

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Brahms' Symphony No. 1

Apr 12 - 14

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

MANFRED OVERTURE, Op. 115

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

Robert Schumann's father was a publisher and bookseller, and his son developed a keen interest in the writings of his time, both poetry and novel, and by his teens was well versed in European literature. He grew up with dramatic works, and brought them to life through youthful songs and character pieces with colorful names such as *Butterflies* and *Kreiseriana*. His literary inspirations would continue throughout his life and help define musical Romanticism by, in his own words, sending "light into the depths of the human heart."

A superb pianist, literary critic and advocate for such up-and-coming talents as Brahms and Chopin, Schumann was prescient about the culture of his time and interpreted current trends in his role as editor of the periodical the *Neue Zeitschrift fur Musik (New Journal of Music)*. He wasn't shy in voicing an opinion or taking sides in a battle and formed the *Davidbundler* – an imaginary league that fought against "philistinism in the arts."

As we look at Schumann's career, his compositions can be lumped into chapters, following his habit of writing in one medium at a time: chamber music one year, symphonies the next, and entire seasons devoted to songs or church music. In 1842 alone, after extensive study of Haydn and Mozart, he wrote three string quartets, the *Piano Quartet* and *Quintet*, and the *Phantasiestucke*. After this burst of creative energy, Schumann would never again continue at such a pace; mental illness ruled the remaining 14 years of his life.

If Schumann was the archetypal Romanticist, then Lord Byron's supernatural verse drama *Manfred* was an ideal vehicle for his sentiment. "Wild, metaphysical and inexplicable" is how Byron described his 1,300-line poem, which was read throughout Europe and used by Tchaikovsky as the basis for a symphony of the same name. Brahms loved Schumann's treatment so much he hinted of it in his *Symphony No. 1*, which concludes tonight's program.

Schumann originally composed the hour-long work in 15 sections for vocal solos, interludes, ensembles, choruses and "melodramas." What we normally hear today is the overture, one of Schumann's finest pieces, which suggests the themes of incestuous love, guilt and self-annihilation in a full-blooded 19th century style. Richly orchestrated and rhythmically urgent, the music depicts an internal struggle that gives way to resignation. The work absorbed Schumann as much as anything else he had written. "Never have I devoted myself to a composition," he once said, "with such love and energy as *Manfred*."

ANNA CLYNE (1980-)

THE SEAMSTRESS

Duration: ca. 23 minutes

If a thoroughly modern orchestra wants to make its mark beyond dusting off the busts of Beethoven and Brahms, it needs to perform thoroughly modern music to reflect our own time. This season, TFO tips its hat to the new with such contemporary composers as Andrew Norman, Steve Reich, Tampa's own Baljinder Sekhon, and the London-born Anna Clyne, who makes her Tampa Bay premiere this weekend with *The Seamstress*.

Just what is this piece? A suite for violin and orchestra? A violin concerto? A composer of acoustic and electro-acoustic music, Clyne calls *The Seamstress* an "imaginary one-act ballet," and describes her work as follows: "Alone on the stage, the seamstress is seated, unravelling threads from an antique cloth laid gently over her lap. Lost in her thoughts, her mind begins to meander and her imagination spirals into a series of five tales that range from love to despair, and that combine memory with fantasy."

Composed in 2015, the 23-minute piece for violin, orchestra and amplified electronics is reflective, melancholy, jarring and at times haunting. The musical germ behind the piece is an Irish folk melody she learned during a fiddle class at the Old Town School of Music in Chicago. Like her double violin concerto, *Prince of Clouds* – which was nominated for a Grammy in 2015 – *The Seamstress* shows a knack for string writing, especially the violin. Clyne drew inspiration for *The Seamstress* from the short poem, *A Coat*, by William Butler Yeats. It reads:

*"I made my song a coat, covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies, from heel to throat;
But the fools caught it, wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it, for there's more enterprise
In walking naked."*

After the Chicago Symphony played the premiere of the work, music director Riccardo Muti described Clyne as "an artist who writes from the heart, who defies categorization, and who reaches across all barriers and boundaries. Her compositions are meant to be played by skilled musicians and can reach different audiences, no matter what their background."

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN C MINOR, Op. 68

Duration: ca. 45 minutes

"Composing a symphony," Johannes Brahms once said, "is no laughing matter." Apparently not, considering he worked for more than a decade on his *Symphony No. 1*, which after its premiere was dubbed "The Tenth" to announce a successor to Beethoven's nine masterpieces

in the form. “You can’t have any idea what it’s like,” Brahms declared, “always to hear such a giant marching behind you.”

Brahms was 43 when he delivered a symphony to the world, and the wait was worth it. By then confident in his mastery of orchestral forms, his *C Minor Symphony* today ranks as the most popular “first” in the repertoire, and its ominous mood makes an impression in any concert hall. The composer’s admiration for Beethoven rings clear in this music, and not just by sharing the same key as the famed *Fifth Symphony* or its shift from C minor darkness C major light. He actually quotes Beethoven, specifically the *Ode to Joy* theme from the *Ninth*.

First performed in 1876, the symphony opens with an anguished series of timpani strokes against rising strings and woodwinds. Brahms introduces new themes and invigorates them in an imaginative display of contrapuntal skill worthy of Bach. A sustained, eloquent second movement offers contrast, the music falling over listeners like a warm blanket of sound. A tranquil theme by the woodwinds opens the third movement, and the orchestra builds its lush textures in softly rolling climaxes.

This leads without a break into the finale, an epic battle in which moments of quiet give way to displays of drama, done with an ingenious suspension of meter. Brahms begins the movement as an adagio, and increases the tension as more and more members of the orchestra take up their weapons and join in. Midway through, Brahms shifts gears by introducing his inverted quote of *Ode to Joy*, an obvious tip of the hat to Beethoven. From there, the music dives back into the darkness of the minor key and struggles to shake it off, then reintroduces the *Ode to Joy* theme. A rousing trombone chorale declares the arrival of C major, and the symphony ends in triumph.

“The *C Minor* is one of the most innovative symphonies that the later 19th century produced,” notes Jan Swafford in his 1997 biography on the composer. “Brahms achieved a paradoxical resolution of conservative and progressive elements, and did it with a magisterial finality that no symphonist of stature would ever match again.”

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.