

Rossini – Wagner – Bizet – Vivaldi – Bernstein** – all were great composers for the stage and (except Bizet) larger than life personalities. Memorable melodies and emotional range give the works on today’s program lasting appeal and substantiate Leonard Bernstein’s credo: “**Life without music is unthinkable. Music without life is academic. That is why my contact with music is a total embrace.**” But one can find irony, too, in the history of these famous pieces and perhaps a touch of Koheleth’s words – “all is vanity under the sun” (Ecclesiastes).

Gioacchino Rossini made *bel canto* opera the rage of Italy. The style showed off singers’ extraordinary technique, pure tone, and (sometimes) taste. “Rossini had genius, he had wit and sparkle, and he had a never-failing melodic gift. ‘Give me a laundry list and I will set it to music,’ he bragged” (Harold Schonberg, *Lives of the Great Composers*). From 1810, age 18, through 1829 he churned out an average of two operas a year, many of them hits such as *The Italian in Algeria*, *Othello*, *Cinderella*, and *The Barber of Seville*. To sustain this productivity he borrowed freely from himself, relied on popular libretti (*The Barber’s* was pinched from another opera, while *Othello* got a happy ending), and ended every act with a rousing chorus. For the overture Rossini admitted that often he would “wait until the evening before the opening night. Nothing primes inspiration more than necessity, whether it be the presence of a copyist waiting for your work, or the prodding of an impresario tearing his hair.” In 1824 he moved to Paris to direct the *Théâtre Italien*, culminating in 1829 with the production of *William Tell*, to “adulation that was all but hysterical” (Schonberg). Yet, half-way through his life Rossini ceased writing operas and, save two religious works, only dabbled in music. Why? Proffered explanations include satisfaction with wealth, incapacitation by hypochondria and insomnia, and distress at the corruption of singing and musical taste. Perhaps most crucial was Rossini’s growing obsession with “what he regarded as the hollowness, the utter futility of fame” (J.W.K. (1969) *Music & Letters* 50: 182).



William Tell

William Tell is based on Friedrich Schiller’s play about the legendary Swiss national hero who led an uprising against oppressive Austrian occupation. The opera is best known for its **Overture**, an orchestral suite certainly not dashed off at the last moment. “At Dawn” opens with cellos in five parts, the solo prominent. The bucolic peace is shattered by “The Storm”, reminiscent of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony. “The Calm” that inevitably follows features a *ranz des vaches*, a melody to gather cattle, with the English horn imitating the Swiss alphorn. This tune is now a cliché of television cartoons. The famed “Lone Ranger” fanfare begins the rousing “Finale”, a depiction of Tell’s call to arms in the name of *Victoire et liberté*.

** “**Wagner’s Adagio for Clarinet and Strings**” in fact was composed by **Heinrich Baermann**, an early 19th century German clarinetist. The manuscript’s owner attributed the work to Richard Wagner and offered it to a publisher in 1922. Only in the 1960s was the piece identified as the middle movement of Baermann’s Clarinet Quintet No. 3 from 1821. According to musicologist John Newhill (1971), “Baermann’s playing of slow movements is reputed to have brought tears to the eyes of his audience – it is easy to see that this *Adagio* provided a perfect vehicle for his expressive playing.” Sadly, few of Baermann’s compositions reached the same high standard. However, as a performer he was considered without equal, and he inspired works for clarinet by Felix Mendelssohn, Carl Maria von Weber, Giacomo Meyerbeer. It seems fitting that, even if under the wrong name, a small but beautiful example of his writing survives in the repertoire.

The soloists for this program are members of the Chapel Hill Philharmonia.

Clarinetist **Alex Vogel** is a retired chemical process research director who has maintained a lifelong involvement in music, performing with orchestras, bands, and chamber music groups. He now serves as principal clarinet and president of the board of the Chapel Hill Philharmonia. Alex has studied clarinet with Frank Kowalsky and Donald L. Oehler.

Violonists **Elizabeth (“Zab”) Johnson** and **Elizabeth Weinzierl** are colleagues in the Department of Neurobiology at the Duke University School of Medicine. Zab, a graduate of Mount Holyoke College (B.A. in psychobiology and music) and New York University (Ph.D. in Neural Science) is a postdoctoral fellow and studies color vision. Elizabeth W., a graduate of Emory University (B.A. in music and chemistry), is pursuing an M.D./Ph.D. degree. In addition to performing in the Chapel Hill Philharmonia, they play in a string quartet with Philharmonia members Steve Ellis and Laura Lengowski, and Elizabeth W. is also a fine pianist. Zab expects her first baby this June. Elizabeth W. does not expect her first baby anytime soon.

By his mid-30s Rossini completed nearly 40 operas and gained wide acclaim. By age 36 **Georges Bizet**, a child prodigy and winner of the prestigious *Prix de Rome*, had produced only a handful of stage works, none a popular success. Then came **Carmen**. Bizet wrote the opera in Paris – he spent most of his life in the Montmartre district. It was commissioned by the *Opéra-Comique* which in 1875 was a home for middle-class family entertainments that “were highly sentimental, unambiguously moral in character, and invariably ended happily” (C. Jenkins). Bizet had a different vision. He insisted on a libretto based on a novella by Prosper Mérimée that defied *opéra comique* conventions. “Carmen, a Spanish Gypsy [stereotyped as immoral and sexually arousing], overtly woos and seduces her arrestor: the captain of the guard, Don José...[He] allows her to escape..., foolishly believing in her promises of love. Instead he is punished for his actions... and loses his job, honor, dignity, and pride. In the end, Don José, a broken man, pitifully pleads for Carmen’s love, which she has intermittently promised to a rich bullfighter. In his despair and anger, Don José murders her” (A. Helbig). Predictably, “the love between these two odious beings” (a contemporary critic), the realistic passion of mezzo-soprano Galli-Marié in the title role, and Bizet’s sophisticated score shocked the audience. Although the opera ran 37 performances, Bizet was depressed by its largely negative reception. Suffering from chronic throat infections and a heart condition, he died three months after the premiere, unaware that *Carmen* would become one of the most beloved operas.



Galli-Marié as Carmen

The **Carmen Suite** for orchestra comprises six episodes from the opera. It opens with an ominous *Prelude*, followed by a lyrical Spanish folk dance (*Aragonaise*) played by the oboe. The *Intermezzo* features flute and harp. The *Seguidilla* (English horn solo) is Carmen’s seductive song to Don José, while in *Dragon d’Alcala* (bassoon solo) she retreats with the smuggler band to the mountains, hearing Don José’s song in the distance. The martial *Les Toreadors* is thematic for the bullfighter Escamillo on whom Carmen publicly bestows her favor, setting off Don José’s murderous attack.

Antonio Vivaldi, the “Redhead Priest”, wrote over 50 operas and fathered the concerto – he composed more than 500. His milieu is evoked by Jeannette Sorrell of Apollo’s Fire: “Venice, first half of the 18th century. The glittering city floating on the sea is...a wonder of the world...Venice becomes absorbed in self-indulgence...and the pursuit of pleasure...European princes and repressed British aristocrats flock here, where more than 10,000 elegant prostitutes are not the least of the attractions...Music is the other supreme attraction, flourishing in...eight opera theatres...It also thrives in the four religious orphanages that Venice maintains for its several thousand illegitimate and orphaned girls.” Vivaldi began work at one of these nunnery-conservatories, the *Pio Ospedale della Pietà*, in 1703 and remained associated with it for most of his career. Under his tutelage “the girls give world-class virtuoso performances, and their Sunday concerts (technically church services) are the greatest tourist attraction of Venice. The girls, dressed in white, are partly screened from view by a wrought-iron lattice, much to the chagrin of the audience” (Sorrell). Vivaldi became an international celebrity, traveled widely, and received commissions from royalty, including France’s Louis XV and Austria’s Charles VI. Late in his life changing tastes brought harder times. Vivaldi relocated to Vienna, banking on the Emperor’s favor to improve his failing finances. However, Charles VI died and Vivaldi too soon succumbed, probably to complications of asthma. Despite his great output, fame, and impact on contemporaries such as J. S. Bach, Vivaldi’s work lapsed into obscurity until a revival in the mid-20th century.

The **Concerto for Two Violins in A minor**, Op. 3/8, from *L’Estro armonico* (published 1711), typifies the Vivaldi concerto – two fast movements flanking a slow one. The opening *Allegro* is in *ritornello* form; the theme returns frequently, like a pop refrain, often embellished by the soloists. The two violins are sometimes in unison or thirds, and at other times trade leading and accompanying roles. The slow movement, in melancholy D minor, features long solo melodies over an *ostinato* bass line. The energetic third movement highlights virtuosic playing, interweaving the two soloists, but with an expressive theme for the second violin alone before the lead voices rejoin for a fiery conclusion.

Leonard Bernstein burst dramatically into public view in 1943, age 25, as a last minute replacement for Bruno Walter to conduct a nationally broadcast concert. Flamboyantly charismatic, yet with a professorial touch befitting his Harvard education, “Lenny” captivated audiences from the podium and through televised Young People’s Concerts. He was electric, eclectic, and ecumenical – wearing musical and social hearts on his sleeve. He became music director of the New York Philharmonic in 1958, championed 20th century composers such as Ives, Gershwin, Copland, and Shostakovich, and won numerous Grammy awards. He performed creditably on piano. He also composed three symphonies, two operas, and