

PROGRAM NOTES

by Pam Davis

Grażyna Bacewicz (1909 - 1969)

Overture for Orchestra (1943)

Until recently, Grażyna Bacewicz's music was rarely heard in the United States, even though her works are quite numerous. She studied composition, piano, and violin at the Warsaw Conservatory, beginning at age 15. Later, she received a grant to study composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Her reputation as a violinist grew alongside that as a composer. She wrote seven violin concertos, usually performing them in their premieres.

Before the outbreak of World War II, she returned to Warsaw and worked as Concertmaster of the Polish Radio Orchestra. During the war, she gave secret underground concerts. The *Overture for Orchestra* was written during the German occupation of Poland, from which she fled the following year during an uprising. The premiere did not take place until four months after Germany's surrender, as part of the Krakow Festival of Contemporary Music.

Opening with timpani and frantic figures in the strings, the music is propelled ever forward. This earnest drive drops off to allow a lyrical woodwind andante, with intertwining melodies. Before long, the scrubby pursuit resumes in the violins. Brass fanfares join the fray, and the energy is sustained until the end.

- ♪ 1943 WORLD EVENTS: Warsaw Ghetto Uprising begins, Sergei Rachmaninoff dies, Mick Jagger is born
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: September 1945 in Krakow, Poland
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: tonight is the SSO premiere

Jean Sibelius (1865 - 1957)

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Minor, Opus 47 (1905)

Like Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky, Sibelius wrote only one violin concerto. But unlike the others, Sibelius's violin concerto is his only concerto for solo instrument and orchestra. Trained as a violinist, a story is told of him as a boy climbing a huge rock overlooking a lake in his native Finland and playing his violin, communing with his beloved nature.

Sibelius taught violin for a time and played in the string quartet at the Helsinki Conservatory before receiving a government grant at age 32 that enabled him to devote himself to composing exclusively. This work, which is now a star in the violin repertoire, was actually written and performed in 1903, but underwent major revisions two years later to the current form.

Entering in the second measure, the audience is not kept waiting for the soloist through an extended orchestral tutti. The solo violin enters rhapsodically over muted violins. The melodic sweep sets the surging lyricism in motion. As a violinist composer, Sibelius provided his own well-thought-out cadenza, but placed it midway in the movement, rather than at the end, contributing to the forward momentum.

Tender melancholy characterizes the opening of the second movement following brief woodwind sighing.

Although no programmatic descriptions were assigned, an early reviewer heard in the last movement "an ancient folk song in which the old careless bravery had been replaced by a kind of

contemplative fear of death.” Some time later, Sibelius seemed to somewhat concur, referring to the rondo movement as a “Danse Macabre.”

Remarkable facility and technic are required for its performance, what with its double stops, up and down bow staccatos, harmonics, quick jumps, and arpeggios from the lowest to the highest reaches. The solo writing is never gratuitous, but an organic part of the whole.

- ♪ 1905 WORLD EVENTS: French novelist Jules Verne dies, Debussy’s *La Mer* premieres, Tommy Dorsey is born
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: 1905 in Berlin, directed by Richard Strauss with Carl Halir as soloist
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: April 2015 with Kyle Wiley Pickett conducting, Paul Hauer as soloist

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827)

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Opus 67 (1808)

How many superlatives apply to this masterwork? Among them is that it is the most often recorded of all symphonies, beginning as early as 1913.

Beethoven worked on this symphony over four years’ time, while he was plagued by his increasing deafness, unrequited love affairs, financial difficulties, and disorderly living conditions. Nevertheless, also during this time of his trial-and-error sketches on the Fifth, he also composed another symphony, (therefore labelled the Fourth), his violin concerto, and the fourth piano concerto.

The premiere was a massive concert featuring an all-Beethoven program: the fifth *and* sixth symphonies, the fourth piano concerto with the composer as soloist, the aria *Ah! Perfido*, three parts of his C Major Mass, and the Choral Fantasy. Whew! The concert was four hours long and the hall was freezing. Apparently, Beethoven, who was conducting, had to restart a piece, due to a mistake. But, as they say, the rest is history, as the fifth’s immortality is uncontested.

The fierce onslaught of the iconic opening is probably the most famous symphonic theme ever written. Brief and powerful, it is said to have been referred to by Beethoven himself as fate knocking at the door. The motto permeates the first movement, sometimes as a roar, sometimes as a whisper. The extremely concise exposition, development, and recapitulation is interrupted by a mini cadenza in the oboe. But the hard-driving coda concludes furiously.

Variations (five) on a double theme comprise the second movement, the first of which is heard in the violas and cellos in A flat major, the second in clarinets and bassoons in C major.

The scherzo begins with a stealthy arpeggio in the low strings to which the horns demand attention with an assertive theme based on the motto’s rhythm. There is very little of the traditional dance character of minuets and scherzos, save the “trio” theme begun in the basses and cellos. The movement contains a delicate transition passage with the first violins weaving up and down accompanied by throbbing basses. This eventually crescendos into the triumphant C major of the last movement without pause.

The finale opens with a heroic tutti fanfare theme which includes, for the first time in Beethoven’s symphonies, three trombones, a contrabassoon, and a piccolo. The turbulence of this movement comes to a halt with a reminder of the third movement leading right back into the triumphant surge. Listen for the insistent piccolo assertions. The excitement continues to the thrilling coda and concluding *presto*.

- ♪ 1808 WORLD EVENTS: First college orchestra in the United States is founded at Harvard, Jefferson Davis is born, the International Slave Trade Ban is enacted by Congress
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: December 22, 1808, in Vienna
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: March 2018 with Kyle Wiley Pickett conducting