lived today."

However, the massive orchestra for which the piece calls is out of the realm for anything Brahms ever composed. Added percussion (especially xylophone) create textures not possibly realized in the original composition's group of instruments. Brahms only wrote for triangle on three occasions: The Symphony No. 4's third movement, the Academic Overture, and his Haydn variations.

It was during Schoenberg's "exile" to California that he received a commission from the Los Angeles Philharmonic to orchestrate a work of Johannes Brahms. He would eventually refer to the work as "Brahms' fifth", coming after the four symphonies composed during Brahms' life. Schoenberg strictly adheres to Brahms' quartet, never adding new melodic material, and leaving intact moments that Schoenberg acknowledged as the "progressive" side of Brahms, including the opening statement of the first movement.

The fourth and final movement culminates in an exhibition of the full force of the large romantic orchestra, utilizing instruments never used by Brahms: the bass clarinet, the E flat clarinet, three trumpets and the xylophone.

We hope to achieve some of what Schoenberg wrote about performance: "Music is only understood when one goes away singing it and only loved when one falls asleep with it in one's head, and finds it still there on waking up the next morning."

Note by Chelsea Gallo