

Samuel Barber

Born: 1910

Died: 1981

Overture to *The School For Scandal*

ASO Premiere Performance

Beloved American composer Samuel Barber composed his first piece for orchestra, Overture to *The School For Scandal*, at the age of twenty-one; he was spending the summer studying music in Italy with his friend and partner Gian Carlo Menotti. The pair enjoyed regular day hikes and other non-musical activities; Barber wrote to his parents, “Generally we work from one until five of the afternoon, playing tennis in the morning when there are no shadows on the court.”

Irish playwright Richard Sheridan’s (1751-1816) most famous play premiered in London (1777); *The School For Scandal* is a comedy of manners with lots of humor and amorous intrigue. The intricate plot is an amusing satire that explores malicious gossip and hypocrisy in the upper classes. Annotator Thomas May aptly wrote, “This was a play of intrigue propelled by conversational tennis matches – the glittering repartee anticipating the bite of Oscar Wilde over a century later.” Characters include the wonderfully named Lady Sneerwell, Sir Oliver Surface and Snake (a forger).

Barber was in the first class of students at the new Curtis Institute of Music (opened in Philadelphia in 1924). In addition to his focus on piano, composition and voice, he thrived on additional classes in literature and foreign languages. Biographer Barbara Heyman points out that all his large orchestral works (except the two symphonies) have references to literature but are not really programmatic. Barber stated that *The School for Scandal Overture* was “intended as a musical reflection of the play’s spirit.”

Although he completed the piece in 1931, its first performance was by the Philadelphia orchestra at an outdoor concert in 1933 - and won a prize for the composer that enabled him to return to cherished Italy! The bubbly overture was also played at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York. The orchestration is rich with rhythmic sassiness, effervescent tone colors, abundant melodies, memorable solos - and features a thumpingly gratifying ending. The justly popular work has been described as a stylish tone poem. To add to the fun, Barber includes a clever reference to the children’s song “I sent a letter to my love”. Annotator Roy Brewer enthusiastically concludes, “A thoroughly modern work with no concessions to 18th century pastiche, this composition possesses all the glitter and panache of a true theater piece and remains a firm favorite with concert audiences.”



Mateo Messina

Born: 1972

30,000 Days

Precious

Uncharted (2018 ASO Musica Nova
commission)

ASO Premiere Performance and World
Premiere

Award-winning Seattle and Los Angeles-based composer Mateo Messina has composed over 50 film scores – including the Grammy-winning movie JUNO (2008) - 150 television underscores and 21 symphonies. “And, I have five children which takes more time than any of those projects! I have a team whose mantra is ‘Keep Mateo writing!’ My family is the most important thing in my life.... I look at my career as something I’m blessed with to be able to provide for them. At age 24, I talked my way into the symphony hall without knowing how to read music or having an orchestra.” He literally walked into the Seattle Symphony office and announced he wanted to write a symphony.... And the orchestra, seeking to give local composers more opportunities, gave this limitlessly energetic young artist a shot! (Check out his remarkable TED Talk called *How to Write a Symphony without reading music.*) For twenty years, Messina has volunteered at Seattle Children’s Hospital, playing the piano and writing songs with kids undergoing cancer treatments. “I believe it’s very important for everyone to tell their story, especially kids going through difficult times. Volunteering has filled my heart in a way nothing else can.... Don’t be afraid to give.” His popular annual Children’s Hospital fundraising concerts (this year featuring the NW Symphony Orchestra) have raised over \$2,000,000 for the hospital and kids; the concerts at Seattle Symphony’s Benaroya Hall feature his newest works and highlight his joyful, quirky, inquisitive approach to music, collaborative art, storytelling, and to life.

30,000 Days – Messina summarized, “This piece examines the inside of a beautiful moment between child and parent via a hug – and how quickly they grow up. I partnered with Dutch filmmaker Frans Hoffmeister to show how a parent can hug their child and watch them turn into an adult before their eyes in seemingly the same moment in time.”

Precious – This is a glimpse into how precious our lives really are, how they can change in a moment, how important the little details and moments can be. Messina explained, “When we experience a trauma, our perceptions change, things slow down, and the event is indelibly printed in our lives.” The work was inspired by an obscure film created by “Japanese mad scientists” who started 32 metronomes on a suspended table at different times and within minutes (with one charmingly independent exception) had synchronized their beats. “*Precious* examines how our lives are all in the same balance.”

Uncharted, this year’s ASO Musica Nova commission, is based on the book “I Beat the Arctic” by Leslie Edgar Melvin, an account of his journey by dog sled from Martin Point to Nome in the winter of 1931-32.

From the Alaska State Archives online, I learned that Melvin was born in Florida (1910) and moved to Alaska with his family in 1915. They lived in Seward, Kodiak, Lake

Kenai - moving frequently until finally settling in Seattle. Fascinated by Alaska as a child, Melvin made five trips here between 1928 and 1943, taking tons of photographs and keeping a detailed diary. He held a variety of jobs including winter bartending and spring/summer managing a resort – and collected Alaska memorabilia.

His epic adventure by dog sled began by sailing from Seattle on the S.S. Yukon in early 1931 – stopping in Cordova and Valdez on his way to Seward. He hid on a train from Seward to Fairbanks, spending most of the two-day trip standing in an airless closet! He got a job as a cook for several mining camps and decided to pursue prospecting, so he “talked his way onto a mail plane bound for Nome”. He and a pal boarded a ship that stopped in Kotzebue, Barrow and ultimately Martin Point where they had heard of a new gold strike. “Unable to tolerate his friend’s surly disposition any further”, Melvin bartered with local Eskimos for a sled, some dogs and food. “With no previous experience in mushing or arctic survival, he set out alone to make his way back to Nome – 1500 miles away. 132 days later, in March 1932, he made it. “He encountered unbelievable hardships en route; lost and traveling in circles on several occasions, he mushed almost 3,000 miles total.” He took photos to document the whole crazy journey – and returned to Seattle.

Messina shared, “At 21 years old Leslie Edgar Melvin was unfamiliar with the desolate tundra, never mushed a dog team, spoke not a word of Eskimo, and knew little of celestial navigation. Melvin covered the distance in 132 days from late October to early March traveling mostly in the darkness.

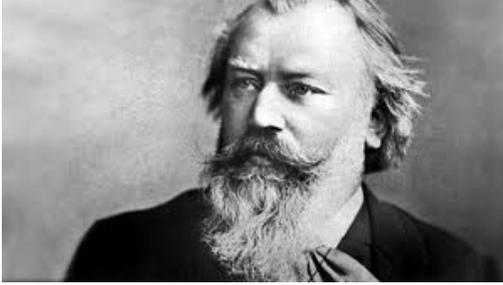
The piano represents Leslie Melvin’s strength, resolution, and fortitude. The strings are often filled with excitement for his journey ahead. He is naive and incredibly optimistic. The strings and woodwinds are the embodiment of his optimism and sense of adventure. The motif of the piece is purely optimistic in nature. The french horns naturally fill this melody with a sense of heroism.

Often the piece lives in two places. This frenetic sense of adventure and a slower pace of feeling grounded, walking slowly, making progress but ever so patiently.

At times the spigot strings represent his dog team and their enthusiasm and dedication.

About five minutes into the piece, the tubular bells signal his moments of peril. I can’t imagine what was going through his mind when he traveled days at a time completely isolated. He seemed to have many moments where he could have questioned his ability to survive, but he had this incredible fortitude to continue to move forward, to mush, to follow the coastline. He was naively optimistic - I believe it paid off for him as he stayed in motion and would always happen upon a welcoming trader or Eskimo family to take him in for the night. A little over 7 minutes into the piece the low brass and strings provide a feeling of relief, the relief he must’ve felt over and over again on this long journey.

At eight minutes, we pause and feel his confidence on the lower register of the piano as he arrives into Nome. Then the adventure motif returns - frenetic strings play a melody reminding us of our human abilities and our desire for adventure.”



Johannes Brahms

Born: 1833

Died: 1897

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73

Last ASO Performance November 2004

A group of outspoken Viennese young people idolized Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt's works which they described as "the music of the future". They raged against Johannes Brahms, who preferred writing in classical forms and structures, and his music was classified by some of his contemporaries as old-fashioned.

His detractors did not have the historical perspective to understand that Brahms masterfully fused traditional forms with the romantic emotions and poetic speech of his own era. Musicologist James Gibbons Huneker admiringly wrote, "Brahms reminds one of those medieval architects whose life was a prayer in marble, who slowly and assiduously erected cathedrals, whose domes hung suspended between heaven and earth, and in whose nave an army could worship. Whatever he wrought, he wrought in bronze and for time, not for the hour. He restored to music its feeling for form."

As he got older, Brahms established a pattern of completing most of his major new works during summer trips away from stiflingly hot Vienna. During the bulk of the year he would draft score ideas and submit his newest works to a severe regimen of rewrites and proofreading. He chose his summer havens carefully and usually did not return to the same locations for more than a few years. The second symphony was conceived and composed in 1877 while he visited Pörschach, a peaceful Austrian village in the Italian Alps that he visited for three summers. In Michael Steinberg's wonderful book The Symphony, he shared that Brahms stated, "This is where the melodies were so abundant that one had to be careful not to step on them." Brahms penned a delightful letter describing his apartment, writing, "Pörschach is a lovely spot and I have found a lovely and apparently pleasant abode in the Castle. You may tell everybody just this. It will impress them. But I may add in parentheses that I have only two tiny rooms in the housekeeper's quarters. They could not get my piano up the stairs, it would have burst the walls." The generally serene music of the symphony might reflect moods the composer probably experienced in this charming location.

When Dr. Billroth, a famous Viennese surgeon and good friend, played a piano transcription of the new score, he announced, "It is all rippling streams, blue sky, sunshine, and cool green meadows". However, Brahms, legendary for his wicked sense of humor, had some fun with friend and correspondent Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, hinting that the symphony was filled with F minor chords (of which there are none) then writing that at the final rehearsal "the orchestra here plays my new *Sinfonie* with crepe bands on their sleeves because of its dirge-like effect, and it is to be printed with a black border, too." He took the joke a step further, saying that he should wear a black armband to the premiere "in deference to the solemn and mournful nature of my latest child."

The genial, pastoral symphony was so successful at its premiere that several of the movements had to be repeated. Pleased with its reception, Brahms made light of some of the contemporary criticism directed at him and extended this whimsical invitation -

“Expect nothing, and for a month before drum nothing but Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner; then its tender amiability will do a lot of good.”

Brahms’s second symphony is a masterpiece of construction and rhythmic inventiveness. His use of *hemiola*, a rhythmic relationship of three notes against two, pervades the entire work. Brahms, who studied and admired Beethoven’s compositions, borrowed and expanded the technique of motivic derivation; he takes two simple ideas – a three-note turn in the cellos and basses and a rising two-note figure initially heard in the horns – and from them develops the entire first movement as well as the motivic threads that bind the symphony as a whole. The opening movement features an additional Brahms characteristic; a favorite instrument combination – violas and cellos – plays one of his most eloquent melodies.

A mood of introspective calm permeates the *Adagio*. This movement has unusual rhythms derived from the beginning motives and showcases a hymn-like second theme. Annotator Phillip Huscher astutely observed, “Brahms knows that even a sunny day contains moments of darkness and doubt.... It’s that underlying tension – even drama - that gives this music its remarkable character.”

Instead of the traditionally fast scherzo, Brahms often preferred a more relaxed tempo for his third movements, in this case a charming *intermezzo* with an unexpectedly animated middle section. The deceptively simple opening camouflages the greatest rhythmic sophistication found in the score – a treasure chest full of shifting accents.

The principal theme of the electrifying *finale* recalls the main motif of the first movement, reinforcing the strong structural unity of the work. Annotator Richard Freed cleverly writes that, after an exultant orchestral outburst, “The way is cleared by the good-naturedly crackling and snarling winds; the broad second theme makes its appearance in lambent sunset colors.” Hints of gypsy music add earthy pleasure to the glorious, exhilarating wild-ride of a conclusion.

Steinberg notes that composer Virgil Thomson once reviewed a Brahms concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra and heard a woman on her way out of Carnegie Hall say, “Brahms is so dependable!” In his ability to create magic with unforgettable melodies and inventive orchestration, he certainly lives up to her billing.