Chapel Hill Philharmonia

Sunday, 10 December 2023
7:30 p.m.

Moeser Auditorium
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Donald L. Oehler, Music Director

Brevity, the Soul of Wit

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity (from The Planets, Op. 32) Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Fourth Symphony (1945) David Diamond (1915-2005)

Allegretto
Adagio; Andante
Allegro

—Intermission—

Symphony No. 8 in F, Op. 93 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro vivace e con brio
Allegretto scherzando
Tempo di Menuetto
Allegro vivace

Brevity is the soul of wit

So says Polonius in *Hamlet*. Tonight's program presents two brief symphonies, one old, one (relatively) new. And to begin, we present a brief tone poem about Jupiter (the planet). In addition to Jupiter's jollity, there is much fun and wit in the Beethoven symphony. Enjoy.

Holst: Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity (from The Planets, Op. 32)

Gustav Holst came from a musical but not affluent British family. To support his studies at the Royal College of Music he used his skills as a trombonist and organist, playing a lot of what we now call gigs. After graduation he took on teaching positions at a college and a girls' school at the same time, leaving little time for composing. But, encouraged by good friends like Ralph Vaughan Williams, he kept writing and trying to get his works noticed.

On vacation with friends in Spain in 1913, he became fascinated by astrology and horoscopes. This provided him the idea for a suite of short tone poems about the various planets and their mythical properties. With his two teaching jobs he had little time to work on it, so it took until 1917 to complete. The opportunity to use a good hall and a fine orchestra on a Sunday morning led to the first performance, with girls from his school providing the wordless chorus for the last planet, *Neptune, the Mystic.* (Pluto had not yet been discovered). The invited audience full of musicians was enthusiastic, and a later public performance was a great success. Suddenly Holst found himself an important British composer.

Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity, which we play, is performed separately more often than the other numbers in the suite. It is full of joyous fireworks-like patterns, and among its several upbeat melodies is one that took on a life of its own. Here is that story.

Sometime in 1921 Holst was asked, by the daughter of the former British ambassador to the USA — a schoolmate of Holst's daughter Imogen — to set to music a poem her late father had written. It is a patriotic verse, beginning "I vow to thee, my country…" According to Imogen, her overworked father was not happy with this extra task, until he realized that the poem fit nearly perfectly the stately melody he had put into the middle of *Jupiter*. Making a few alterations to the tune Holst set the poem and gave the resulting hymn the name *Thaxted*, after the town where he was living. It was immediately successful; today it is in effect a second national anthem for the British. It is sung every year at the celebration of the British version of Armistice Day; it was also sung at the funerals of Winston Churchill and Princess Diana.

Diamond: Fourth Symphony (1945)

David Diamond's long life spanned three periods in American classical music. In his young years the leading composers were adapting European styles to American themes. Barber, Copland, Hanson, Harris, Piston, Schuman and Sessions all wrote basically tonal music in standard forms. Diamond, who studied with Sessions, fit easily within that school. Then after World War II the atonalists and followers of Schoenberg provided most of the new scores that found performances. But the minimalists and others brought tonality back into style in Diamond's later years.

At age seven Diamond began to play the violin and to write little bits of music, but he didn't receive serious instruction until he was twelve. He studied at the Eastman School in his native Rochester NY, and later with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. He attracted the attention of Serge Koussevitsky, conductor of the Boston Symphony which played some of his works in the 1940s.

His most popular work is probably *Rounds*, for string orchestra, written in 1944. He continued composing into his 90th year, completing, among other works, eleven symphonies.

Diamond composed his fourth symphony in 1945, with a grant from the Koussevitsky Foundation, and dedicated it to the memory of Koussevitsky's wife Natalie. Its 1948 premiere was conducted by Koussevitsky's young assistant Leonard Bernstein. In the program for that concert the composer supplied detailed notes; the following description is excerpted from those.

I. Allegretto: … first theme of a pastoral lyricism introduced in two large phrases; the first half at the very beginning of the movement in muted strings; the second half of the theme is ushered in by a cortége-like rhythmic accompaniment… A short bridge section brings the second theme, of a simple, jovial, and carefree quality played by the solo oboe… The development section follows, utilizing every bit of the material heard in the exposition. After an extended climax in which both themes are contrapuntally combined, there is a short recapitulation of only the first theme. A short coda using the cortége-like rhythmic figure and the second theme brings this movement to a tranquil close.

II. Andante. Introduction (Adagio): a chorale-like theme of a religious and supplicating nature… Exposition: a long cantilena melody is heard in the violas… The second theme follows, the first phase stated by clarinets…the second half following immediately in the violins. It is the second theme that is elaborated and brings about the climax of this movement… The first theme now follows in the violins bringing the movement to its end.

III. Allegro. Brass proclaim the theme stridently at the outset… There is a percussion rhythmic figure… whose magical unpremeditated presence intrudes itself here and there as the movement gains momentum. It acts as a kind of reiterative censor, enforcing itself more and more as the tonal (realistic) materials of the movement assert themselves almost as a challenge to this magical, scherzando spirit… I have chosen materials in this movement which are strongly contrasting in character…so that there are strongly dramatic flashes of an almost theatrical-like evocativeness. It is as though what seemed earthbound at the start of the movement, at the end is released… More than this I cannot interpret for the listener.

In its original form the symphony is for a very large orchestra. Most current performances use the reduced orchestration version, which is what we play.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 8 in F, Op. 93

In the summer of 1812 Beethoven was a busy man. He had recently finished his seventh symphony and was starting on his eighth, but he had other concerns. In search of relief for his chronic digestive problems he visited two spas, at one of which he spent several days conversing with Goethe, for whose drama *Egmont* he had written incidental music. He penned a passionate letter to a woman he called "Immortal Beloved", creating a still unsolved mystery about her identity. Then he spent several weeks in Linz meddling in the affairs of his younger brother Johann, who was preparing to marry an unmarried woman with a daughter; the older brother disapproved, and tried (unsuccessfully) to use law enforcement to stop the thing. Nevertheless, he found time and inspiration to sketch out the new symphony, finishing it in October.

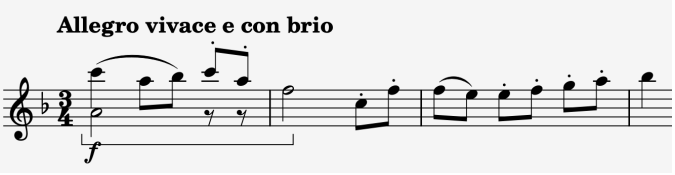
When they were written there were no plans for a public performance of either symphony. In late 1813 the seventh was the main feature of a benefit performance for the wounded in the war against Napoleon, and it was a success — almost as big a hit as the *Battle Symphony*, a patriotic pastiche celebrating Wellington's victory at Vittoria, played on the same program. A few months later Beethoven led a performance of those two works again in a concert for his own benefit.

Between them in that program he inserted the premiere of his eighth symphony. A Viennese reviewer noted that the reception of the new work was not enthusiastic, and suggested it might fare better if not placed between the two crowd favorites.

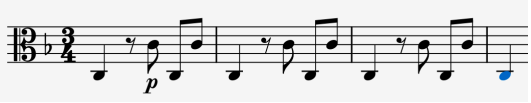
Perhaps, but the "little symphony in F", as Beethoven called it, never became as popular as the seventh. Not in the heroic style of the composer's middle period, it harks back in some respects to his early works while also heralding the more subtle style of his later ones. It was praised by Wagner, Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky (who said it was his favorite Beethoven symphony). Like a beautifully clever miniature, it appeals more to the intellect than to the heart.

It is "little" in terms of length, running around 25 minutes, about the same as his first symphony. And like that earlier work it has a minuet movement where the other symphonies have scherzos. But the usual slow movement is missing; instead there is a four minute *Allegretto scherzando* (literally, "joking Allegretto"). The first and last movements have long codas, and the last movement is much longer than the others, characteristics of his late style.

There is no introduction; the first theme simply sails out in the violins:



The bracketed six note phrase is a motive — we'll call it *A* — that dominates the movement. There is a gentle second theme and a floating third one, but the development is built entirely from *A*. Another pattern that plays an important role is rocking octaves played, for example, at the start of the development by the violas alone:



This appears in many places, as accompaniment or as played by the whole orchestra.

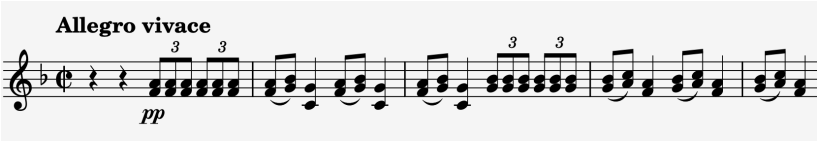
The development ends in a long crescendo based on *A* that reaches *fff*, an extreme dynamic level Beethoven rarely used. Amid this, the cellos, basses and bassoons can be seen but barely heard playing the opening theme to start the recapitulation. (Unhappy about this imbalance, Gustav Mahler re-orchestrated the passage to make the theme heard; a short lived bit of impertinence.)

The long coda is essentially a second development section. It rises to a climax with strings and horns proclaiming *A* heroically, then subsides quickly and ends with the strings simply playing *A* one last time, softly.

Winds playing repeated staccato chords, like a ticking metronome, start the *Allegretto scherzando;* over this the strings play a tune Haydn could have written. There are sudden outbreaks of *forte*, but it is all quite simple until the end of the second theme, when the strings suddenly erupt with a machine gun burst of eight repeated 64th notes (the player must move the bow back and forth eight times in less than a second). The second theme returns, but ends again with the same rapid outburst. The short movement is a sonatina, with three themes but no development section. At the end of a very brief coda the strings play an accelerating pattern and close the movement with a final volley of sixteen repeated 64th notes. (Put off by the joke, some stodgy 19th century conductors replaced this movement with the *Allegretto* from the seventh symphony.)

The minuet that follows is the most conventional of the movements, although Beethoven places some strong emphases on "wrong" beats, and has the trumpet and drum seeming to disagree on where the downbeat is. The lovely trio features a dialogue between the two horns and the solo clarinet, accompanied by bouncing triplets in the cellos.

Having limbered up the right wrists of the string players with the 64th notes of the *Allegretto*, Beethoven now gives them a whole movement with extremely fast repeated notes. This time it is rapid triplets, such as these played by the violins in the opening:



This whispering theme winds down to a quiet unison C. At which point Beethoven inserts a loud unison C#, like a rude gesture. This is ignored, the theme is reprised by the whole orchestra, and other themes are introduced. However, when the first one comes back in the recapitulation the rude C# is inserted again. (Why? We will see.) In this movement as in the first, rocking octaves provide an important motive; for this purpose, the tympani are tuned in octaves, F-F', instead of the usual F-C.

The long coda includes a final statement of the opening theme. But this time the C# interruption is not ignored, it is insisted upon, until it drives the tonality from F major up a half step into F# minor. In this key horns, trumpets and tympani have no role because their notes don't fit. (In 1812 brass instruments did not have valves.) After many measures in the strange key they become impatient, play their Fs loudly, and drive the rest of the orchestra back into F major. This not very subtle way of changing keys disturbed some 19th century musicians, and perhaps contributed to the neglect of this symphony during that time. To our ears, used to Wagnerian harmonies and stretched tonalities (and indeed atonality), it sounds quite natural. In any case, the rest is free of surprises. At the end Beethoven gives us one of his long windups, with F major chords passed around the orchestra until it's time to go.

Taken altogether, this "little"symphony provides a fine exhibition of the composer's wit and inventive genius.

Notes by Lawrence Evans