MISSY MAZZOLI
Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)

Missy Mazzoli was born in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 1980. Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres) was composed for chamber orchestra, and first performed by, the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, John Adams conducting, on April 8, 2014. An enlarged version was performed by the Boulder Philharmonic, Michael Butterman conducting, on February 12, 2016. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons (doubling harmonicas), horns (doubling harmonicas), trumpets (doubling harmonicas), trombones (doubling harmonicas), one tuba, percussion for two players, piano (doubling synthesizer; organ sound) and strings.

Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres) was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

ABOUT THE MUSIC
Missy Mazzoli, who can easily be called a superstar composer today on the strength of her growing list of powerfully-conceived works, including several operas, received her Bachelor’s degree at Boston University and a Master’s at Yale University, followed by additional study at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague. Her music has been performed widely by soloists such as pianist Emmanuel Ax, violinist Jennifer Koh, cellist Maya Beyser and mezzo Abigail Fischer; by ensembles like the Kronos Quartet, eighth blackbird, and the NOW Ensemble; and a growing list of major orchestras. She has also written three operas with librettist Royce Vavrek and has been commissioned to write a new work for the Metropolitan Opera (one of two women to receive such a commission) based on George Saunders’ recent, highly-successful novel Lincoln in the Bardo.

Her description of Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres) captures the uniqueness of her conception of the piece.

Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres) is music in the shape of a solar system, a collection of rococo loops that twist around each other within a larger orbit. The word “sinfonia” refers to baroque works for chamber orchestra, but also to the old Italian term for a hurdy-gurdy, a medieval stringed instrument with constant, wheezing drones that are cranked out under melodies played on an attached keyboard. It’s a piece that churns and rolls, that inches close to the listener only to leap away at breakneck speed, in the process transforming the ensemble turns into a makeshift hurdy-gurdy, flung recklessly into space. Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres) was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic.
JEAN SIBELIUS
Violin Concerto in D minor

Jean (Johan Julius Christian) Sibelius was born at Tavastehus (Humeenlinna), Finland, on December 8, 1865, and died at Järvenpää, at his country home near Helsingfors (Helsinki), on September 20, 1957. He began work on his violin concerto in 1902, completed it in short score in the fall of 1903, and finished the full score about New Year 1904. After the first performance, in Helsingfors on February 8, 1904, with Viktor Novaček as soloist and with the composer conducting, Sibelius withdrew the work for revision. In its present form it had its premiere in Berlin on October 19, 1905, with Karl Halir as soloist and Richard Strauss on the podium. The orchestra consists of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, all in pairs; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

ABOUT THE MUSIC
A failed violin virtuoso is responsible for what became surely the most popular violin concerto composed in the twentieth century. Though he knew he would never play it himself, Sibelius poured into the concerto all his love for the instrument and his understanding of its peculiar lyric qualities.

In September 1902, he wrote to his wife that he had just conceived “a marvelous opening idea” for a violin concerto, and if he was speaking of the way that the work actually begins in its finished form, “marvelous” is indeed the term to apply: against a hushed D-minor chord played by the strings of the orchestra, tremolo, the soloist enters delicately on a dissonant note, yearning as it leans into the chord. The magic begins already during the first few seconds of the piece.

But it takes more than a wonderful opening idea to generate a large-scale work. Sibelius struggled with it for years. He drank heavily. He even virtually insulted the German violinist, Willy Burmester, who had encouraged him to write such a piece. In the 1890s, when Sibelius was beginning to make his mark as a composer, Burmester had spent some time as the concertmaster in Helsingfors, and he had become an early champion of the budding composer. While working on the concerto throughout 1903, Sibelius kept Burmester apprised of his progress, and when he sent him the completed work, Burmester was enraptured. “Wonderful! Masterly!” he wrote. “Only once before have I spoken in such terms to a composer, and that was when Tchaikovsky showed me his concerto!” At one point, Sibelius mentioned dedicating the work to Burmester, too.

The violinist proposed to premiere it in Berlin in March 1904, where his fame as a soloist would have guaranteed something of a splash. But Sibelius found himself in a fiscal emergency (and also perhaps unsure of himself, one of the consequences of his heavy drinking), and he scheduled a concert of his works in Helsinki, with the new concerto as its centerpiece. But Burmester was unable to appear at that time. Instead, Sibelius made a choice that guaranteed failure, by offering the premiere to an undistinguished violin teacher named Viktor Novaček. (As difficult as the work is now, it was even more difficult in its first version.) Neither soloist nor orchestra were up to the demands of the piece, and one of the leading critics, Karl Flodin, a long-standing supporter of Sibelius, wrote that the concerto was “a mistake.”

Nonethless, Burmester wrote to Sibelius, generously overlooked the slight to himself, and offered again to play the piece in October 1904, nobly promising, “All my twenty-five years’ stage experience, my artistry and insight will be placed to serve this work . . . I shall play the concerto in Helsingfors in such a way that the city will be at your feet!” But Sibelius was determined to revise the work before allowing another performance. He dawdled with the changes and finally brought himself face to face with his revisions in June 1905, when his publisher told him that he had gotten the concerto scheduled in a prestigious concert series directed by Richard Strauss. But by this time, Burmester’s schedule was full and he was not available. The solo part was given to Karl Halir. After the second slight, Burmester never played the piece that he had been the prime mover in bringing to creation.
The revisions to the Violin Concerto were far more drastic than simply touching up details of the scoring, such as composers usually undertake after a first round of rehearsals and performances of a new piece. Referring to what he considered the flaws in the work as his “secret sorrow,” Sibelius insisted that the revision would not be ready for two years (though in the end, he accomplished them in about a month once he really set to work). Sibelius evidently took Flodin’s critique of the first version very much to heart. He greatly reduced the amount of sheer virtuosic display in the solo part. The first movement had contained two solo cadenzas, the second of which was possibly inspired by Bach’s works for unaccompanied violin; it disappeared in the revision. He also shortened the finale. Only the slow movement, which met with general favor at the premiere, remains substantially unchanged. (It is always extremely interesting to hear an alternate version of a standard repertory work, because it gives us an insight into the composer’s own thought processes; fortunately, we can now make a direct aural comparison between the two versions of Sibelius’s Violin Concerto, because the original version has now been recorded by violinist Leonidas Kavakos with the Lahti Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Osmo Vänskä. The original version was more dramatic, more rugged, closer perhaps to the spirit of Beethoven, and certainly more virtuosic. The final version of the concerto, which has become established as one of the handful of most popular violin concertos of all time has more of a lyric quality without denying itself a strong symphonic development in the opening movement, a heartfelt song in the slow movement, or the wonderful galumphing dance (“evidently a polonaise for polar bears,” as Donald Francis Tovey once wrote) in the rondo of the finale.

JOANNES BRAHMS
Symphony No. 2

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. The Symphony No. 2 was composed in 1877, during a productive summer stay at Pörtschach, Carinthia (southern Austria). The first performance took place under the direction of Hans Richter in Vienna on December 30, 1877. The symphony is scored for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings.

ABOUT THE MUSIC
It is a well-known fact that Brahms put off allowing a symphony to be brought to performance until his forty-third year, so aware was he of the giant shadow of Beethoven. But once he had broken the ice, he did not hesitate to try again. His First Symphony was completed in 1876. The Second came just the following year. Brahms spent the first of three happy and musically-productive summers at Lake Wörth, near Pörtschach in the southern Austrian province of Carinthia. Between 1877 and 1879, he composed a major work each summer—the Second Symphony, the Violin Concerto and the G-major Violin Sonata. Richter’s performance of the symphony in Vienna was an enormous success, and it received similar acclaim in Leipzig two weeks later. (To be sure, Vienna and Leipzig were the centers of the Brahms cult, with critic Eduard Hanslick in the former and Clara Schumann in the latter.)

Elsewhere, the notices were more varied. The criticism most frequently encountered was that Brahms’ music was too intellectual, too calculated, had too little emotional quality. Today, most listeners regard Brahms’ Second Symphony as the most spontaneous, the most sensuous, a work that pulses with the sounds of nature. It feels much more relaxed than the tense, driven First Symphony.

Nonetheless, the Second Symphony is, if anything, even more finely precision-ground than before; the parts fit as in a fine watch. Everything in the first movement grows out of some aspect of its opening phrase and its three component parts: a three-note “motto” in cellos and basses, the arpeggiated horn call, and a rising scale figure in the woodwinds. One of the loveliest moments in the first movement occurs at the arrival of the second theme in violas and cellos, a melting waltz tune that is first cousin to Brahms’s famous Lullaby.
The second movement, a rather dark reaction to the sunshine of the first, begins with a stepwise melody rising in the bassoons against a similar melody descending in the cellos, the two ideas mirroring each other. Rising and falling in slow, graceful shapes, each grows organically into rich and sinuous patterns.

Beethoven would have written a scherzo for his third movement. Brahms avoids direct comparison by writing more of a lyrical intermezzo, though shaped like a scherzo with two trios. A serenading 3/4 melody in the oboe opens the main section, which is twice interrupted by Presto sections in different meters, the first in 2/4, the second in 3/8 time. A century ago this was regarded as “the giddy fancies of a wayward humor.” It makes sense, though, when we realize that each interruption is a variation and further development of the oboe tune.

The final Allegro is as close-knit as the first movement and is based on thematic ideas that can ultimately be traced back to the very beginning of the symphony, including the motto figure. Here Brahms’ lavish invention makes familiar ideas sound fresh in new relationships. The great miracle of the Second Symphony is that it sounds so easy and immediate, yet turns out to be so elaborately shaped, richly repaying the most concentrated study, yet offering immediate delight to the casual listener.