Chapel Hill Philharmonia

Sunday, 30 April 2023
3:00 p.m.

Moeser Auditorium
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Donald L. Oehler, Music Director

Happily Free

Hungarian March from *La Damnation de Faust*, Op 24 Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Piano Concerto in C Minor, Op 16 Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

Moderato

Young Artist Concerto Competition Winner: Benjamin Luo, piano

— Intermission —

Symphony in F Major, Op 90 Johannes Brahms (1832-1896)

Allegro con brio
Andante
Poco allegretto
Allegro; un poco sostenuto

North Carolina Arts Council
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ORANGE COUNTY ARTS COMMISSION

Happily Free

Today we present works by two composers who, at one point in their lives, experienced the musical version of writer's block, but who broke through to artistic freedom and a period of great creativity. And we begin with a work by a composer who never seemed to lack self-confidence.

Berlioz: Hungarian March from *La Damnation de Faust*, Op 24

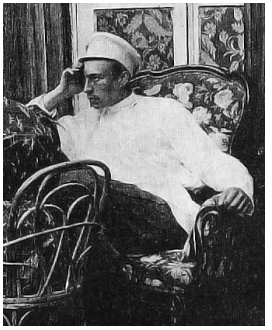
Hector Berlioz and his music have often been put down as eccentric curiosities. After all, he was sent to Paris by his physician father to study medicine, not music, and he had almost no musical training before then. But he fell in love with the cultural life of the city, and began studying music on the side (sort of: he never learned to play an instrument well). He wanted to write music, and was soon applying for the prestigious Prix de Rome for composers. He failed to make the first cut, but that didn't deter him. After finishing school he rejected medical practice to enroll at the Conservatoire. A few years later, after writing the *Symphonie Fantastique*, he applied again and won the Prix de Rome.

By 1846 he was well known enough to undertake a tour of Europe as a conductor, performing some of his compositions in the concerts. For a stop in Pest, Hungary — before it merged with Buda — he made an arrangement of a Hungarian favorite called the Rákóczi march. He knew his audience: it was a time of nationalist fervor, leading in 1848 to Hungary's unsuccessful war for independence from the Austrian empire. The response to the march, as reported by the composer, was tumultuous.

During that time Berlioz had become enthralled by Goethe's *Faust*, and decided to set it to music. The result is a rambling musico-dramatic work that has rarely been performed in full. But into its first scene, where Faust is reminiscing, Berlioz inserted his Hungarian march. This required him to place Faust in Hungary at the start of the story — which certainly would have surprised Goethe.

Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto in C Minor, Op 16 (first movement)

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born into affluence. His mother's dowry had included five estates given by her father. But her husband was not a good businessman. One after another, the estates had to be sold to pay debts. So by the time Sergei was studying music seriously the money was running out; and he was not a model student, failing his exams to the point that he had to leave St. Petersburg for Moscow. There he thrived and attracted the attention of Tchaikovsky among others. He wrote a piano concerto and a one-act opera, but the work that most people know from that time is the Prelude in C-sharp Minor. He soon finished a symphony and began work on a second concerto.

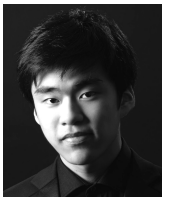


Rachmaninoff during his period of depression

Then disaster, in the form of a terrible and brutally panned performance of his symphony. (Some blamed the performers, especially the conductor Glazunov, who was said to be drunk.) This rejection sent Rachmaninoff into a depression that prevented him from composing and finishing the concerto. Friends tried to help, and they had connections. He was sent to visit Tolstoy, which only made it worse. Then someone recommended that he consult a hypnotist, a certain Dr. Dahl. With his patient dozing on the couch, Dr. Dahl intoned to him as follows: "You will begin to write your concerto ... You will work with great facility ... The concerto will be of an excellent quality."

It worked, somehow. Rachmaninoff, now happily freed from self-doubt, completed the concerto and dedicated it to Dr. Dahl. It was first performed on 9 November 1901, with the composer as soloist. This, the first of 145 performances he gave of the concerto, was an immediate and overwhelming success. Some critics have grumbled, but the public has always loved it, especially for its wealth of directly affecting melody. It is by far the most often performed of his major works. (It also holds the record among classical works for the most American popular ballads based on its melodies: Frank Sinatra used the second themes of the first and third movements in the 1940s and 1950s, and Eric Carmen used a theme of the second movement in the 1970s.)

The first movement opens in a unique way: the soloist alone plays a series of eight chords alternating with a deep bass octave, ending with a short cadence leading to the first subject. Introduced by the violins and violas in unison, this is a long melodic line passed from one set of voices to another over nearly 50 measures while the soloist plays rolling arpeggios. A transition passage in a faster tempo leads to the relative major, setting up the famous second theme, played by the soloist. After this is elaborated, brasses announce the development, largely based on the second theme. The recapitulation opens with strings in octaves playing the first theme while the soloist accompanies in the style of a march. The second theme is reprised in a dreamy half-tempo by the solo horn. Then things move quickly: a short coda with an accelerando leads to three short sharp chords ending the movement.



Fourteen-year-old **Benjamin Luo**, a middle-schooler who hails from Apex, North Carolina, began his piano study with Florence Ko at age five. Since then, he has competed in various piano competitions and has garnered over forty first-prize awards in a myriad of piano competitions, including eighteen wins above the state level. Apart from music, Benjamin enjoys track & field, building with LEGOs, and playing video games.

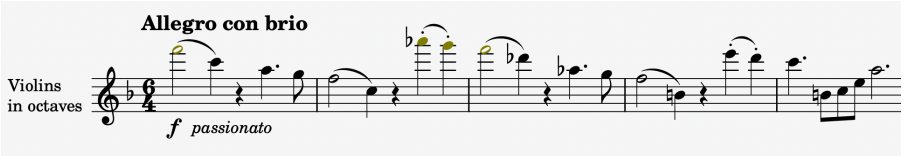
Brahms: Symphony in F Major, Op 90

Young Johannes Brahms, enjoying the company of Robert and Clara Schumann and violinist Joseph Joachim, invented for himself a musical motto: F-A-F, standing for *frei aber froh* (free but happy). This was in joking response to Joachim's F-A-E: *frei aber einsam* (free but lonely). Later, when he was a famous composer, Brahms didn't make much of his motto and never explained why he chose it. But the symphony we play today begins with chords on F-A-F. It's unlikely to be coincidental.

Brahms was over 50 when he wrote this symphony, at the height of his powers and fame. He had presented his first symphony eight years earlier, after a long period of gestation. Once past his anxiety at putting forward a symphony in competition (as he seems to have imagined it) with Beethoven, he was free and happy, as his motto says. The second symphony came only a year later. Then followed two concert overtures, the violin concerto, the second piano concerto, and numerous smaller works. He was now Dr. Brahms, having received an honorary doctorate. So in the summer of 1883, in a house above Wiesbaden overlooking the Rhine, he sketched out his third symphony. Back in Vienna in the fall, he played the sketches for friends including Antonin Dvořák, who found it surpassed the other two symphonies in beauty. The finished work was first performed that December by the Vienna Philharmonic under Hans Richter.

The shortest of Brahms's symphonies, it is as Tovey says, "technically by far the most difficult … mainly in terms of rhythm, phrasing and tone." Perhaps this is why it is the least often performed of the four. It is also the only one in which all the movements end quietly.

The first movement opens with the motto chords referred to above — except that A becomes A flat, setting up the kind of major-minor ambiguity Brahms loved to employ — and then a theme with cascading downward intervals, in alternating major and minor modes:



This recalls a theme from Schumann's "Rhenish" symphony. Perhaps daily views of the Rhine inspired Brahms too. Perhaps he recalled his happy time thirty years earlier with Robert and Clara (especially the latter) in Düsseldorf on the Rhine. Perhaps the "murmuring" Lorelei Rock just downstream from Wiesbaden kindled his imagination. (Or perhaps it was the splendid Rieslings from the nearby Rheingau vineyards.) In any case, the movement seems imbued with the spirit of Germany's sacred river.

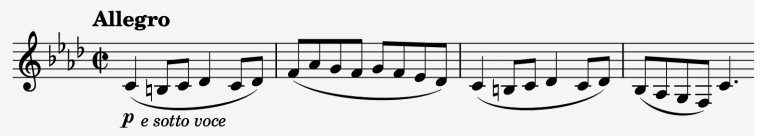

The Lorelei Rock

Brahms sets the second theme, not in C major as sonata form would dictate, but in A major, making the key structure of the movement also F-A-F. This theme is in 9/4 rhythm, three times three-four, giving it a gentle folk dance lilt. It provides much of the material for the short development. After a fairly regular recapitulation and a brief coda the movement ends with a soft restatement of the opening theme.

The second movement, a gentle *Andante* in C major, opens with a lovely melody in clarinets and bassoons. The second theme is a soft chorale, which also plays an important role in the final movement. The first two notes of this chorale create a theme of their own, the pattern ♩𝅗𝅥 passing from one set of voices to another, with ambiguous harmonies and intervals. It sounds very "modern", especially for Brahms. In the coda the F-A flat-F of the very opening underpins the harmony of the final cadence in the upper winds.

For the *Poco allegretto* in C minor, Brahms turns to a melody he could well have heard a Gypsy violinist playing in a Viennese café. (He is said to have used tunes from such cafés in his Hungarian Dances.) Introduced by the cellos, this theme becomes a duet with the first violins, then the winds take over. In the middle section, which moves back and forth between major and minor modes, the dynamic emphasis is placed on the last beat of the measure rather than the first, giving a sliding feeling to the melody. The reprise of the first theme is given to a solo horn. Then the woodwinds follow, and finally the cellos and first violins, in three octaves. A simple and beautiful movement.

The first three movements presented nature, beauty and charm, but little drama. The finale, in F minor, makes up for that lack. It opens ominously with strings and bassoons, in a hushed tone:



This is followed by a variant of the soft chorale from the second movement. Then the storm breaks. Fierce chords punctuate the opening theme. Horns and cellos try a heroic tune in C major, but it doesn't last long as the tempest returns. The development sets fragments of the opening theme against the chords of the chorale, now almost angry sounding. The recapitulation rushes by. It is all tightly organized and very effective, sweeping the listener along with it.

But the storm subsides; the tempo relaxes; the key returns to F major; over rustling strings the winds intone the chorale like a benediction. At the very end the opening theme from the first movement appears once more, floating gently down in the muted strings. It is like the close of an opera by Wagner, whose works Brahms admired. Wagner had died shortly before Brahms began working on the symphony. Coincidence? Perhaps, but no other orchestral work by Brahms ends this way.

Notes by Lawrence Evans