

Program Notes:

U-M Life Sciences Orchestra Concert

January 24, 2016

BEETHOVEN, CORIOLAN OVERTURE, OP. 63

Heinrich von Collin's dramatic play featuring the story of Gaius Marcius Coriolanus, legendary Roman aristocrat, is the inspiration for Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture*. After being unjustly exiled by Roman tribunes, Coriolanus draws forth an army of supporters to fight against Rome. When he reaches the city gates, his mother, Volumnia, begs her son for mercy. At her behest he retreats, drawing the hate of his new supporters. Stuck between his former allegiance, and his new supporters, he sees no other recourse and falls on his own sword, committing suicide. In Shakespeare's version he is killed by the Volscians, his new allies.

Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* was premiered at the home of Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz, alongside the Symphony No. 4, and the Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major. While the two larger works on that program are generally energetic and cheerful, it seems that the more turbulent mood that infuses his 5th Symphony (which he had been working on) was on his mind.

Two contrasting themes, preceded by long powerful unisons, and striking chords, outline the musical seeds of the overture. The principal, uneasy theme in the beginning of the piece represents Coriolanus' rage and stirring vengeance. The secondary lyrical theme, outlined in the violins and then answered by woodwind doublings represents Volumnia, as she begs her son for mercy. Both themes are presented in a very unique sonata form: In the recapitulation, Beethoven presents the primary subject only in fragments. In the secondary theme, we witness it in a minor key for the first time. The music grows in extreme agony as Coriolanus faces his ultimate fate. In the end we hear only string pizzicati - his last heartbeats.

GRIEG, PEER GYNT SUITE NO. 1

Peer Gynt Suite No. 1 is derived from the incidental music composed for Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*. The real-life Peer Gynt was a man of legend in the Norwegian community during the mid 19th-Century, when the piece was composed. Ibsen's take on Gynt's travels, however, are far from the folkloric stories told by villagers in Norway. Grieg chose four of his 28 original movements to comprise the Suite No. 1.

In *Morning Mood* Grieg depicts a sunrise in the middle of the Moroccan desert. In the play, Gynt is making a reed pipe. The evocative flute solo in the beginning depicts not only the sunrise, but also quite literally Gynt making a woodwind instrument while admiring nature. The beginning melody is perhaps one of the most popular in the western canon, and is regularly used in popular culture to depict sunlight and morning.

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Peer Gynt is torn from his travels when hearing a ghostly voice telling him to return home. He returns just in time to witness the last living moments of Åse, his mother. In *Åse's Death* Grieg uses only strings and long lyrical lines to depict Gynt's sadness and his mother's last utterances. The piece crescendos to a dramatic climactic statement of the melody, but subsequently sinks into nothing.

Back in Morocco, Gynt dresses in Bedouin attire and is mistaken for a prophet by a local tribe. The tribe chieftain's daughter, Anitra, tries (and succeeds) to seduce Gynt with her dancing. Scored also for strings and triangle, *Anitra's Dance*, is a seductive, yet rhythmically quirky middle point for the suite.

In the Hall of the Mountain King takes us to the underground palace of the Mountain King. Trolls, goblins, and gnomes are regulars in these dark caverns. In the play, Gynt goes into the hall after hitting his head on a rock. It's likely that all of this happens within the confines of his imagination. In this movement, Grieg gives us a repeating, pulsating primal gesture with a recurring melody that crescendos dramatically in dynamic and in tempo to an epic finale.

SIBELIUS, SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D MAJOR, OP. 43

Jean Sibelius began composing his second symphony in the beautiful northern Italian town of Rapallo. He completed the symphony back in Finland, and conducted the premiere in Helsinki on March 8, 1902.

Sibelius was one of the great symphonists. His second symphony is the most often performed, and commonly considered to be the most accessible to audiences. Of the most successful pioneering composers during the beginning of the 20th Century, one could say that only Mahler and Sibelius achieved their artistic peaks through the symphony.

Through his letters and compositions we can ascertain that Sibelius was obsessed with musical material; it governed over form. In fact there are numerous mentions of a superior power controlling the true outcome of a piece. The compositional process for Sibelius was derived from that initial seed, and whatever form or orchestration arose was a result of the material itself. When speaking about orchestration he said,

“Always remember that even the best orchestration ceases to be good as soon as it becomes the aim of the composer instead of remaining a means.”

And perhaps most revealing, about the symphonic form itself:

“It is often thought that the essence of symphony lies in its form, but this is certainly not the case. The content is always the primary factor, while form is secondary, the music itself determining its outer form. If sonata form has anything that is lasting it must come from within. When I consider how musical forms are established I frequently think about the ice-ferns which, according to eternal laws, the frost makes into the most beautiful patterns.”

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The second symphony is built on three notes. These three step-wise and ascending notes are the seed for every theme in the whole piece. It is a bright and joyful piece, yet plunges into darkness temporarily only to rise brighter and more joyously in the end.

The first movement begins with a gentle, lyrical, pulsating string melody. The woodwinds answer, presenting the three-note motive backward and in short diminution. It's the woodwinds that present what is commonly considered the secondary theme: one lengthy note, followed by pulsating eighths and a descending gesture. The precise form of the movement has been source of debate amongst theorists. Harmonically speaking, however, the movement is in sonata form. That is to say, secondary material which is originally stated in a key other than the tonic (in the dominant in this case) returns to its home of D major in the recapitulation.

The second movement begins with a stark timpani roll, followed by a pizzicato melody alternated between the double basses and cellos. It is over this pizzicato motion (now taken over completely by the cellos) that the bassoons begin their songful statement, their melody constructed yet again from the original three notes. A new, passionate melody arrives with oboes, and is answered by violins and violas, ultimately moving the tempo and reaching a powerful climactic section with the brass. All these themes repeat throughout the movement. Each time, however, they are presented in different places within the orchestra with varied underlying rhythms and orchestration. It switches colors and moods on a dime, from ethereal to assertive, from depressed to hopeful; at times it even sounds like Russian chant. It ends powerfully on an assertive "d minor" chord.

The third and fourth movements are performed *attacca*, without a break in between. The third movement is a blustering scherzo with "in-your-face" attacks, and fragmented woodwind melodies placed over the constant triplet pulsation of the strings. In stark contrast, the middle sections of the movement are soft, chorale-like pillars, overlaid by a beautiful oboe melody, answered each time by the clarinets, cello solo, and subsequently cello section, in the last utterance of the melody. The end of the third movement acts as a transition into the triumphant fourth movement.

The fourth movement begins with the same three-note ascending motive. Yet in its first version, the melody is incomplete. The second time we hear it, it is accompanied by a D pedal in the orchestra. It is only in its third version that we get the whole picture with the bass line moving by bar, alongside the melodic gestures. The movement is not all cheerful - the intermediate, transitional sections are full of darkness, and storm-like gestures that build up in intensity only to release triumphantly into the now familiar primary melody. In the final trumpet melody, the three-note motive we have heard all along finally goes beyond the three note ascension into a fourth note. It may seem like a simple thing, but after 43 minutes of listening to a particular melodic gesture restart, this one note difference elevates the music to new heights. It is one of the most joyous and powerful endings ever composed; a fitting ending to one of the greatest pieces in the symphonic repertoire.

Program notes by Roberto Kalb