

Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Dvořák's New World Symphony

Julian Rachlin, *Conductor & Violin*
Sarah McElravy, *Violin & Viola*

Friday, Apr 12, 2024, Straz Center at 8:00 pm
Saturday, Apr 13, 2024, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm
Sunday, Apr 14, 2024, Mahaffey Theater at 2:00 pm

Hector Berlioz
(1803-1869)

Wolfgang A. Mozart
(1756-1791)

Antonín Dvořák
(1841-1904)

Roman Carnival Overture, Op. 9

Sinfonia Concertante, K.364 (320d)

- I. Allegro maestoso
- II. Andante
- III. Presto

Julian Rachlin, violin
Sarah McElravy, viola

Intermission

Symphony No. 9, Op. 95 "From the New World"

- I. Adagio – Allegro molto
- II. Largo
- III. Molto vivace
- IV. Allegro con fuoco

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Hector Berlioz (1803-69)

Roman Carnival Overture, Op. 9

Duration: ca. 8 minutes

To say Hector Berlioz wore his heart on his sleeve would be an understatement. Music for the eccentric French composer was not an objective art with rules and a scaffolding of notes, but an extension of his emotions and fantasies. To hear a work by Berlioz is to be immersed in autobiography.

“Which of the two powers, love or music, can elevate man to the most sublime heights?” he once said. “Why separate them? They are two wings of the soul.”

Berlioz was a mercurial, blunt, passionate and determined idealist. Had he chosen painting instead of composing, his canvases would quiver with pigment. His personality makes itself known in a single bar of music, undeniable and quickly etched in the mind. His skill as an orchestrator, penchant for vivid colorings, affinity for soaring literary subjects and an over-active imagination all made Berlioz not only a giant of 19th century music, but among the more fascinating artists in any field.

Everything for Berlioz was big. His colossal *Requiem, Te Deum* and five-hour *Les Troyens* require such large forces they are seldom performed, if for production cost alone. He wrote no significant chamber music. This may have been as much hard-wired egocentrism as a reflection of the era, notes the musicologist Jan Swafford: “It was an age when artists were expected to be excessive, profligate, on the edge of sanity. In other words, Berlioz’s personality and self-consciousness were symptomatic of his time.”

Berlioz fueled much of his thinking with literature, and by the time he entered the Paris Conservatory at age 22, he had immersed himself in the works of Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe and Sir Walter Scott. From books, Berlioz fashioned his music as program – as opposed to absolute, or abstract music – and each of his creations tells a vivid and imaginative story.

This is the case with his *Roman Carnival Overture*, intended to open the second act of the ill-fated opera *Benvenuto Cellini*. The English horn plays an arioso-like theme in the first section, followed by the orchestra depicting a carnival in a lively Italian dance known as the saltarello. This is full-throated music, virtuosic and splashy – just listen to the brass bellow – and remains one of the composer’s finest examples of orchestration.

Berlioz conducted the premiere of the eight-minute work in Paris in 1844, but with only one rehearsal to get things in order without his woodwind players, who were away on National Guard duty. When they returned for the first performance, they had to read the music sight unseen. Everyone apparently did a good job, as the audience insisted on a repeat performance as an encore.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Sinfonia Concertante in E Flat for Violin and Viola, K. 364

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

What can be said of Mozart that hasn’t been said a thousand times over? So much has been written about this precocious *wunderkind*, the effortless style of many of his 626 published compositions, the perfection of his operas, late symphonies and piano concertos, and his tragic death at age 35, that anything more seems redundant.

We can all agree, however, that Mozart was an innate musician who absorbed, analyzed and created art with uncanny ease and profound humanity. His vulnerability also reminds us that he was not a musical god, but a mortal.

The question is, what mortal could compose the *Sinfonia Concertante*, a blend of symphony and concerto that weds two sweetly matched string instruments? At age 23, Mozart imagined the work only a few years after completing his five concertos for violin, so his new creation might be thought of as a sixth – but a double concerto. It also is surprisingly mature in its abundance and treatment of musical material.

The opening movement, marked *maestoso*, begins with a two-minute orchestral introduction, almost like the overture to an opera. This is important because the development throughout is symphonic, organic and bursting with arioso-like phrasing. Violin and viola might be center stage, but every instrument etches its own individual voice.

The middle section is alleged to be a tribute to his mother, who died in Paris while accompanying her son on tour.

“It’s a conversation where Mozart says farewell to his mother;” notes TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “Something incredible happens here.”

This is among the composer’s most eloquent and expressive moments, and a true dialog, dipped in grief, between the soloists. All sadness vanishes in the *presto* finale, a return to good spirits with violin and viola voicing into the highest register as they weave their lines in and around the orchestra. So typical of Mozart, he responds to darkness with a ray of light.

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, From the New World

Duration: ca. 40 minutes

Any music lover who happened to be in New York in December of 1893 no doubt craved a ticket to Carnegie Hall, which opened with great fanfare two years earlier. The famed Bohemian composer Antonin Dvořák was in town for an occasion of special significance: the world premiere of his *Symphony No. 9*, composed on American soil and aptly titled *From the New World*.

Dvořák was a musician of major status – even Brahms praised his work – and his *Seventh* and *Eighth* symphonies had become repertoire standards, as they remain today. But the *Ninth* was special. Dvořák’s confidence and artistic skills were at their peak, and he found inspiration (not literal replication) in African-American spiritual songs.

“These (spirituals) can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States;” Dvořák wrote. “These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them.”

Dvořák served as head of the National Conservatory of Music in New York for three years, and during this time felt he should express an American sentiment. While he never directly quoted native American tunes, he turned to Henry Thacker Burleigh, an African-American student at the National Conservatory, who sang to the composer indigenous spirituals and southern plantation songs.

In his 2005 book *Classical Music in America: A History of its Rise and Fall*, Joseph Horowitz notes how the *Ninth* is distinctly American in flavor, yet at the same time manifestly European. This was, of course, an astounding feat coming from a composer so deeply rooted in Slavic idioms. The premiere of the *Ninth* also prompted one of the most elaborate music reviews in the history of newspapers, a 3,000-word essay by the eminent critic William J. Henderson, who raised the question of whether the symphony was in the least bit American.

The composer and critic Virgil Thomson, in a 1950 review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, called the symphony the “work of a European landscape painter charmed by American subjects,” and praised it as “intrinsically tender and imaginative.”

Dvořák cast the *Ninth* in the standard four movements of the Romantic-era symphony, although some have accused him of a patchwork style that merely strings together enchanting tunes. What they failed to understand is the power and momentum the composer lends to themes fueled by an extroverted self-assurance.

From the start, the music grabs listeners and nearly pulls them from their seats. The closing tune of the exposition, as you might agree, is similar to the old spiritual *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

The largo that follows features a sumptuous solo for the *cor anglais* (English horn) and introduces the famous reference to *Goin’ Home*. A rollicking scherzo – which mimics a rhythmic figure from the scherzo of Beethoven’s own *Ninth* – raises the blood pressure much like one of Dvořák’s *Slavonic Dances* and sets the stage for a thrilling finale. To create unity, Dvořák brings together earlier themes and charges them with a relentless rhythmic pulse that culminates in one of the most memorable climaxes in music.

Quarter note: The symphony is justly popular around the world, but it’s also a bit cosmic: The Apollo 11 astronauts brought a recording of the piece on their journey to the moon in 1969, the music being symbolic of exploring a “new world.”

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