Chapel Hill Philharmonia

Hill Hall — University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

7:30 p.m. Sunday, May 6, 2012

Donald L. Oehler, Music Director

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Overture to *Ruy Blas*, Op. 95

Saverio Mercadante (1795-1870)

Flute Concerto No. 2 in E minor, Op. 57

Allegro maestoso

Jake Beerel, flute

2012 Young Artist Concerto Competition Winner

Intermission

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

***Romeo and Juliet*, Fantasy-Overture after Shakespeare**

Refreshments

Inspirations

William Shakespeare conveyed the overwhelming impact of Julius Caesar in imperial Rome: "Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colussus." So might 19th century composers have viewed the figure of Ludwig van Beethoven. With his Symphony No. 3, known as *Eroica*, composed in 1803, Beethoven radically altered the evolution of symphonic music. The work was inspired by Napoléon Bonaparte's republican ideals while rejecting that 'hero's' assumption of an imperial mantle. Beethoven broke precedent by employing his art "as a vehicle to convey beliefs," expanding beyond compositional technique to add the "dimension of meaning and interpretation. All the more remarkable…the high priest of absolute music, effected this change." (composer W.A. DeWitt) Beethoven, in a word, brought Romanticism to the concert hall, "replac[ing] the Enlightenment cult of reason with a cult of instinct, passion, and the creative genius as virtual demigod. The Romantics seized upon Beethoven's emotionalism, his sense of the individual as hero." (composer/writer Jan Swafford) The expression of this new sensibility took many forms, ranging from intensified expression within classical forms, exemplified by **Felix Mendelssohn** or **Johannes Brahms**, to the unbridled fervor of **Piyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky**, the revolutionary virtuosity and structural innovations of Franz Liszt, the hallucinatory visions of Hector Berlioz, and the megalomania of Richard Wagner. This evening the Chapel Hill Philharmonia presents four distinctive works to explore the diverse inspirations of Romantic music.

Mendelssohn: Overture to *Ruy Blas*

The writer Victor Hugo (1802-85) was the emblem of French Romanticism, "a movement characterized by reliance on the imagination and subjectivity of approach, freedom of thought and expression, and an idealization of nature." (Robert Schwartz, Mount Holyoke College) He melded compassion and social conscience in his literary works with political action as a reformist leader, and served in his country's Constitutional and Legislative Assemblies. Hugo opposed the seizure of power in 1851 by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (Napoleon III), nephew of the first Napoleon. He was forced to live in exile and returned to France only after the Third Republic was established in 1870.

Sara Bernhardt as the Queen in *Ruy Blas*, Paris, 1879

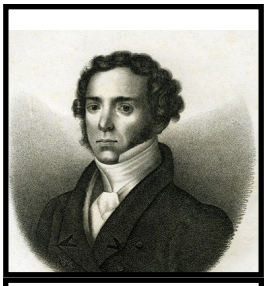
Although best known as a poet and novelist (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Les Miserables*), Hugo also was a successful playwright. His drama *Ruy Blas*, written in verse and first performed in Paris in 1838, is set in 17th century Spain in the reign of Charles II. Don Salluste de Bazan, a villainous Count, has been exiled by Queen Doña Maria de Neubourg for seducing one of her ladies-in-waiting. He seeks revenge.The schemer knows that his indentured servant Ruy Blas, a dreamy, talented but low-born individual, educated in the "college of science and pride" (i.e., the school of hard knocks), secretly adores the queen from afar. Don Salluste disguises this lackey as a nobleman and presents him at court. Ruy Blas rapidly achieves great things and rises as a statesman and popular reformist leader, becoming the queen's favorite. She appoints him prime minister and grants him a dukedom. Don Salluste then returns from hiding and springs his trap. Hoping to force the queen's abdication, he exposes and humiliates Ruy Blas, issuing trivial commands ("close the window", "pick up my handkerchief") while the 'minister' attempts serious political discourse. The distraught Blas responds by murdering his cruel master, then takes poison. As he verges on

death, the queen forgives his deception and openly declares her love: “I give you my soul. Queen for all, for you I am only a woman..”

By 1839 Felix Mendelssohn, just 30 years-old, had lived up to spectacular early promise, achieving great success as pianist, composer, and director of Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchestra. When the city’s Theatrical Pension Fund planned a benefit performance of Hugo’s new hit drama *Ruy Blas*, Mendelssohn naturally was asked to contribute incidental music for the occasion. Perhaps in reaction to what he perceived as vulgar melodrama or a radical political message, and not helped by a poor German translation, Mendelssohn found the play “detestable” and “utterly beneath contempt.” Nevertheless, he deigned to produce a choral song (for a chorus of washerwomen) for the Pension Fund production, but at first he begged off a requested overture. The Fund’s directors twitted him, apologizing extravagantly that such a busy man could not possibly be expected to generate a complete work in the few months they had allotted. Inspired more by this implied challenge to his compositional facility than by Hugo’s drama, Mendelssohn rose to the bait and in three days dashed off a powerful piece, delivered in the nick of time for the performance of the “odious” play. Ten days later he programmed the work for the final concert of the Gewandhaus Orchestra’s season, without mentioning *Ruy Blas*, announcing it merely as an overture for the *Theater-pension-Fond*. The work was published only posthumously.

Mendelssohn biographer Larry Todd (Duke University) finds that the overture contains “evidence Felix responded musically to Hugo’s metaphor of the servant as ‘an earthworm enamored with a star.’ Felix captured the mixing of classes by juxtaposing distinctly different, high and low musical styles.” The overture opens with brass fanfares employing “majestic dotted rhythms, by 1839 a cliché for an elevated style,” presumably symbolic of the royal court. This contrasts with an agitated theme suggestive of “intrigue and deception,” and a second fast theme which “connotes a popular idiom.” These elements alternate throughout the piece, but regardless of the play’s tragic ending, Mendelssohn concludes his composition triumphantly. The influential music critic Olin Downes summarized the *Ruy Blas* Overture’s enduring appeal: “There are sweep and spontaneity in the melodic flow, an urgency in the march of simple harmonies, a freshness and brilliance in the orchestration, which have made this one of Mendelssohn’s most popular works.” Others suggest that the composer may have completed the work with tongue at least somewhat in cheek. Thomas Grey (Stanford University) considers the overture as a “perfectly straight-faced ‘parody’ of a melodramatic overture in the modern Franco-Italian idiom.”

Mercadante: Flute Concerto No. 2 in E Minor



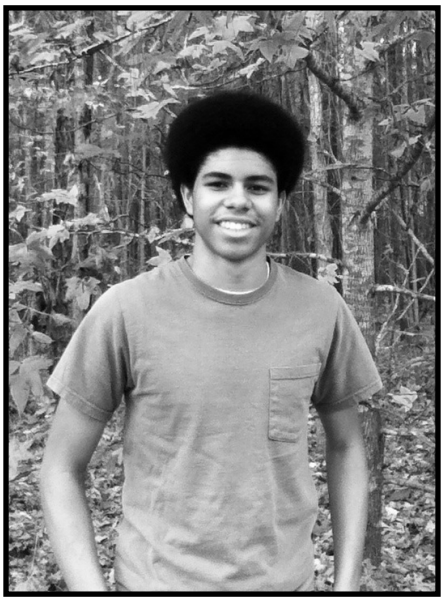
Saverio Mercadante

At least one musical inspiration has remained unchanged for millennia – the sound produced by various instruments, especially in the hands of virtuosic players. Saverio Mercadante entered the San Sebastian Conservatory in Naples, Italy, at age 13 and soon became the lead violinist of its orchestra. But he also played the flute, and while still a student composed six sparkling concertos for that instrument. The **Flute Concerto No. 2 in E minor** dates from 1813 and remains one of Mercadante’s few works in the active repertory.

Mercadante concentrated increasingly on composition and graduated in 1817 at the top of his class, emerging as the best hope to restore the lapsed reputation of Naples as an important center for new music. Commercial realities encouraged him to focus on works for the stage. Two years later Mercadante’s first opera had a successful premiere, and by 1821 his seventh, *Elisa e Claudio*, scored a hit at La Scala in Milan, fully

launching the composer to international recognition. The work's subject, somewhat reminiscent of *Ruy Blas*, was love between a couple of widely different social strata – in this case a peasant girl and the son of a ranking nobleman. Over a span of 40 years, Mercadante composed nearly 60 operas, serving for periods as director of royal opera houses in Lisbon, Portugal and Madrid, Spain. In later life he turned to programmatic orchestral music, and also produced two large-scale church masses and many lighter works. Even after suffering blindness due to a stroke in 1862, he continued to compose and to teach until shortly before his demise eight years later at age 75. Despite achieving "extraordinary fame during his lifetime", Mercadante suffered "comprehensive oblivion after his death. His works never became part of the established operatic repertory in the second half of the 19th century, and in the 20th century he was at best seen as a precursor of [Giuseppe] Verdi. This narrowly aesthetic judgment of his operas ignores the commercial context in which Mercadante worked, which was more akin to the world of modern show business." (Grove Dictionary of Music) Although in his lifetime regarded as a worthy successor of Gioachino Rossini and at least an equal of such composers as Gaetano Donizetti and Vincenzo Bellini, Mercadante failed to embrace the dramatic realism that continues to maintain contemporary interest in their operas and, especially, those of Verdi. In this respect he calls to mind Antonio Salieri (1750-1825), the leading opera composer a half century earlier in Vienna, whose legacy was vastly overshadowed by that of his young rival Wolfgang Mozart, as recounted (with historical license) in Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus* and the film directed by Milos Forman.

In the student piece for which Mercadante remains best known, one can already hear qualities that were to make him a successful opera composer in his day. Jake Beerel will perform as flute soloist in the first of the work's three movements, accompanied by string orchestra. Marked *Allegro maestoso* (fast/lively but majestic), and written in classic double-exposition sonata form, it opens with a statement of a rising theme by the violins. A second theme offers a flowing contrast. After the extended introduction, the flute enters dramatically over hushed strings. The demanding solo part features a brilliant cadenza.



Jake Beerel, age 18, winner of the 2012 Chapel Hill Philharmonia Young Artist Concerto Competition, is a high school senior homeschooled in Wake Forest, NC. He began playing the flute in 2003 and performed with the Lighthouse Christian Homeschool Band for five years. Jake's first flute teacher was Melissa Kerstetter and he has studied with his current teacher, Rosene Rohrer, for almost six years. He won the Most Valuable Player award from the Trunote Bank Camp of 2005 and was presented with his first open-hole flute as a gift from the Altus Flute company in 2007. He has won several annual flute contests and obtained a ranking of Superior from the Raleigh Area Flute Association, and has placed in the top three at All-District and All-State competitions. Jake currently performs with the Triangle Youth Philharmonic under the direction of Hugh Partridge, and with the Richland Creek Community Church Orchestra. His most recent accomplishment is participation in the Brevard Music Center's 2011 Summer Festival under the instruction of Keith Lockhart, Marianne Gedigian, and Dilshad Posnock.

Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Haydn

Mercadante's descent into obscurity highlights the delicate balance confronting any artist of the Romantic era. Far from rejecting the past, the movement promoted historical study, embracing and idealizing elements that "became even more enchanted as more…was revealed – still Romantic because distant and unattainable. Meanwhile, obsessed with history and with art and artists, the Romantic era raised creators to the status of pedastaled demigods." (Brahms biographer Jan Swafford) The artist's challenge was to somehow go further, despite being "in thrall to the past and what [Brahms] called 'the tramp of giants' behind him." The archetypal Romantic was fantasist and composer E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). He became an alter ego for the young Brahms, who styled himself "Johannes Kreisler" after one of Hoffmann's literary characters. As music critic, Hoffmann singled out one composer as the paragon for his movement: "Beethoven's music sets in motion the mechanism of fear, of awe, of horror, of suffering, and wakens just that infinite longing which is the essence of Romanticism."

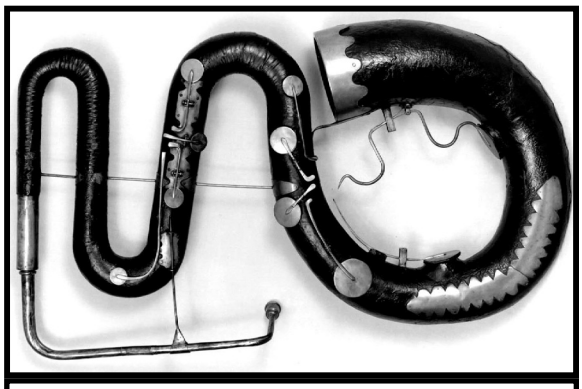
Johannes Brahms, still beardless, 1872

For much of his life, Johannes Brahms kept a bust of Beethoven looking over his piano. Whatever inspiration flowed from its presence, consciousness of Beethoven's role in the development of music also carried a considerable burden – it was this giant's tramp that most perturbed his equilibrium. Shortly after meeting the 20-year-old Brahms in 1853, Robert Schumann published an extraordinary article in the influential periodical he had founded, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, labeling the neophyte composer one of the "elect." In effect he anointed Brahms "a Messiah destined to bring a new age of joy and blessing to the art of music." (Swafford) Schumann implied that the 'young eagle' would soon emulate Beethoven. In a letter to Brahms's friend Joseph Joachim, he made the expectation explicit: "Now where is Johannes?...Is he setting drums and trumpets to work yet? He must call to mind the beginnings of the Beethoven symphonies; he must try to do something of the same kind." Yet two decades later Brahms had completed neither a symphony nor a string quartet (the other medium most associated with Beethoven) he considered worthy of a public hearing. Despite numerous fine pieces for piano, voice, and chamber ensembles, he had yet to finish any major work for symphony orchestra. The **Variations on a Theme by Haydn**, completed in 1873, therefore represented a major breakthrough for the composer destined to be grouped with Beethoven and Johann Sebastian Bach as one of the "Three Bs" (an honorific conferred by conductor Hans von Bülow, substituting Brahms for Hector Berlioz, who had been designated the 'third B' by music critic Peter Cornelius in 1854).

Brahms kept a second icon near him, "a porcelain bust of [Joseph] Haydn [(1732-1809)] in his bedroom, where it rested on a mantel across from his bed." (Heather Platt) Brahms deeply admired and studied works of past composers, notably the other 'two Bs', and he amassed a magnificent collection of old scores. However, his affinity for Haydn has been somewhat overlooked. Brahms's close friend C. F. Pohl, devoted many years to Haydn's biography. In 1870 he shared with Brahms some unpublished manuscripts of suites for wind instruments attributed to Haydn. Brahms liked a *Partita* based on a melody labeled *Chorale St. Antoni*, and copied it into his notebook. Ironically, historians now believe that someone other than Haydn, perhaps his student Ignace Pleyel, wrote the tune, probably based on a hymn honoring Saint Anthony of Padua, "Guide of Pilgrims." From

this theme Brahms created his first large-scale symphonic work, and the first fully worked set of variations for orchestra by any composer. Brahms recognized the challenge of writing variations, a skill at which Mozart and Beethoven had excelled, and hoped to break conventional limitations – "We cling nervously to the melody, but we don't handle it freely, we don't really make anything new out of it, we merely overload it." He succeeded admirably.

The 'Haydn Variations' comprise a statement of the theme, eight named variations, and a long finale. To open Brahms uses the wind choir to emulate the sound of the source *Partita*, which was scored for two oboes, three bassoons, two horns and a serpent (an obsolete S-shaped bass wind instrument). Barbara Heninger (Redwood Symphony) summarizes how Brahms then "systematically changes everything but the essential structure of the theme in the variations:



Contrabass musical "serpent"

Pocu piu animato – various sections of the orchestra play pulsing notes in the chords of the theme, while two contrapuntal moving parts play against them;

Piu vivace – changes the key to minor, syncopates the rhythm, and gives us an insistent, dance-like movement;

Con moto – indeed a study in motion, with a steady, ever-flowing version of the theme weaving back and forth between sections of the orchestra and individual instruments;

Andante con moto – transforms the theme into a haunting minor melody over broad, slow lower strings and winds;

Vivace – an energetic *scherzo* somewhat reminiscent of Brahms's hero Beethoven that segues immediately into a second;

Vivace – regal, brassy;

Grazioso – a gentle *siciliano*, a slow 6/8 or 12/8 form associated in Brahms's day with pastoral scenes and romantic melancholy;

Presto non troppo – a bit of sleight of hand: quickly moving parts almost manage to hide the theme in their winding melodies, with the pedal points spread out over six octaves."

The ***Finale*** is a *tour de force*, worthy of the first B, Bach. Brahms reaches back to the Baroque model of the passacaglia, creating a series of 17 variations over a persistently repeated figure – in this case a five bar ostinato (literally "stubborn") statement of the theme in the bass register. Following this elaborate set of rhythmic and harmonic modulations, the work concludes with a restatement of the original *Chorale St. Antoni*, now harnessing the full-throated resources of the complete orchestra.

The composition and well-received performance of the 'Haydn Variations' broke Brahms's creative logjam. Within the same year he produced his first two published string quartets. He also returned to sketches of a first symphony, begun in 1855, and completed it in 1876. That work contains clear references to the "fate" theme (dot-dot-dot-dash) of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 and the "Ode to Joy" of Symphony No.9 – Brahms impatiently noted that "any ass can see" the similarities. With it, the now middle-aged 'Kreisler' may have finally silenced the tramp of giant footfalls.

Tchaikovsky: *Romeo and Juliet*, Fantasy-Overture after Shakespeare

Romeo and Juliet in an illustration from 1879

The ***Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy Overture** also was a breakthrough work for a composer struggling to fulfill great potential. Tchaikovsky was 28-years-old in 1869, and, as one of the few formally trained Russian composers, a faculty member at the Moscow Conservatory. He had little under his belt beyond a first symphony, a failed opera, and a symphonic poem that his mentor Mily Balakirev (a talented amateur and the central figure in a rising circle of Russian nationalist composers) criticized as "slapdash," "clumsily stitched," and "completely uncoordinated." Tchaikovsky expressed "fear that my Muse has flown away." Hoping to lift the young man from his funk, Balakirev urged Tchaikovsky to take a page from his own book – alluding to an overture to Shakespeare's *King Lear* he had written a decade earlier. Correctly judging Tchaikovsky's temperament, he suggested *Romeo and Juliet* as subject, and even offered a detailed plan for the overture, complete with key scheme and a sketch of the first four bars.

Even if overbearing, Balakirev's advice was right on target. "The theme of tragic love, centering around a doomed young woman, could not have been more likely to provide the kind of stimulus on which [Tchaikovsky's] imagination thrived…The tragic ingredients of Romeo and Juliet… offered precisely the right blend of changing moods and moments to move him to both lyrical and intensely dramatic heights." (biographer Anthony Holden) Although the work required multiple revisions, finalized only in 1880, the so-called "Overture-Fantasy" reenergized Tchaikovsky and became his first masterpiece.

Rather than slavishly following the plotline of *Romeo and Juliet*, Tchaikovsky captured its emotional climaxes in motivic episodes. The work begins, following Balakirev's advice, with a slow chorale suggesting the wise voice of Friar Lawrence. A tense, syncopated figure introduces the Montague-Capulet conflict. Street fighting breaks out, rising in confusion and violence. The battle subsides, giving way to a first statement of what may be the best-known love theme in all music, sung by the English horn (standing for Romeo) and violas. Muted violins sigh Juliet's response. A development section uses the "battle" theme to depict the deepening conflict between warring families and the introductory theme to express the Friar's unsuccessful efforts to conciliate the feud. Romeo and Juliet's growing ardor overflows in a climactic statement of the love theme. But tragedy cannot be averted. In Richard Rodda's description, "The tempo slows, the mood darkens, and the coda emerges with a sense of impending doom. The themes of the conflict and of Friar Lawrence's entreaties sound again, but a funereal drum beats out the cadence of the lovers' fatal pact. Romeo's theme appears for a final time in a poignant transformation, and the closing woodwind chords evoke visions of the flight to celestial regions."

Shakespeare's plays, of course, have provided inspiration for myriad musical works over four centuries (a 1991 catalog listed over 21,000 examples). At least 20 operas, not to mention the Broadway musical and film *West Side Story*, are based on *Romeo and Juliet*. Even so, the play may have had unique personal resonance for Tchaikovsky. In the spring of 1869, according to Holden, the homosexual "Tchaikovsky was deeply in love with a pupil named Eduard Zak, then fifteen – the age at which, all his life, he found young men at the height of their sexual allure." Whether

requited or not, the love ended tragically. Four years later Zak committed suicide. Holden argues, controversially, that in 1893 Tchaikovsky did the same by deliberately drinking contaminated water during a cholera epidemic, either to contract the disease or camouflage self-inflicted poisoning, possibly because of growing repercussions of his homosexuality in the Victorian climate of tsarist Russia. Holden also cites the composer's diary and correspondence with his brother Modest to provide evidence both for the unhappy consequences of Tchaikovsky's love for the young student Zak and his longstanding "unbearable" guilt. Whether or not heightened by torturous personal circumstances, there seems no dispute with his biographer's conclusion that in the *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy Overture, for the first time, Tchaikovsky's Romantic sensibility merged with technical mastery, as they "would henceforth unite in [all of his] most characteristic and successful work."

Mark E. Furth, Ph.D.