Chapel Hill Philharmonia

7:30 p.m. May 6, 2018
Moeser Auditorium
Hill Hall, UNC-Chapel Hill

Music Director
Donald L. Oehler

In the Shadow of Giants

The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave), Op. 26 — **Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47)**

Violin Concerto No. 5 in A minor, Op. 37 — **Henri Vieuxtemps (1820-81)**

- Allegro non troppo – Moderato
- Adagio
- Allegro con fuoco

Caroline Jesalva, Violin

Young Artist Concerto Competition Award

Intermission

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 — **Johannes Brahms (1833-97)**

- Un poco sostenuto – Allegro
- Andante sostenuto
- Un poco allegretto e grazioso
- Adagio – Più Andante – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

Please join us after the concert for a reception in the rotunda

Kindly silence all mobile devices and refrain from flash photography

In the Shadow of Giants

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonorable graves.

– William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2

If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

– Isaac Newton (1675)

Composers of every era face the same conundrum. Will they skulk in shadows cast by heroes of the past, or will they stand on those giants' shoulders and envision compellingly innovative music? As the physicist Stephen Hawking was inspired by Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein (he borrowed Newton's aphorism about giants for a book title), so composers born in the 19th century sought to grow beyond the models of Johann Sebastian Bach, Joseph Haydn, and Wolfgang Amadé Mozart. But the colossal figure who most immediately dominated their worldview was Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). This evening's concert by the Chapel Hill Philharmonia explores how three composers from the first post-Beethovian generation responded to the legacy of that titan and his predecessors to build music's future.

Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*

Felix Mendelssohn, born in 1809, and his older sister Fanny were prodigies at least on the scale of Wolfgang and "Nannerl" Mozart a half century earlier. The Mendelssohn children were schooled privately at their home in Berlin, where their father Abraham was a prosperous banker. Their mother Lea focused on Felix and Fanny's musical education. While both made astonishing progress, only Felix was groomed as a professional musician. Fanny became her brother's lifelong confidante as he grew into a lauded composer, performer on piano and organ, and conductor and educator. His musical breadth was matched perhaps only by Leonard Bernstein in the 20th century. Mendelssohn's wide array of talents as a visual artist, scholar, linguist, correspondent, chess player, and even gymnast distinguished him as a "Renaissance Man Among the Romantics."

Carl Zelter, a devotee of the "hallowed traditions of the eighteenth century," served as composition tutor during Mendelssohn's teens. Zelter "nourished [Felix] on German models of Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, but also sheltered him from newer…avenues of musical expression." (R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*) Mendelssohn's early student compositions closely resemble classical models. Nonetheless, he followed contemporary trends. In his first symphony for full orchestra, published in 1824, "the principal influences are...the Beethoven of the *Fifth Symphony* and [Carl Maria von] Weber of *Der Freischütz*." (Todd) By age 17 Mendelssohn produced two works that won lasting recognition as masterpieces, the *Octet for Strings* and the concert overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Each displayed the composer's unique ability to convey fantasy, exemplified by the latter work's "fairy music" evoking Puck and his elfin compatriots from William Shakespeare's play.

Another signal accomplishment of Mendelssohn's formative years resulted from a 15th birthday gift—a manuscript score of J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, composed in 1727. A century later this work was largely forgotten and "Old Bach" had slipped into obscurity, considered "an unintelligible musical arithmetician." Yet there remained a hard core, including Zelter and several members of the Mendelssohn family, who remained devoted to his music. Felix committed to make Bach's great oratorio accessible to 19th century listeners. In March 1829, after five years of preparation, he conducted the first performances of the *Matthew Passion* since its composer's lifetime. The public response, writes Todd, "was nothing short of extraordinary…This epoch-making composition had indeed risen phoenixlike from the ashes…" Having ignited the revival of Bach's works, the 20-year-old Mendelssohn was now ready to establish his own career path.

Felix embarked that spring on a journey around Europe, traditional for newly graduated gentlemen. He spent several months in London, the first of ten visits to England. A highlight was a Midsummer Day concert in which he soloed in the English premiere of Beethoven's "*Emperor" Piano Concerto No. 5* and also conducted *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In July Felix set off to Scotland with Karl Klingemann, a friend who once roomed at the Mendelssohn home. The "'picturesque' Scottish Highlands tour" had become a trendy "Romantic alternative to the continental 'grand tour' with its emphasis on a classical literary heritage…which Mendelssohn would carry out the following year." (Thomas Grey, "*Fingal's Cave* and Ossian's Dream") The appeal of Scotland lay both in its rugged scenery, which Felix captured in drawings, and its literary associations.

Felix Mendelssohn's sketch of Dunollie Castle overlooking the Hebrides (Bodleian Library)

A meeting with Sir Walter Scott yielded only an anticlimactic half-hour conversation. However, the tour abounded in impressions and lore linked to another author, Ossian son of Fingal, a 3rd century Homer-like poet introduced to the world in the 1760s by James Macpherson's purported translations from Gaelic manuscripts. While proclaimed fraudulent by Samuel Johnson, England's leading man of letters, the Ossianic epics became wildly popular across Europe (Napoleon carried the books into battle) and America (Thomas Jefferson considered "this rude bard of the North the greatest poet that has ever existed"). Whether the poems were at least partially authentic or conjured out of whole cloth by Macpherson, "the fascination with Ossian as the noble art of a primitive people endured [well into the 19th century]." (Todd, *Mendelssohn: The Hebrides and Other Overtures*)

The Hebrides islands west of the Scottish mainland evoked strong responses from Felix and Klingemann. On August 7 they reached Oban, a town "from which one could see almost all the Ossianic islands and cliffs, picturesque, eerie and awesome..." (Todd) Felix drew the ruins of Dunollie Castle, dating to the 13th century, overlooking the isles. That evening he sent home a letter containing his expression of "how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me," namely, his conception of the opening of ***The Hebrides*** concert overture. "Here we find the rising, three-tiered statement of the evocative bass motive, with layered chords above in the violins and winds…[T]he images of the Oban drawing became sonorous; the orchestra a palette of softly mottled hues and shades, to capture the unforgettable Scottish sea- and landscapes." (Todd)

The next morning the travelers proceeded to a small Hebridean island famous for an extraordinary geological formation, discovered by the naturalist Joseph Banks in 1772. Klingemann described it eloquently:

> Staffa, with its strange basalt pillars and caverns, is in all the picture books. We were put out in boats and lifted by the hissing sea up the pillar stumps to the famous Fingal's Cave [so named by Banks]. A greener roar of waves never rushed into a strange cavern—its many pillars making it look like the inside of an immense organ, black and resounding, absolutely without purpose, and quite alone, the wide gray sea within and without."

Who was Fingal? Macpherson claimed to derive the epic poem of that name (1762) from Scottish legends about Fionn mac Cumhail (anglicized as Finn McCool). Perhaps deliberately, Macpherson confounded his Fingal story with Irish mythology about a hero of the same name sometimes portrayed as a giant. In a traditional version of the tale, Finn builds a bridge so that he can cross the channel between Ireland and Scotland to fight a gigantic rival. Basalt columns at the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland matching those at Fingal's Cave, both sets created ca. 50 million years ago by a great lava flow, gave physical credence to the fancy that these marked the terminal remains of a giant's bridge.

Fingal's Cave, Staffa, The Hebrides
(Photo courtesy of Richard Clark, MD, Principal Cellist, Chapel Hill Philharmonia)

Mendelssohn completed his overture in 1830 but continued to revise the work for five years, replacing academic counterpoint with music that would

convey “train oil, gulls, and salted cod.” He also experimented with multiple titles for the overture, finally publishing orchestral parts as *The Hebrides*, but the score as *Fingal’s Cave*. His vacillation over the name reflects the work’s dual character. On one hand it can be taken as a musical landscape of the lonely isles, and even a precursor of musical Impressionism which evolved at the turn of the 20th century. One the other hand, Todd argues that Mendelssohn intended to convey an “Ossianic quality” and “capture a primitive, folk-like type of music,” and notes specifically the surprising interjection of “D-major brass fanfares…that could bring to mind the epic battles of Fingal.”

One year after Mendelssohn’s untimely death from a stroke in 1848, a figure less ephemeral than Fingal cast a giant shadow over his reputation. Richard Wagner, the megalomaniac self-proclaimed visionary of music’s future, attacked him in a vitriolic, anti-Semitic essay. This was truly ironic because the assimilated Jews Abraham and Lea had baptized and raised the Mendelssohn children as Lutherans, and Felix “did more to align his music with Protestantism than any other major 19th-century composer.” (Tom Service, in *The Guardian*) Service summarizes Wagner’s poisonous thesis: “Where the new German music should be strong and ambitious, Mendelssohn’s was...effeminate and vague;…his conducting was ‘flabby and colorless’;…[and] Mendelssohn, as a Jew, was ‘outside the pale of German art-life’.” The portrait of Felix as a backwards-looking, commercially driven, shallow sentimentalist was swallowed by some who should have known better, like George Bernard Shaw, and later amplified by the Nazi party.

Others took a different view. His contemporary Robert Schumann called Mendelssohn “the Mozart of the 19th century, the most illuminating of musicians, who sees more clearly than others through the contradictions of our era and is the first to reconcile them.” Musicologist Leon Botstein discerns “an aesthetic of creative restoration; a search for historic models; a backward glance tempered by a modern taste for the subjective, emotional, poetic voice of romanticisim.” And biographer Larry Todd concludes that Mendelssohn’s ability to “overlay onto richly expressive music the classical attributes of poise, balance, and clarity—has much to do with restoring and preserving…timeless values drawn from the exemplars of the past.”

Vieuxtemps: *Violin Concerto No. 5*

Henri Vieuxtemps, born in Verviers, Belgium in 1820, resembled Mozart and Mendelssohn in precocity. As a toddler he incessantly scraped a bow over the strings of a toy fiddle, at four he began violin lessons, and at six he gave his first public concert. Two years later Charles de Bériot, Belgium’s leading violinist, took Henri under his wing.

Since the 1500s Italy had been home to violin manufacturing and the most virtuosic string players. However, in the late 18th century France became the epicenter of a revolution in the instrument’s performance practice and repertoire. Giovanni Battista Viotti, an Italian based in Paris, led this modernization. He collaborated with François Tourte to reengineer the violin bow, enabling sustained power and many innovations in righthand technique. (In December 2017 a Tourte bow sold for nearly $700,000, shattering auction records for these humble “sticks” cut from Brazilian Pernambuco wood.) Considered the finest violinist of his day, Viotti also composed 29 concertos for his instrument. His followers in the Paris and Brussels Conservatories, including Pierre Rode, Pierre Baillot, and Bériot formalized the “Franco-Belgian school”.

Henri Vieuxtemps, 1834 (age 14)

Henri’s formal instrumental training ended when Bériot beat a hasty retreat from Belgium to quell a marital scandal, advising his protégé henceforth to “seek his own path, clear his own road.” Vieuxtemps’ star rose during a concert tour of Germany in 1833. A chance introduction to Beethoven’s opera *Fidelio* during a stopover in Frankfurt, electrified him—“It is impossible to describe the deep impression that this incomparable music made on my young mind of 13 years.”

Vieuxtemps went to Vienna to study composition. There he also befriended several members of Beethoven’s onetime inner circle. They encouraged him to learn that master’s *Violin Concerto*, a piece strongly influenced by Viotti and the French school, which had suffered complete neglect after poor reviews of its premiere in 1806. Vieuxtemps’s first public performance of the work in 1834, at age 14, in his own assessment, “made a sensation by its daring and invested me with a certain

importance." A decade later a landmark concert in London featuring 12 year-old violinist Joseph Joachim conducted by Mendelssohn cemented the revival of the Beethoven *Violin Concerto* initiated by Vieuxtemps.

Vieuxtemps' own first trip to London in 1834 proved transformative because it overlapped with a tour by Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840), whose technical prowess, facilitated by extraordinarily long, flexible fingers, and unparalleled showmanship created a mythic aura as the Devil's Violinist. Vieuxtemps determined to "combine the grand form of the Viotti concerto with the technical demands of modern times," exemplified by Paganini's pyrotechnics. To that end he devoted the winter of 1835 to advanced composition study in Paris with Anton Reicha, who had been a close friend of Beethoven.

Between 1836 and 1861 Vieuxtemps completed five violin concertos, elevating his reputation to approach Paganini's at the pinnacle of Romantic violinist/composers. A British critic dubbed Vieuxtemps "the Beethoven of all the known violinists." The composer Hector Berlioz, a rigorous critic, praised his performance—"M. Vieuxtemps is prodigious…He does things that I have heard from no other violinist," and composition—"his works...are those of a master whose melodic style is unfailingly noble and dignified." Boris Schwartz, in a history of the violin, concludes that Vieuxtemps' "achievement was to rejuvenate the grand concept of the…violin concerto by using the orchestra in a more symphonic manner and by letting the solo violin speak with a more eloquent and impassioned voice."

Vieuxtemps toured the world. During several visits to the United States he held his own in a rivalry with the Norwegian-born violinist Ole Bull, an adopted favorite son. During a five-year sojourn in Saint Petersburg (1846-1851) Vieuxtemps helped lay the foundation for the great Russian School of violin playing. In 1871 he returned to the Brussels Conservatory to take the professorship once held by Bériot, feeling a "sacred mission" to extend his teacher's work. Among his students was Eugène Ysaÿe, who led the Franco-Belgian school into the 20th century. Two years later a stroke paralyzed Vieuxtemps's left side, effectively ending his performing and teaching career. He died in Algeria in 1881.

Vieuxtemps completed his *5th Violin Concerto* in 1861. It served as an examination piece for the advanced violin class in Brussels. Vieuxtemps premiered the work with the Conservatory's orchestra. It comprises three movements played without interruption. The orchestral exposition introduces "three powerful and memorable themes, then subsides into relative stasis as if becalmed." (quotes from liner notes by Calum MacDonald on Hyperion) The solo violin enters with rising arpeggios and amplifies on the themes with dramatic bursts of virtuosity, followed by an extensive, impassioned cadenza which "develops into a magnificent polyphonic meditation…upon the movement's materials." The orchestra returns to introduce the lyrical slow movement (Adagio), "in which the violin first sings an almost operatic solo against a hushed [plucked string] accompaniment. It modulates…to sing a hauntingly beautiful melody adapted…from the aria 'Ou peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille' [What better place to be than in the bosom of one's family]" from *Lucille* by Belgian composer André Grétry (the tune was a favorite of Napoleon). The concerto's short final movement serves as "a bravura coda…a brief effusion alluding to the themes of the first movement while hurrying us to a triumphant close."

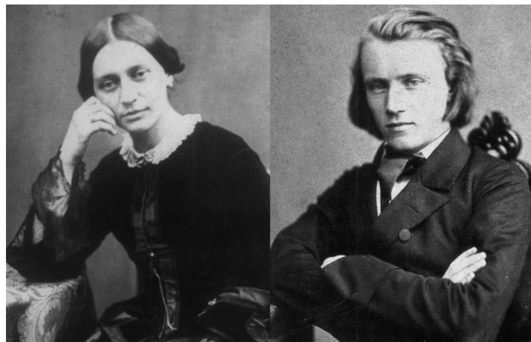
Caroline Jesalva

Soloist Caroline Jesalva is a homeschooled high school junior from Cary, NC. She began violin lessons at age 4 with Margaret Garriss and now studies with Eric Pritchard of Duke University's resident Ciompi Quartet. In addition to the Chapel Hill Philharmonia Young Artist Concerto award, Caroline has won competitions of the Philharmonic Association, the North Carolina Women's Club, the Raleigh Music Club (Wieniawski Prize), and the Winston-Salem Symphony (runner-up). Caroline has performed in youth orchestras for 9 years, presently serving as Concertmaster of the Triangle Youth Philharmonic, and with ensembles from the North Carolina Chamber Music Institute and the Mallarmé Youth Chamber Orchestra. She attended summer programs at the Brevard Music School (scholarship recipient of the National Federation of Music Clubs) and the Meadowmount Music School, where she studied with Sally Thomas from the Julliard School. She is also a vocalist for the award-winning Triangle Youth Jazz Ensemble. In addition to music, Caroline enjoys reading philosophy and the classics, and writing poetry.

Brahms: *Symphony No. 1*

Johannes Brahms grew up in slums near the waterfront in the Free City of Hamburg. He was the first son of Johann Jakob Brahms, a minor musician known derisively as a "beer-fiddler," specializing on the contrabass. Regular gigs at a café and in the town militia's brass band barely sustained Johann Jakob, his wife Christiane, and their three children. His greatest aspiration for himself (eventually achieved) or "Hannes" was to secure a position as a section member in the Hamburg Philharmonic. The boy indeed showed musical ability, but, to his father's consternation, he insisted on studying the commercially "useless" piano and, worse, he wanted to compose new works. Yet Hannes's manifest talent persuaded Johann Jakob to beg Hamburg's leading musician to teach his son. Eduard Marxsen saw something special in the tiny, blond, blue-eyed boy and offered him several lessons per week without fee. Under this tutelage Brahms "made himself a very fine pianist and a creative genius of the highest rank." (Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms, A Biography*)

Yet at age 20, by which point Mendelssohn had composed masterworks and Vieuxtemps had become a seasoned international soloist, Brahms remained virtually unknown. When the violinist Eduard Reményi, a political refugee after a failed revolution in Hungary, landed in Hamburg in late 1852, he and Brahms clicked as music partners. In the spring the "semi-famous violinist and his obscure accompanist set out on a small-time concert tour." (Swafford) Their relationship soon foundered, but during a stop in Hanover they caught up with an old conservatory classmate of Reményi's with whom he shared a Hungarian-Jewish background—Joseph Joachim, known since his breakthrough performance of the Beethoven *Violin Concerto* a decade earlier as one of "the preeminent musicians of the age." (Swafford) The meeting of Joachim and Brahms rocked both their worlds.



Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms 1853

Program notes for this orchestra's performance one year ago of Brahms's *Serenade No. 1 in D-major*, related how two factions of Romantic musicians were becoming increasingly polarized. Radicals led by Franz Liszt and his son-in-law Wagner wanted to discard forms inherited from the Classical era in favor of a comprehensively programmatic "Artwork of the Future." They aligned against a more conservative faction, including Joachim and Robert and Clara Schumann, that wanted to advance music within the constraints of forms developed by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

When they met in 1853 Joachim recognized a kindred spirit in Brahms and was gobsmacked by the energy and originality of his early compositions for piano. Joachim pushed Johannes to meet the Schumanns. That couple shared the violinist's assessment of Brahms as a "genius." However, Robert Schumann's reckless anointment of Brahms as Beethoven's successor, published in Europe's major journal on new music, exposed the young composer to hostile scrutiny from many quarters and burdened him with expectations that he was utterly unprepared to meet.

Fast forward nearly 20 years to the end of 1872. Brahms, approaching age 40, remains beardless, but no longer appears childishly vulnerable. He has moved to Vienna as Director of the Society of Friends of Music (*Musikverein*). Robert Schumann's descent into suicidal insanity and his death in an asylum lie in the distant past. So does Brahms's infatuation with the widowed Clara and his sudden withdrawal when a marriage seemed on the horizon; yet the two remain special friends, and Brahms is like a surrogate father to Clara's children. The catalog of his published Opuses runs to the mid-50s and contains a plethora of magnificent works ranging from songs to chamber music to *A German Requiem*.

What is missing? Beethoven left a legacy of 16 string quartets and 9 symphonies. Brahms has yet to complete a work in either genre that he will expose publicly, although he has consigned at least 20 quartets to flames. To the conductor Hermann Levi the composer confesses in despair, "I shall never compose a symphony! You have no conception of how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us." The giant, obviously, was Beethoven.

Finally, in 1873 with the publication of two string quartets (Op. 51) Brahms began to break the logjam. Assessing the impact of

these tautly constructed works, Jan Swafford argues they “helped inspire quartets from...many of the next century’s composers. In other words, Brahms revivified a great but moribund tradition.” The same summer marked the composition of Brahms’s first purely orchestral work in nearly 15 years, variations on a theme attributed to Haydn. It took the Viennese public by storm. Buoyed by this success Brahms returned to sketches of a symphony begun almost 15 years earlier; he shared a draft of the first movement with Clara in 1862. Brahms finished the work in the summer of 1876.

The acerbic Hans von Bülow, a fine conductor and music journalist, nicknamed Brahms’s *Symphony No. 1* “The Tenth.” The obvious reference to Beethoven contained more than a grain of truth. That giant’s spirit, writes Swafford, “shone unmistakably in the *First Symphony*, from the monumental sound of the orchestra to the chorale theme of the last movement—the latter so inescapably reminiscent of the [“Ode to Joy” in Beethoven’s] *Ninth Symphony* finale that Brahms could only snap in response: ‘Any jackass can see that.’” However, Brahms’s *First* also links directly to Beethoven’s *Fifth* in the choice of key, C minor, and in the layout of its four movements: “serious opening movement in moderate-to-fast tempo, contrasting lyrical slow movement, relatively light third…, then a ‘heroic’ allegro finale.” (Swafford)

Brahms innovates from the introductory bars of the first movement, a slow, sustained chromatic progression in 6/8 time with the kettledrum relentlessly hammering each eighth note. To Swafford “It is one of the most spine-tingling beginnings of any symphony, plunging us into a world dark, questioning, shifting, striving toward some indefinable goal.” Brahms transitions to an *Allegro* conceived years earlier in which two ideas from the introduction merge into a double theme comprising a “relentlessly surging line” and the “rising chromatic ‘fate’ theme of the opening measures.” Further development evokes the iconic Ta-Ta-Ta-TAA “fate” motif of Beethoven’s *Fifth.* The tempo then slows and, in a 17-bar coda that brings back the opening drumbeats and suggestively recalls the opening chord structure, “Brahms in effect reopens the dramatic question of the introduction, and leaves it hanging in the last chords.”

The second movement begins in E major, a major third interval above the first movement, and reveals a serenely lyrical world. Strings give way to a second theme in the oboe, then return “with blazingly impassioned music for the first violins, into which they draw the seconds and violas.” The oboe returns with a new melody “like music from a Bach cantata but from the perspective of 150 years later.” (Michael Steinberg, *The Symphony: A Listener’s Guide*) A solo violin reprises the oboe melody, in partnership with the first horn, and closes the movement on an extended high note.

The third movement, marked “a little fast and gracefully,” is an Intermezzo, gentler than typical symphonic scherzos. The key shifts up another major third to A-flat major. “A blithe clarinet tune begins the movement…the theme is stated and then, in the consequent phrase, turned exactly upside down. The middle section, dominated by the flowing woodwind and brass lines, has a touch of fatalism in its insistent repeated notes.” (Swafford)

For the finale, the symphony’s weightiest movement, Brahms completes the sequence of major third increments to return to C minor. Steinberg perceives “a darkness, a strangeness, a mood of mystery we have not encountered since the symphony’s introduction,” reinforced by the work’s slowest tempo. This extended introduction functions, writes Swafford, “to return to the fatalistic question” which the first movement “poses and leaves unanswered.” Brahms now completes “a symbolic journey from darkness to light, from fatalistic uncertainty to apotheosis, from tragedy to joyous liberation.” The transition begins with an alpenhorn theme “in a soaring C major, like sun breaking through clouds.” Years earlier Brahms offered the same music to Clara as a reconciliation offering after an unsettled time between them. Next, for the first time in this symphony, as in the finale of Beethoven’s *Fifth*, Brahms introduces trombones “joining bassoons in a quiet, archaic, chorale-like moment.” This sets up “*the* tune,” the chorale in the strings that pays homage to Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.” The movement develops further. Finally, Swafford concludes, “At the high point of the pealing, ecstatic coda, what Brahms turns to as his final apotheosis is…a full-orchestra proclamation of the introduction’s trombone chorale. It is like an eruption of holy joy, capping both the symphony’s progress from darkness to light and Brahms’s personal triumph.” He has freed himself at last from the sound of the giant’s tramping boots and ascended to perch on Beethoven’s mighty shoulders.

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