

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Pam Davis

### **Zhou Long (born 1953)**

#### **The Rhyme of Taigu (2003)**

Upon the loosening of restrictions after China's "Cultural Revolution", several composers chose to migrate to the United States, among them Zhou Long and his wife Chen-Yi. Internationally recognized for his creation of music fusing East and West, Dr. Zhou is Distinguished Research Professor of Composition at University of Missouri, Kansas City Conservatory, and a recipient of multiple honors, commissions, and fellowships, including the Pulitzer Prize and a Grammy nomination.

As a child he studied piano, but was subjected to years of enforced hardship driving a tractor. Finally, he was able to attend Beijing's Central Conservatory of Music, where he completed a Western course of music education. His years collecting Chinese folk songs and his cultural heritage remain strong compositional influences.

Zhou's experience uniquely qualifies him to infuse his music with elements of China and the west. Inspired by traditional drumming, *The Rhyme of Taigu* unfolds as three sections of one movement. *Taigu* is the Chinese word for Taiko, or Japanese "fat" drums. The work is percussion-forward, aggressively driving throughout. The opening *Andante* features a steady, ominous cadence from the drums. Solo clarinet introduces the *Lento and Accelerando*. Jazzy syncopations characterize the *Presto* with compelling rhythmic ostinatos to a jarring finish.

*The Rhyme of Taigu*, dedicated to his wife, Chen-Yi, on her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, was co-commissioned by the Barlow Development for Music Composition at Brigham Young University and the Singapore Symphony.

- ♪ WORLD EVENTS: Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg is born, Spirit Rover is launched to Mars, Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers) dies
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: Singapore Symphony, May 2003
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: tonight is the SSO's premiere

### **Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)**

#### **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, Opus 77 (1878)**

Dedicated to his friend, the great Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim, who also performed the premiere, the Brahms violin concerto is one of the most loved and celebrated works in the violin repertoire. Written the summer after he completed his second symphony, this piece was composed at the same idyllic retreat in Austria, where Brahms exclaimed that melodies were everywhere.

Joachim was consulted every step of the way in the writing of the concerto, most often by mail. However, at times Brahms would thank him for his input on revisions and then disregard it. But much of the concerto, and not just the first-movement cadenza, bears Joachim's influence. After the premiere, but before it was published, Joachim convinced Brahms to make additional changes.

Before the violin solo enters, the opening tutti introduces three themes and works up to an insistent string climax, only to fall away and invite the soloist to expand and reinterpret the

material magnificently. Following the glorious cadenza, the coda brings a serene return to the opening theme only to be reawakened with a stirring finish.

The work was originally to be in four movements, but during the process Brahms wrote to Joachim of abandoning that plan, saying about the warm and thoughtful second movement, “I have written a meager adagio instead.” The oboe is the star of this movement until the solo violin joins and varies the tranquil melody. The pastoral mood weaves throughout until at the end the violin and oboe alternately convers

The finale brings out the fire of the gypsy spirit from Brahms’s early experience accompanying Hungarian violinist Eduard Reményi and as a tribute to his friend Joachim. The energetic rondo is filled with brilliant passage work and double stops. Powerful final chords conclude the movement after swirling triplets and virtuosic passage work trail off once again relaxing the excitement.

Though exceedingly difficult for the soloist, there are no gratuitous fireworks; the virtuoso playing is always in the service of expression. The orchestra has a larger role than in most concertos up to this point, which may partially explain why the concerto was not an instant triumph; critics were lukewarm at best in the early days. Always self-critical and sensitive, it is said that Brahms burned the draft of a second violin concerto following the searing critique of this masterpiece.

- ♪ WORLD EVENTS: George M. Cohan is born, H.M.S. Pinafore premieres, Tchaikovsky’s fourth symphony premieres
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: January 1, 1879, Leipzig, the composer conducting
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: April 2021, Giora Schmidt soloist, Kyle Wiley Pickett conducting

### **George Gershwin George Gershwin (1898-1937)**

**Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture** (1942) arrangement by Robert Russell Bennett

Gershwin’s last major work, *Porgy and Bess*, is an opera dealing with African-America life in Charleston, South Carolina in the 1920s. It tells the story of Porgy, a disabled man living in the slums, and his attempts to rescue Bess from the clutches of Crown, her pimp, and Sportin’ Life, a drug dealer. Gershwin considered it to be his finest work, but it was not a commercial success until long after his death. Over time, the work gained acceptance from the opera community, and thanks to Ira Gershwin’s decree that only blacks would be allowed to play the lead roles in U.S. productions, *Porgy and Bess*, which premiered in 1935, launched many a prominent career.

Tonight, you will hear *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture*, arranged by Gershwin’s good friend and sometime assistant, Robert Russell Bennett. This medley, which includes most of the best-known songs from the opera, was commissioned by Fritz Reiner, conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony. Reiner laid out the order of the excerpts and even the keys, aiming for exactly 24 minutes - to fit three 78-rpm records.

The music reflects Gershwin’s jazz roots, but also draws on the southern black traditions of jubilees, praying songs, street cries, work songs, and spirituals.

- ♪ WORLD EVENTS: 1935 – Babe Ruth retires, game of *Monopoly* first sold, Stalin attends Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth*
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: (of tonight’s medley) 1943, Pittsburgh Symphony, with Fritz Reiner conducting

♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: February 2018, Kyle Wiley Pickett conducting