

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

The Fair Melusine, Op. 32

Felix Mendelssohn, scion of an eminent German banking family, was born in Hamburg on February 3, 1809 and developed into a supremely accomplished composer, conductor, pianist, and organist. He lived only 38 years, dying on November 4, 1847 from a series of strokes. He wrote his concert overture *The Fair Melusine, Op. 32* in 1833, premiered it in London in 1834, and revised it a year later.

The Rhine, that seemingly bottomless source of myth and legend, served as an inspiration for Mendelssohn's exquisite water poem *The Fair Melusine*, written while Mendelssohn was conducting at the Lower Rhine Festival in Düsseldorf. The maiden in love with her Prince Charming but condemned to live as a mermaid one day a week appears in countless variants, even serving as the original source for the Starbucks logo. Mendelssohn's tone poem captures in its evocative imagery the undulating serenity of Melusine's river world and the sorrowful undercurrent of her story. *The Fair Melusine* may be one of Mendelssohn's lesser-known orchestral works, but he considered it to be his best. Coming from a composer prone to volcanic eruptions of relentless self-criticism, that's high praise indeed.

- Scott Foglesong, scholar-in-residence

Michael Steinberg, the San Francisco Symphony's program annotator from 1979 to 1999 and a contributing writer to its program book until his death in 2009, was one of the nation's pre-eminent writers on music. He is the author of three "Listener's Guides" (The Symphony, The Concerto, and Choral Masterworks) and co-author of the essay collection For the Love of Music, all published by Oxford University Press. His notes on the Brahms Serenade and Schumann Cello Concerto appeared originally in the program book of the San Francisco Symphony and are used by permission. Michael Steinberg wrote his first program notes for the Greenwich Village Symphony in 1960, at the request of its Manager and Philharmonia Baroque's former Executive Director, Peter Pastreich. He wrote program notes for each of the five orchestras Peter managed, and Philharmonia Baroque is happy to publish the following notes as well.

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Concerto for Violoncello in A minor, Op. 129

Robert Alexander Schumann was born in Zwickau, Saxony, on June 8, 1810, and died at Endenich near Bonn on July 29, 1856. He composed the Cello Concerto between October 10 and 24, 1850, but the first performance was posthumous, given by Ludwig Ebert at the Leipzig Conservatory on June 9, 1860, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the composer's birth. The first North American

performance was given on February 3, 1888, by Fritz Geise, Wilhelm Gericke conducting the Boston Symphony. The orchestra consists of two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings.

On September 1, 1850, the Schumanns—Robert, Clara, and six children—moved to Düsseldorf after six stultifying years in Dresden, a city of which Clara said, "everything seems so antiquated here. Not a single intelligent person can be seen on the street; they all look like Philistines! Musicians one doesn't see at all." An offer had come along for Robert to succeed Ferdinand Hiller as conductor of the Düsseldorf Music Society. Düsseldorf had a reputation as a conductor-eating town (why was Hiller so eager to move on to Cologne?), but Schumann badly wanted an orchestra of his own. He was not only bored in Dresden, but angry because the opera there had declined to stage his *Genoveva*. He was willing to give Düsseldorf a try.

By the time Schumann arrived in his new Rhineland home, he was in high spirits, and he and Clara were welcomed by a serenade and a combined concert, supper, and ball, tendered by the local musicians. Clara worried about social standards in Düsseldorf, especially "the breezy, unconstrained conduct of the women, who at times surely transgress the barriers of femininity and decency... Marital life is more in the easy-going French style." Both Robert and

Clara were distressed by the noisiness of their first apartment, but a Rhine excursion at the end of the month and a move to quieter quarters helped. (All Clara could do about the Düsseldorf ladies was to avoid them.)

But contentment in Düsseldorf was destined to be brief. Unequal to the requirements of the position, Schumann was asked to resign in October 1852. The matter was smoothed over for the moment, but not quite a year later he had, in fact, led his last concert. Four months after that, having thrown himself into the Rhine in a suicide attempt, he was committed into Dr. Richarz's hospital at Eendenich, where he died two and a half years later. But all that is another story. The Düsseldorf episode began with Schumann possessed by enormous creative energy. He composed his Cello Concerto in just fifteen October days, and in what remained of 1850 and in 1851 he wrote the Rhenish Symphony, revised his D minor Symphony into what he considered its definitive form (Symphony No. 4), and wrote two violin sonatas, the *Märchenbilder* for viola and piano, two substantial cantatas, and a number of overtures on literary themes.

Clara Schumann was delighted by the new concerto. "It pleases me very much and seems to me to be written in true violoncello style," she noted in her diary on November 16, 1850. The following October she wrote: "I have played

Robert's Violoncello Concerto through again, thus giving myself a truly musical and happy hour. The Romantic quality, the vivacity, the freshness and humor, also the highly interesting interweaving of violoncello and orchestra are indeed wholly ravishing, and what euphony and deep feeling one finds in all the melodic passages!" Robert seems to have had reservations, but we know only that he canceled plans for a performance in the spring of 1852 and that he did not send it to Breitkopf & Härtel, the Leipzig publishers, until 1854.

In this concerto we glimpse the experimental side of Schumann's temperament. He is interested here in compression and in finding new ways to connect the parts of a multi-movement composition. Both the initial chords for woodwinds with pizzicato strings and the wonderful cello melody to which they open the door have more than local functions. The idea of the chords pervades the slow movement, and the cello theme turns into a recitative—shared fascinatingly and poignantly by soloist and orchestra—that forms the bridge from the second movement to the finale. Each movement is linked to the next, and the middle one, though it sets out in gloriously expansive song, has something of the character of a bridge or an intermezzo. The device of using a solo cello in the orchestra is one that Robert borrowed from Clara's Piano Concerto of 1836, in whose

orchestration he may, however, have had a hand. The shift into 6/8 time for the last pages of the finale is a device that Brahms obviously found worth imitating, and often. Just before that happens in this concerto, Schumann introduces a brief accompanied cadenza, an inspiration to Elgar and probably also to Schoenberg and Walton in their violin concertos.

—Michael Steinberg

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Serenade No. 2 in A major, Opus 16

Johannes Brahms was born in the Free City of Hamburg on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He composed the Serenade No. 2 in 1858-59: Clara Schumann saw the first movement in December 1858 and received the complete score on November 9, 1859. After a reading rehearsal with Joseph Joachim's orchestra in Hanover in January 1860, Brahms conducted the first performance on February 10 that year at a concert of the Hamburg Philharmonic Society. He made some revisions that summer, and the publication of the score by Simrock in November began a connection that lasted for the rest of Brahms's life. Some further revisions of details followed in 1875. The first North American performance was given on February 1, 1862 by Carl Bergmann and the New York Philharmonic. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, violas, cellos, and basses. In

a letter to the conductor Bernhard Scholz, Brahms suggested that “eight or more violas, six cellos, and four basses or something on that order seems right to me.”

The young and beardless Brahms wrote this Serenade and its joyous D major companion under the spell of Mozart’s serenades and divertimentos, the septets of Beethoven and Hummel, the Schubert Octet, and the Octet and Nonet of Louis Spohr. After a trial visit in the spring of 1857, he was working at Detmold, even now a town of only some 30,000 inhabitants, and located about forty-five miles southwest of Hanover. In Brahms’s day it was the capital of Lippe, a tiny principality with a rich cultural

must have some of Mozart's serenades in mind. Those are often like symphonies expanded by an extra minuet, with perhaps something additional like a set of variations as well. Brahms's Serenade No. 1, his longest piece except for the German Requiem, is a six-movement work; the Serenade No. 2 is on a much more modest scale, with five movements, the "extra" being a scherzo interpolated between the first movement and the Adagio.

The difference between the two serenades in actual sound is equally striking. The D major Serenade is written for an orchestra much like the one we find in late Haydn and early-to-middle Beethoven, but with a full quartet of horns. The present work omits violins; not only does this give it a darker sound, but it creates a balance which makes this work, in contrast to the other, essentially a wind serenade with accompanying and supporting strings.

There has been much discussion of what gave Brahms the idea for this violinless orchestra. Was it his delight with the sound of the opening of the Adagio of the D major Serenade? Was it Méhul's opera *Uthal* (admired both by him and Joachim), Hummel's beautiful Septet, Opus 74, the duet of Elisabeth and the Landgrave in Act 2 of *Tannhäuser* or the quartet in *Fidelio* that surely was Wagner's inspiration? All these are possible sources, and it doesn't really matter. Brahms was not given to talking about his music, and when

he did he was likely to be teasingly deceitful, but there is a tantalizing story about this A major Serenade. In a November 1875 letter to the Breslau conductor Bernhard Scholz, who was about to perform the work, Brahms wrote: "When I took this piece of paper in hand, I secretly had something like a Wagnerian inclination to write something very beautiful and elaborate about my beautiful opus . . . but now that desire has evaporated."

The reception of the Serenade at its Hamburg premiere was quite friendly, though not enough so to get Brahms appointed the Philharmonic's next conductor, a position he then ardently desired. Its successful performance in Vienna under Johann von Herbeck in 1862 was an important step toward making Brahms known in the city that would become his home in 1869. But not everyone was pleased. When Joachim conducted the Serenade in Hanover in March 1860, he received an unsigned letter instructing him that "Brahms's Serenade is a monstrosity, a caricature, a freak, which should never have been published, much less performed here . . . whilst the piano concerto [No. 1] served up to us last winter still sticks in our throats! It is inexcusable that such filth should have been offered to a public thirsting for good music. . . . Do not impose upon your audience a taste for that which can only be the greatest torture to people with sound ears."

The first movement begins with mellow clarinets and bassoons,

though the sweetness of this opening soon gives way to a melancholy strain in minor, with Brahms's beloved triplets cutting across the duple meter. A soaring, expressive melody for the oboe and a lazily swaying theme for clarinets in thirds are the other chief thematic components. The movement is in sonata form, but this is one of the examples where Brahms does not ask for the exposition to be repeated. (This is a question Brahms always considered carefully, a good argument for making the repeats where he does mark them.) After the urgent and impassioned development, the entry into the recapitulation is exceptionally lovely. With utmost gentleness, the oboe leading the way, Brahms returns to A major; after half a minute of musing, he brings the first theme back, and then we realize that we have been home all along. The recapitulation itself is regular, but to make up for that, Brahms gives us an expansive and magically poetic coda.

The scherzo, which is very fast, is distinctly Czech in its bouncy cross-rhythms. The trio is more tuneful, but the strings make sure we do not forget the rhythmic dissonances. There is an exuberant coda with virtuosic scale passages.

The slow movement—Adagio but non troppo, not too slow—is a marvel. Here, fourteen

years before the Haydn Variations, Brahms sets out to write a passacaglia, a set of variations over a reiterated bass. (It may well have been the first time that anyone had done that since Beethoven's C minor Variations for Piano of 1806.) Brahms follows Bach's example in such works as the D minor Concerto in having the bass modulate rather than stay on a fixed set of pitches. Eight iterations carry it from its starting point of A minor to C major. There an impassioned rhetorical outburst leads to the introduction of new material and new adventures. When the violas bring the passacaglia bass back, Brahms presents it fugally, making a great stir before leading the movement to its quiet close.

I don't understand what Brahms meant by heading his fourth movement "Quasi menuetto." Even taking the most generous view of "quasi," I cannot hear anything minuet-like in this sweet D major movement with its distinct duple meter. Ghosts of the main part of the movement are a gentle background presence to the trio. The trio's main business is a shy and touching melody for the oboe. Here is another curious story. When Otto Dessoff conducted the Serenade with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1863, he wrote to Brahms that, having received permission from him to experiment with this trio, he had had the "glorious idea" of giving the oboe solo to Joseph Hellmesberger to play on the viola. (Hellmesberger was

the Philharmonic's concertmaster, but he evidently led the violas in this work.) Evidently Brahms liked the effect because he recommended it as something for his friend Scholz to consider for his Breslau performance in 1875; he did not, however, include it as an alternative in the printed score. I have never heard the trio played this way but would certainly like to some time.

Brahms has saved the piccolo for the finale. It is a happy cheerleader in an exuberant movement full of charm and subtle rhythmic surprises.

—Michael Steinberg