

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Passion and Power - October 6, 7 & 8, 2018

ELLEN TAAFFE ZWILICH *Celebration* for Orchestra



Ellen Taaffe Zwilich was born in Miami, Florida, on April 30, 1939. She composed Celebration in 1984 on a commission from the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra for the opening of a new concert hall; it is dedicated to the conductor John Nelson, who led the first performance on October 12, 1984. The score calls for four flutes (including piccolo), three oboes (including English horn), three clarinets (including bass clarinet), three bassoons (including contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (marimba, triangle, suspended cymbal, chimes, three vibraphones, two gongs, two handbells, harp, piano/celeste and strings. Duration is about 9 minutes.

Even before she won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for her Symphony No. 1, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich had developed an enviable reputation for writing music that was original, identifiably hers, and accessible to performers and audiences alike. From 1975, when Pierre Boulez led the Juilliard Orchestra in her *Symposium* for Orchestra (1973), she has not lacked for enthusiastic performers, including major orchestras and chamber ensembles well beyond the purview of the “new-music specialists.” But the recognition that came with the Pulitzer was unusually large, simply because she happened to be the first woman to have won the prize. Along with the recognition and the award, she had to endure many hundreds of variations of the standard interview question, “How does it feel to be the first woman to win a Pulitzer in music?” That she retained her sense of humor through the experience is evident from her remarks at the award ceremony, presided over by William Schuman, who had received the very first Pulitzer Prize in music back in 1943. She was especially glad to be there, she said, “because I’ve always wanted to ask Bill Schuman how it felt to be the first man to win a Pulitzer Prize.”

Among the most frequently performed American composers, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich began her musical studies as a child in Florida, performing on piano, violin and trumpet before turning to composition at age 10. She was the first woman in the history of The Juilliard School of Music to earn a Doctor of Music degree in composition (her teachers included Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter). Many other honors and performances have followed in years since that signal event as her catalogue has grown to include five symphonies, concertos for most of the instruments of the orchestra, including flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trombone, bass trombone, violin and piano, as well as a double concerto for violin and cello and a triple concerto for piano, violin and cello. And this partial listing does not even mention her large output of chamber music in a variety of media.

Celebration is designed as an overture, a lively, festive single-movement work composed with the aim of celebrating the opening of a new concert hall in Indianapolis. In a program note that she wrote for the first performance, Zwilich referred to the work as a kind of mini-concerto for orchestra, designed to give each of the sections of the orchestra a chance to show off in a festive way. “The celebratory image that persistently came to me was the ringing of bells, so I allowed the work to issue from this image. Sometimes there is a very clear musical image of ringing bells, as in the beginning in the trumpets, strings and percussion.” The sonorities range between the extremes of very soft and very loud, or very low and very high, gradually filling up the sonorous space in which

the piece is played. The very opening sound—a sustained note in octaves played by much of the ensemble—seems, to my ears, to be a reference to Beethoven's *Leonore* overtures, a brief suggestion of the very idea of "overture," before the celebratory fanfares race off and play against one another, sometimes hushed and far away, later drawing near before a return of the forceful opening gesture and a glorious tintinnabulation.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Concerto in D major for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 77



Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He wrote the Violin Concerto in the summer and early fall of 1878, but the published score incorporates revisions made after the premiere, which was given by the dedicatee, Joseph Joachim, in Leipzig on January 1, 1879, the composer conducting the Gewandhaus Orchestra. In addition to the soloist, the score calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. Duration is about 38 minutes.

The Violin Concerto of Brahms is both a close collaboration of two great friends and the testament to their friendship. Brahms was twenty in May of 1853, when he met the violinist Joseph Joachim, who was also a fine conductor and a solidly grounded composer in his own right. Joachim was just two years older but already well-established as a musician. A close bond of mutual idealism sprang up between the two men at once and remained unbroken for more than thirty years. (There was a rupture between them in the middle 1880s, when Brahms clumsily tried to help patch Joachim's failing marriage. Brahms later composed his Double Concerto as a peace offering; it was accepted, but the two never regained the unfettered frankness of their earlier friendship.)

It is not clear when Joachim first asked Brahms to write him a concerto, but, in any case, he had to wait a number of years before receiving it. Not until the summer of 1878 did the composer feel ready to essay the piece, his first concerto since the one in D-minor for piano, which had been a catastrophic failure with the audience at its premiere in 1859. Brahms drafted the score during a fruitful summer in Pörschach, a beautiful spot where, as he wrote, "so many melodies fly about that one must be careful not to step on them." On August 21, 1878, Brahms suggested to Joachim that they collaborate on the final details of the solo part, since the composer was not himself a violinist. The intensity of the collaboration is evident in the composer's manuscript score, which bears the marks of extensive revision in Brahms's hand--often lightening the orchestral texture for the benefit of the soloist--and even more elaborate revisions to the solo part, made in red ink by Joachim himself.

The process of revision even ran beyond the first performance, which took place in Leipzig on New Year's Day, 1879. Joachim, of course, was the soloist, and the normally shy and retiring Brahms conducted. The critical response was certainly more favorable than it had been for the piano concerto two decades earlier, but Brahms was still regarded as a composer of severely intellectual music that made extraordinary demands on its listeners. Despite Joachim's ardent championing of the concerto, it did not really join the standard repertory until after the turn of the century.

But Brahms and his friends were clearly pleased; we have an amusing description of the evening's aftermath from a Bostonian, George W. Chadwick, who was a student in Leipzig at the time and soon to become one of America's leading composers. A few days later Chadwick wrote to a friend in Massachusetts:

Joachim played Brahms' new concerto for the violin in the Gewandhaus that night under Brahms' own

direction, and about one o'clock I saw the precious pair, with little Grieg (who is here this winter) staggering out of Auerbach's Keller (of Faust renown) all congratulating each other in the most frantic manner on the excellent way in which they had begun the New Year. I thought to myself that Johnny Brahms might be the greatest living composer, but I did not believe it could save him from having a "Katzenjammer" [hangover] the next day about the size of the Nibelungen Trilogy, as many a lesser composer has had.

What early audiences found difficult to follow in Brahms was the abundance of his invention. He was never simply content to state a musical idea and then restate it; he begins to develop his ideas almost from the moment they appear, and the impact of so much material seemed overwhelming. The opening orchestral ritornello flows in long musical paragraphs, but these are made up of strikingly varied ideas, interwoven in one another, capable of being developed separately or in combination. The unaccompanied melody at the opening, with the orchestra entering softly on an unexpected harmony, is an homage to Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. The second part of the orchestral exposition runs through a gamut of musical ideas, hinting at but never quite reaching a new lyric melody that finally appears—swaying, coaxing—only when the soloist is able to introduce it in his exposition.

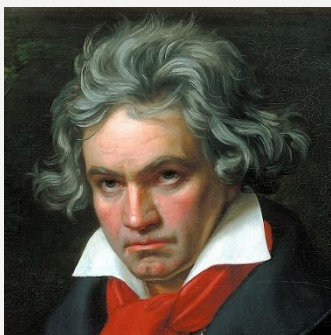
Throughout the movement Brahms is not concerned to produce an excuse for virtuosic fireworks in which the orchestra simply provides support, but to blend the soloist and orchestra into a substantial organism inspired by the Beethoven Violin Concerto, the one earlier work that could be said to occupy the level at which Brahms aimed.

The slow movement was an afterthought, replacing two whole movements that Brahms decided to cut before the premiere. (Characteristically self-effacing, Brahms described them as "the best parts.") The new Adagio begins with a woodwind passage referred to by violinist Pablo de Sarasate, when he explained why he did not intend to learn the new concerto: "Why should I stand there and let the oboe play the one good tune in the piece?"

Brahms had been introduced to Joachim by a Hungarian violinist, Eduard Remenyi, with whom he was touring and who taught Brahms about the style of so-called "gypsy" music. The finale of the Violin Concerto is another delightful essay in imitating that exotic style, filled with fire, flash and energy

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Opus 67



Ludwig van Beethoven was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770 (he was probably born the day before), and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He began to sketch the Fifth Symphony in 1804, did most of the work in 1807, completed the score in the spring of 1808, and led the first performance on December 22, 1808. The symphony is scored for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. Duration is about 31 minutes.

In the years just after 1800, Beethoven was repeatedly invited to take part as performer and composer in concerts intended to raise money for charitable purposes. After performing three times in such concerts, he was given the free use of the Theater-an-der-Wien for a concert of his own on December 22, 1808. The program that night consisted entirely of Beethoven's own works in their first performances. The evening began at 6:30 p.m. with the Sixth Symphony, followed by the concert aria *Ah, perfido!*, two movements from the Mass in C, and the Fourth Piano Concerto (with the

composer himself as soloist) on the first half. After intermission the audience heard for the first time the Fifth Symphony, a piano fantasy improvised by the composer and the Choral Fantasy. The last piece did not end until 10:30!

Such a concert is a challenge to the attention span of the most dedicated music lover, even in a day when concerts normally ran longer than they do today. It is not surprising that most of the critical reviews and reminiscences dwelt on the one real catastrophe of the evening, when the orchestra fell apart in the middle of the Choral Fantasy and the whole piece had to be started over.

Thus, the most important and influential reaction to the Fifth Symphony did not come until a year and a half later, when a review of another performance was printed in the prestigious *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, a journal that had never been wholly pro-Beethoven. But in this case the reviewer was the famous writer E.T.A. Hoffmann (whose wide-ranging talents included competence as a composer). His enthusiastic appraisal of the Fifth Symphony as a landmark in the history of music was largely responsible for a new critical perception of Beethoven. To Hoffmann, music invites the listener "to surrender himself to the inexpressible."

Haydn and Mozart already towered as the "creators of modern instrumental music," and Beethoven was a colossal new figure. Hoffmann waxed ecstatic in his description of the new symphony:

Radiant beams shoot through the deep night of this region, and we become aware of gigantic shadows which, rocking back and forth, close in on us and destroy all within us except the pain of endless longing—a longing in which every pleasure that rose up amid jubilant tones sinks and succumbs. Only through this pain, which, while consuming but not destroying love, hope and joy, tries to burst our breasts with a full-voiced general cry from all the passions, do we live and are captivated beholders of the spirits.

The overwhelming energy and expressive richness of the C-minor symphony left early audiences stupefied or exhilarated. Even among people who have never attended an orchestral concert, the opening phrase can conjure up the very idea of "symphony," much as the question "To be or not to be?" conjures up, not only the indecisive Prince of Denmark, but all of Shakespeare. Inevitably, with so popular a work, the question is asked: What does it mean? Beethoven's own answer, to one of the many curious persons who asked him what his music was about, was "Thus Fate knocks at the door." Here, as in other, similar cases, Beethoven was no doubt seizing a ready *bon mot* to satisfy a casual acquaintance. And yet, as such things go, this one is certainly appropriate. The notion of Fate, and the self-evident struggle that takes place in the four movements of this powerful score have resulted in a century's overlay of other notions, too—most widespread during World War II, when the coincidence of the opening four notes of the symphony corresponding rhythmically to the Morse code for "V" and the ubiquitous "V for Victory" gesture of Winston Churchill turned Beethoven's Fifth almost overnight into the "Victory Symphony."

But the "victory" thus superimposed on this score is inherent in the music itself, predicated on ideas worked out in purely abstract musical ways—this surely is what so excited Hoffmann. This is why the score grips us today no matter how many times we have heard it. Beethoven's sense of the struggle, and his vision of the final victory, grew over a period of years as he kept returning to his sketchbooks to develop his ideas nearer and nearer to fruition.

After noting the first sketches about 1804, Beethoven first wrote the Piano Concerto No. 4. When he returned to the C-minor symphony, he worked out its details at the same time that he was working out the Sixth. These two symphonies, composed together, inhabit totally different musical universes—the Fifth, with its demonic energy, tense harmonies and powerful dramatic climaxes on the one hand, and the Sixth, with its smiling and sunny air of relaxation and joy on the other. In one respect only do the two symphonies reveal their simultaneous composition: Beethoven was experimenting with links between movements here, and in both of these symphonies—as never before and never again—he composed a carefully plotted transition linking the last two movements.

The decision to write a transition at all came at a fairly late stage in the composition and marks a shift from the traditional center of gravity for a symphony from the weighty first-movement sonata form to a still more potent finale (rather than the sort of witty-epigrammatic rondo-sonatas that Haydn had preferred in his finales).

Is it possible, at this late date, to listen to Beethoven's Fifth not as if it were the most familiar of symphonies, but rather as if it were brand new? Listen to the first four notes, followed by their immediate and slightly varied echo, and try to guess how to continue. That four-note figure clearly assumes great importance from the outset, but the more we hear of it, the more we marvel: this little musical atom is not a theme in itself; it is the rhythmic foreground to an extraordinarily long-limbed melody—a polymer, to continue the chemical analogy—made up of a surprising chain of four-note atoms. Our ears hear a long phrase, but no one in the orchestra actually plays it: following the first two full-orchestra statements, the second violins contribute four notes before being overlapped by the violas, which in turn are superseded by the first violins and so on. The growing, tensely climbing phrase is an aural illusion. The rapid interplay of orchestral sections, a constantly boiling cauldron in which each has its own brief say before yielding to the next, lends a dramatic quality to the sound of the orchestra from the very opening, a sense of the theatrical that is instantly self-evident.

The drama in the Fifth Symphony is a musical one: How to achieve a coherent and fully satisfying conclusion in the major mode to a symphony that begins in the minor? In most minor-key symphonies before this one, the major-key ending was expected, conventional, achieved without struggles or doubts. But throughout the four movements of this symphony, C major keeps appearing without ever quite exorcizing the haunting sense of C minor—never, that is, until the end of the last movement.

In the opening Allegro, the C major appears right on schedule where it is conventionally expected—at the recapitulation of the secondary theme. But instead of continuing in that vein, the lengthy coda goes on, back in C *minor*, to assert that we have, as yet, no triumph, only continued struggle.

In the Andante, Beethoven keeps moving with a surprising modulation from the home key of A-flat to a bright C major, reinforced by trumpets and timpani. But that C major idea is never once allowed to come to a full conclusion. Instead, it fades away, shrouded in harmonic mists and sustained tension time after time.

The very un-joking scherzo (in C minor) turns to C major for a Trio involving some contrapuntal buffoonery, but the fun comes to an end with a hushed return to the minor-key material of the opening. It is here that we begin to approach the light, moving through the darkness of the linking passage between the movements to a glorious sunburst of C major opening the finale—but we have not yet reached the major mode permanently. The scherzo and the tense linking passage are recalled just before the recapitulation (to provide another shift from gloom to bright day). Only then are we at last fully confirmed in C major. And to make sure we understand this point, Beethoven ends with an astonishing coda in Presto tempo, pounding home C major, finally reached for good and all, again and again and again. And as if to celebrate this achievement, Beethoven even enlarges his orchestra with the addition of a piccolo on the top and three trombones on the bottom—the first time either instrument appeared in the symphonic repertory, so that his success can sound even more resonantly. The extended coda, an extraordinary peroration in C major, needs to be as long as it is (*eighty measures!*) because it is not just the conclusion of the last movement, but rather of the entire symphony, culminating a demonstration of unification on the very grandest scale to which virtually every composer since has aspired, though few have succeeded.

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