

Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Brahms' Violin Concerto

Stefan Asbury, *Conductor*

Stefan Jackiw, *Violin*

Saturday, November 12, 2022, Mahaffey Theater At 8:00 Pm
Sunday, November 13, 2022, Straz Center - Ferguson Hall At 2:00 Pm

Gideon Klein

(1919-1945)

Johannes Brahms

(1833-1897)

Antonín Dvořák

(1841-1904)

Partita

I. Allegro

II. Variations on a Moravian Folk Song: Lento

III. Molto vivace

Arranged for string orchestra (1990) by Vojtěch Saudek

Concerto for Violin & Orchestra in D major, Op.77

I. Allegro non troppo

II. Adagio

III. Allegro giocoso; ma non troppo vivace

Stefan Jackiw, *Violin*

Intermission

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88

I. Allegro con brio

II. Adagio

III. Allegretto grazioso

IV. Allegro ma non troppo

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Gideon Klein (1919-1945)

Partita for Strings

Duration: ca. 17 minutes

Gideon Klein left much of his life's work in a suitcase. Stuffed with musical scores, it ended up with Klein's sister and for nearly a half-century, its treasures stayed hidden. Then in 1990, a little-known composer named Vojtěch Saudek transcribed the *Trio for Strings* of 1944 into the larger *Partita for Strings*, and performances around the world began to reveal the talent of this remarkable Moravian-born musician.

Klein's short life was remarkable for a number of reasons. A child prodigy, he was a gifted pianist, soon an avid impresario, and a composer of originality. At 21, he won a scholarship to London's Royal Academy of Music and along with it the ambitions of a dynamic career.

But Klein was Jewish. Trapped in a violently anti-Semitic Europe controlled by Nazi Germany, he could not leave Prague for London. Instead, he was sent to Theresienstadt, a "model" concentration camp that Hitler used as public relations for the fair treatment of "detainees." Prisoners were allowed to play musical instruments and organize concerts, which Klein promoted, performing his own works along with fellow inmates Viktor Ullmann, Pavel Hass, Sigmund Schul and others.

It was at Theresienstadt – also known as Terezín – that Klein passed along the briefcase before he was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau for slave labor. Historians disagree on how Klein died; he either was shot by guards or worked to exhaustion in a coal mining camp in Katowice, Poland. He was 25.

Most of Klein's surviving works are considered experimental and atonal, and full of hard-edged sonorities. He finished the *Partita for Strings* just 10 days before being transferred to Auschwitz, and the music's tensions, arguably, reflect his anguish. It unfolds in three short movements, anchored by a central set of variations on a Moravian folk song.

The website *Performing the Jewish Archives* describes the *Partita* as deceptive, calling it classically inspired and void of modernist language. On the other hand, "its apparent, though largely concealed, references to works by other composers, and folk music of his native Moravia, hides a profound message about the level of Nazi deceit in Terezín, as well as the fracture of European and Jewish culture."

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77

Duration: ca. 38 minutes

Of all the music composed in the 19th century, you might think such a fruitful era would be pregnant with great concertos for the violin. Although the 1800s teemed like a fiddle-factory, most of these creations range from fair to forgettable. The finest rose to the top and have never been surpassed – those by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Bruch, Tchaikovsky and Brahms.

A question – if amusing to us today – was whether the Brahms *Violin Concerto* belongs in another category: a violin symphony. After its premiere on New Year's Day of 1879, the Viennese conductor Joseph Hellmesberger called it "a concerto not for, but *against* the violin." Henryk Wieniawski, a virtuoso violinist capable of any technical contest, deemed it "unplayable." And in his 1997 biography on Brahms, Jan Swafford sardonically said that the composer "committed the cardinal sin of writing a symphonic concerto in which orchestra and soloist carry on the musical dialogue as equals."

The concerto has been affectionately called a symphony with a fiddle in the middle, in part because the orchestral writing doesn't bow to the violin; instead, it's in full throttle throughout. Brahms originally planned a four-movement symphonic scheme, but decided on three – aligning it with the traditional concerto form – and transplanted the orphaned movement into his *Piano Concerto No. 2*. Yet, for all its muscularity, the *Violin Concerto* is essentially lyrical, notably the adagio, and mirrors the mood of his pastoral *Second Symphony* in the same key.

But not the opening movement. This is the most tumultuous start of any violin concerto, with a 2-1/2 minute intro by the orchestra before the violin makes its frenetic entrance. Then, the eruption settles and the violin delivers a cascade of delicacy and sweetness before the drama appears again, the solo part replete with technical challenges. Most performances include the cadenza written by violinist Joseph Joachim, soloist at the premiere who had advised Brahms to simplify such a daunting work.

The sweetly poised adagio features one of the composer's loveliest woodwind melodies, which befuddled the famed violinist Pablo de Sarasate: "Does anyone imagine that I'm going to stand on stage, violin in hand, and listen to the oboe playing the only tune in the adagio?"

The finale begins with a lively dance – a Hungarian rondo – propelled by off-balance rhythms, double stops and an earthy melody on the fiddle. The concerto ends in one of the composer's most joyous codas.

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88

Duration: ca. 34 minutes

For the listener who knows little of Dvořák's music, what may come to mind is its likability. Almost everything he wrote feels homegrown, nurtured by rich soil, the themes warm and amiable. This isn't to say Dvořák wrote only happy music; he could summon at will great power and tension, evident in his last three symphonies alone. More important, Dvořák wove native folksong into his music with such ease and effectiveness that he remains Bohemia's most important musical nationalist.

Dvořák began experimenting with symphonic music after studying the works of Beethoven and Schubert. But the influence of the Viennese masters was more inspirational than literal; by the time he was 30, he had evolved a strong Czech sentiment, and his methods of composing were free to roam.

The composer's biggest success was his *New World Symphony*, but it rode the coattails of the two before it, which long ago became staples of the concert repertoire. The *Eighth* is an agreeable work that Dvořák began in 1889 and finished in less than three weeks. The work is sunny, full of fanciful improvisation and a wealth of harmonic tessellations.

The opening allegro sets a dark tone in G minor but quickly gives way to light, and some of the composer's most robust thematic touches. The adagio sways between C major and C minor and remains upbeat throughout. The third movement allegretto, a waltz, borrows themes from one of the composer's operas, and the finale opens with a brass fanfare and set of variations designed to bring down the house.

"Melodically, this is one of the most satisfying of symphonies," notes the music writer, Ethan Mordden. "But the work's charm lies in its wealth of sheer innocence, so surprised by the sorrowful clarity of its slow movement that it has to outdo itself dancing in the finale."

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