

Program
Notes
for
Platinum
Sounds:
The
Symphony
Turns
70



THE SYMPHONY PRESENTS

Platinum Sounds: The Symphony Turns 70

Saturday, May 13, 2023 | 7:30 PM

Sunday, May 14, 2023 | 3 PM



by Dan Kepl

The Symphony officially closes its subscription season with a virtuoso program celebrating its milestone 70th anniversary as one of Southern California's most accomplished professional ensembles. Conductor Nir Kabaretti has chosen three works: Jonathan Leshnoff's Concerto Grosso, composed in 2012 to celebrate The Symphony's 60th anniversary, Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64, featuring renowned violin soloist, Philippe Quint, and to bring the evening to a rousing close, Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, arguably a concerto in four movements for orchestra.

Maestro Kabaretti has focused his programmatic musical narrative on the interconnectivity at several levels of these three works. All are in one form or another concertos featuring soloists. The concert's central intellectual zeitgeist is the narcotic romanticism that gripped nineteenth-century Europe in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. Mendelssohn and Brahms were at the epicenter of this movement. Each suffered a personal loss that weighed heavily on their emotional stability and contributed to their melancholic natures. Both composers also knew very well the relationship between tonality (key area) and psychological response from the listener. The two most important keys of lamentation in the sonic toolbox of the romantic era, C minor (Symphony No. 1) and E minor (Violin Concerto), clearly indicate a restless subtext in each work. While generally optimistic, both nineteenth-century compositions are haunted by bittersweet memory.

Hailed by The New York Times as "a leader of contemporary American lyricism," GRAMMY®-nominated composer Jonathan Leshnoff (1973 -) was commissioned by the Santa Barbara Symphony in 2012 to create a four-movement work modeled on the Baroque Concerto Grosso form. Nir Kabaretti conducted the world premiere performances of Concerto Grosso in Santa Barbara on March 16-17, 2013. The first movement features two solo violins, as is common in many Baroque concertos. The second movement gives soloists on cello, trumpet, horn, and trombone the opportunity to display their virtuosity. The third movement features the principal players of the woodwind section, and the final movement brings together all the soloists. Leshnoff's Concerto Grosso is both a contemporary work of lush romantic sensibility, and an homage, if loosely so, to Baroque form.

German composer, pianist, organist, conductor, publisher, critic, and watercolorist, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), grew up as a son of privilege in Hamburg and Berlin, where his wealthy parents - his father, Abraham, was the founder of Mendelssohn Bank in Hamburg - insisted on intellectual pursuits and higher education for their children. Felix's older sister, Fanny, was also a brilliant pianist and composer, but a career in music was deemed unseemly for a woman of her caste. Her talents were never fully encouraged or developed. Suffering fragile health in the last years of his life, Felix died of a stroke in Leipzig in 1847 at the age of 38, barely six months after the death of Fanny.

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The Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64, was composed during the period 1838-1844, while Mendelssohn was the conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Ferdinand David, concertmaster of the orchestra and a childhood friend of Mendelssohn's, consulted with the composer over the roughly seven years of its composition, and performed the premiere of the work in 1845, just two years before the composer's death. Organized in the standard three-movement, fast-slow-fast form of classical concertos, the first movement, *Allegro molto appassionato*, is a model of mid-nineteenth century romantic temperament – triumphant and melancholic in equal measure, with a stunning solo cadenza that is both defiant and reaches for the sun.

A compositionally innovative bassoon obligato links the first movement to the stunningly simple yet emotionally draining slow movement, *Andante*, where hope, destiny, regret, and maybe a little premonition of Brahms, guide the orchestral sighs and pregnant pauses in the score toward a satisfying if exhausting musical denouement: no regrets, life is life. The last movement, *Allegretto non troppo – Allegro con vivace*, after a harrowingly anguished and mercifully brief dark opening section – a kind of look back in horror – bursts into a lively galop reminiscent of the composer's music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. With flair, verve, and contagious energy, the Violin Concerto ends with a flourish, reminding the listener of what music there might have been, had Mendelssohn not died so young.

Leningrad-born American violinist, Philippe Quint, made his orchestral debut at the age of nine. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees from The Juilliard School. Quint has released over 15 recordings and has performed as soloist with orchestras around the world.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) is a titan of the nineteenth-century romantic pantheon. His traumatized teen years playing piano in the brothels of Hamburg to make ends meet, his ill-advised but lifelong infatuation cum love for Mrs. Clara Schumann, and his sometimes-overwhelming self-doubt, make for a perfect storm of passionate nineteenth-century angst. Ergo, it is the rich romanticism and profound musical struggle between darkness and light, self-doubt and personal triumph, minor and major tonalities, that marks the Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, as a particularly splendid jewel in the crown of nineteenth-century romanticism.

Brahms began composing the Symphony No. 1 in 1856, the year of Robert Schumann's death by insanity. It took the composer another 20 years of tinkering, revising, fear, and loathing, before he would allow its first public performance in 1876. Self-doubt indeed. Or might it have been the composer's insecurities about what his most important audience, Clara Schumann, might think of the finished product?

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The orchestral repertoire of the nineteenth century has not a more relentless opening than that of the first movement, *Un poco sostenuto – Allegro*, with its “fate” pulse in timpani. Some passages in the movement’s churning narrative are edgy, with uneasy calms; a Rousseau-like *sturm und drang* of emotional unrest. By movement’s end, however, a rainbow. The second movement, *Andante sostenuto*, is a bittersweet lullaby, fraught with tenderness and sweet passion, an angelic violin solo, a solo oboe’s lament, and the big question – is this movement a passionate confession of love?

The third movement, *Un poco allegretto e grazioso*, is an arcadian walk in the woods as was the habit in the nineteenth century, complete with a noble post horn tune and a pastoral harmonic temperament. The fourth movement, *Adagio – Più andante – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio–Più allegro*, opens with a massive sonic thunderclap, and is for a time as manic as its lengthy title implies, recalling variously the “fate” pulse in timpani, and other fragments from the first movement. One can’t help but hear the ghost of Mendelssohn’s *Symphony No. 5, Reformation*, in the glorious alphorn theme and chorale tune Brahms develops to nearly ecstatic levels of heroic messaging as the last hurrah for this magnificently complex masterpiece.