Mendelssohn Violin Concerto – October 8, 2016

The Great Swiftness Andrew Norman
for Chamber Orchestra b. 1979

For centuries, composers have been inspired by poems and literary works, but it is only recently that many of them have started to recast visual art into musical metaphors. In the case of *The Great Swiftness*, composed in 2010 on commission by the Grand Rapids Symphony, Andrew Norman drew his inspiration from the bold, abstract curves of *La Grande Vitesse*, Alexander Calder's monumental stabile in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Great Swiftness is all about musical swishes and curves – or glissandi. In a pre-concert talk about the work at a Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra performance, Norman said: "In Grand Rapids, there's this absolutely fabulous sculpture by Alexander Calder…It's bright orange; it's about 50 feet tall; and it has these amazing swoops and curves. I've known this sculpture since I was a child, and when the [Grand Rapids] Symphony asked me to write I was, of course, thinking about this particular sculpture and asked myself what would it sound like if it were orchestra music. What would it sound like to go slipping and sliding across these amazing orange curves? And what does it sound like to walk around this sculpture and see it from all these different angles, and you see these amazing shapes that are all interacting with each other?"

The changes in orchestration, key and tempo suggest the shift in viewing angle. The wide, angular leaps, always executed on the slide, suggest the formal, constant aspects of the piece.

Norman is a graduate from the University of Southern California and Yale. A lifelong enthusiast of structure, particularly architecture, he composes music – chamber and orchestral – often inspired by the physical forms and textures he encounters in the visual world. He is also heavily involved in music education and has written numerous pieces for youth ensembles.

Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64 Felix Mendelssohn
1809-1847

As a mature artist, Felix Mendelssohn was acclaimed throughout Europe as a composer and conductor, especially in his native Germany and in England, where he had a private audience with the young Queen Victoria, who sang for him after he had played for her. His untimely death from unknown causes created a profound shock, and Mendelssohn societies promoting his music and ideas quickly sprang up all over middle and northern Europe.

Fortunately for the development of Mendelssohn's prodigious talents, his carefully selected teachers were strict and demanding. Even as a mature artist, he was extremely self-critical, constantly requesting feedback and carefully perfecting his compositions. The Concerto in E minor had a long gestation period. Mendelssohn started the concerto in 1838 but did not finish it until six years later. He wrote it for his friend, the famed violinist Ferdinand David (1810-1873), concertmaster of the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig where Mendelssohn served as conductor from 1835 to 1843. The composer sought – and took – David's advice on technical aspects throughout its composition. David finally premiered it in Leipzig in

1845, but Mendelssohn was ill and unable to attend. Now one of the staples of violin repertory, contemporaneous audiences considered the Concerto daring and innovative

From the first bar, the *Allegro molto appassionato* broke new ground. Instead of the usual orchestral exposition of the main themes, the violin enters at once with the principal theme on which the movement is built. For the second theme, the roles are reversed, with the winds introducing the theme. The cadenza, largely David's creation, is placed unconventionally before the recapitulation. Relocating the cadenza away from its traditional place at the end of the movement stresses continuity with the second movement, which follows without pause.

The *Andante* emerges out of a single quiet bassoon tone, emanating from the last chord of the opening movement. It is joined by other instruments for a short transitional passage, after which the solo violin introduces the simple, almost religious theme.

Another transition, based on the opening theme of the Concerto, leads into the *Allegro molto vivace*. Mendelssohn saved the demonstration of the violin's virtuoso possibilities for this sparkling Finale. After an orchestral fanfare for the winds, the soloist enters with a flourish followed by a delicate, dancing theme that dominates the movement and recalls the atmosphere of the teenaged composer's first great hit, the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98 Johannes Brahms
1833-1897

The Fourth Symphony nearly didn't make it to the concert stage.

Brahms spent the summers of 1884 and 1885 in Mürzzuschlag, in the high Austrian Alps, composing the symphony. Coming back from his walk one day, he found his lodgings in flames. Luckily, his friends and neighbors had saved most of his books and papers, including the manuscript of the Fourth Symphony.

Brahms had his doubts about how the new work would be accepted by the general public, especially in light of its somber tone and of the unusual fourth movement. In a letter to his friend, the conductor Hans von Bülow, he wrote: "It tastes of the climate here – the cherries are hardly sweet here, you wouldn't eat them!" Even his friends, including Clara Schumann, had their reservations and suggested changes, including scrapping the third movement and the finale. Luckily, Brahms trusted his own judgment and changed nothing. The symphony premiered in Meiningen, in October 1885, Hans von Bülow conducting. It was only a moderate success, taking its time to win public favor. Vienna in particular remained cool to its charms for many years.

It has been said that this symphony was the culmination of Brahms's development of the symphonic structure and especially of the blending of modern harmonic idioms with formal structures of the past. It is also a work in which the composer worked more with development of short motivic elements rather than extensive themes. Brahms was a committed classicist, to the point that such avant garde musical thinkers as Richard Wagner set themselves at ideological odds with him, generating considerable acrimony on the German music scene.

The symphony opens with a gentle four-note motive, which is ingeniously crafted into the fabric of the entire movement, often subtly transformed but always perceptible. The principal contrast is created by a fanfare-like second theme.

Classical slow movements were generally cast in ternary (ABA) form. The structure is common both in Western classical music and folk music; it was seriously over-farmed in the eighteenth-century opera as the da capo aria. Symphonic composers, however, frequently used the basic structure as a launching pad for their own modifications. The *Andante moderato* is a modified ABA structure, to which Brahms adds a repeat of the B section plus a coda. The flowing main theme is introduced by a horn solo that leaves the key of the movement temporarily in question. The entrance of the clarinets, however, clears things up, although in a surprising way.

The third movement is a scherzo, but in sonata form instead of the Classical "minuet/trio" structure. In sharp contrast to the flowing theme of the preceding movement, it employs a somewhat quirky, angular first theme with irregular phrase lengths and pauses. The movement features some unusual orchestration, including the heavy use of the timpani, as well as the triangle, piccolo and contrabassoon.

The fourth movement is one of the most unusual in the history of the Romantic symphony. It is in the form of a passacaglia, a baroque dance form in which a short motive in the bass is continually repeated as the upper parts perform variations over it. Brahms's movement presents a chromatic eight-note motive, or ground, taken from Bach's Cantata 150, with thirty variations. The opening, with a fanfare-like statement for all the woodwinds and brass, ensures that everyone can recognize the ground before Brahms submerges it in inner voices. Brahms breaks the potential monotony of the form by varying the orchestration, creating seamless elisions between the repetitions of the ground and continually ramping up the musical tension by falsely suggesting that the movement is coming to a close when it is only reaching one of several internal climaxes.

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