

Nathan Aspinall's Coffee Premiere
Friday, March 18, 2016, 11:00 a.m.
Nathan Aspinall, conductor

Richard
STRAUSS

Serenade for 13 Winds, Op. 7

Wolfgang Amadeus
MOZART

Ballet Music from *Idomeneo*

1. Chaconne – 2. Pas seul de Mr Le Grand

Franz
SCHUBERT

"Unfinished" Symphony in B minor, D. 759

1. Allegro moderato – 2. Andante con moto

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Serenade in E-flat major for 13 Winds, Op. 7 (1881)

In 1878, a 14-year-old Richard Strauss wrote a letter detailing how tedious he'd found Wagner's *Siegfried*, warning his pen-pal: "The last act is so boring you will die." Of course, in 1881 the young critic's assessment of Wagner did a 180 after he'd studied the score of *Tristan und Isolde*, and Strauss would build upon Wagner's colorful style to become the most famous German composer of the late Romantic and early Modern eras. In the meantime, Richard deferred to his father, Franz, who first performed the principal horn parts in several of Wagner's operas. Papa Strauss detested Wagner as both man and composer, and encouraged his son to emulate earlier German masters instead. So even though the junior Strauss's one-movement Serenade, Op. 7 was composed the same year as his *Tristan* epiphany, don't be surprised that it sounds more like Mendelssohn than the forebear of *Meistersinger*.

LISTEN UP: This earliest of Strauss's four works for winds alone unfolds in a straightforward sonata form. Where a first-movement sonata-allegro typically has a lively principal theme followed by a more lyrical secondary one, Strauss starts his moderately-paced Andante with a gentle chorale and saves the more spirited bits for a little later.

Following the premiere of the Serenade in 1882, Strauss's publisher sent the score to Hans von Bülow, the influential conductor who championed the works of Brahms. Bülow was so impressed that he not only performed the Serenade several times, but also commissioned Strauss to write another work for winds. Bülow insisted that Strauss conduct the 1884 premiere of the new Suite, Op. 4 (published before Op. 7 though written after), which the inexperienced Strauss felt he performed "in a state of slight coma." But not Bülow, and in October 1885 he invited Strauss to be co-conductor of the elite Meiningen Court Orchestra. The next month Bülow uprooted to Berlin, leaving Strauss as the sole music director. Thus, at age 21, Strauss began his rise among the world's leading conductors.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Ballet Music from *Idomeneo*, *Ré di Creta*, K. 367 (1781)

In 1773, having graduated from the short pants of the child prodigy into the equally short pants of adulthood, a 17-year-old Mozart returned to Salzburg as a court musician. His hometown afforded ample opportunity to showcase the young composer's growing catalog of instrumental and choral works, but the relatively provincial Salzburg lacked the resources to nurture Mozart's ambitions as an opera composer. So in August 1777, Mozart resigned his post and set off to explore prospects in Germany and France.

By January 1779, the disappointed genius was back in Austria, and though he didn't get a new job, he nonetheless must have made a good impression. The following year Mozart got a commission from the Elector of Bavaria to write an opera for the 1781 carnival season in Munich. *Idomeneo* was the result. Mozart had composed a dozen earlier operas, but *Idomeneo* is regarded as the first to fully demonstrate his originality and forecast the glories that would follow.

LISTEN UP: The commission required that Mozart conclude with a ballet. From among the five "cursed dances" he dashed off, it's likely that only the Chaconne and *Pas seul* (Solo dance) were included in the first performances. Despite its name, the Chaconne does not present continuous variations over an unchanging harmonic pattern. It instead pays homage to a chaconne tune from *Iphigénie en Aulide* by C.W. Gluck that Mozart adapted for his own rondo-like structure. There's a somewhat slower middle section, and when the tempo picks up again it slips into the minor mode before recalling the opening music. The Chaconne moves almost seamlessly into the multi-sectioned *Solo dance of Mr. Le Grand* (Largo, Allegretto, Più allegro, Più allegro), which identifies the choreographer of the first performances in its title.

An interesting footnote: For the 150th anniversary of Mozart's first international triumph, the Vienna State Opera engaged Richard Strauss to adapt *Idomeneo* to 1931 tastes. The recipe: 2 parts Mozart, 1 part Strauss.

Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

Symphony in B minor, D. 759, "Unfinished" (1822)

Schubert never said why he left his Symphony in B minor "unfinished," and this oversight has led to rampant speculation. One theory, first televised in 1959, posits that Schubert's work was interrupted when his piano was stolen by a night-watchman neighbor who wanted to nap undisturbed during the day. This "revelation" formed an episode of *Peabody's Improbable History*, a cartoon series in which "Mr. Peabody" (a talking beagle/genius) and his adopted boy "Sherman" used their WABAC machine to travel through time searching for missing pieces to historical puzzles. Pure silliness, but it illustrates the enduring place Schubert's best-loved orchestral work has held in the popular psyche since first performed on December 17, 1865.

Yes, it took nearly four decades after Schubert's death before his masterpiece resounded through any concert hall. But the score wasn't "lost" as one might suppose. Schubert had given the manuscript of his two movements, dated October 30, 1822, as a token of thanks to the Hüttenbrenner brothers for presenting him with an honorary diploma on behalf of the Styrian Music Society in Graz (the second largest Austrian city). The score collected dust until one of the brothers mentioned the holy relic to conductor Johann von Herbeck. Finally unveiled, the Nearly Forgotten Symphony has never left the repertoire.

LISTEN UP: Schubert's "Unfinished" is universally cited as THE FIRST ROMANTIC SYMPHONY, despite the Romantic era having been halfway spent by the time anyone heard it. It must have come as a revelation even in 1865, being so unlike other early 19th-century symphonies that had emerged still cloaked in Beethoven's shadow. The first movement (B minor) opens with a somber, unaccompanied motto from the low strings that introduces the restless principal section, and its ominous mood overshadows the entire movement. Where Beethoven would have stirred things further with a dramatic transitional passage, Schubert's secondary theme breaks in suddenly like sunshine through the gloom. After just a held note and three simple chords, a syncopated accompaniment massages the waltz-like tune. But the sunny warmth is fleeting. Cloudy dread descends again, with only a brief respite when the waltz is recapped.

Tiptoeing in like gentle dawn after a stormy night, the *Andante con moto* (E major) unfolds in sonatina form (basically a sonata without a development section). Where the first movement moves from its minor-key

opening to a major-key secondary tune, here Schubert reverses that. He recalls the syncopated accompaniment from the first-movement waltz, and the turbulent closing section raises a sinister specter that's never quite shaken, even with the ultimate return to the E-major home key.

Schubert left a sketch for a scherzo movement, and he may have originally conceived the B-minor Entr'acte from *Rosamunde* as this symphony's finale. But he lived another six years, so not returning to the score must have been deliberate, whatever the motivation. Poor health, writer's block, or giving precedence to other projects are the usual suspects.

Another possibility: Maybe instead of conceiving a symphony, Schubert started out with an overture and interlude to some unrealized stage work. That might explain the abrupt changes of key and mood, and having three consecutive symphonic movements in triple time (counting the scherzo) would have been nearly unthinkable. Additionally, the use of trombones would have been more likely in a dramatic work than a symphony, as in Weber's *Der Freischütz* that had premiered the year before. Weber's opera overture also has the same sense of foreboding contrasted with cheery dance moves that Schubert uses. Was it perhaps an afterthought to convert his movements into a symphony, abandoned when the scherzo failed to reach the lofty standard of the existing movements?

Then again, what does it matter? It's so easy just to be thankful for what we have.

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