



ABOUT THE MUSIC

BERNSTEIN & BRAHMS

February 22, 23 & 24, 2025

Program Notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

SHUYING LI

Purple Mountains for Orchestra



COMPOSER: Born November 24, 1989, China

WORK COMPOSED: 2023. Commissioned by a consortium of orchestras led by the Hartt Orchestra, directed by Edward Cumming.

WORLD PREMIERE: 2023

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, 5 timpani, bass drum, castanets, glockenspiel, ratchet, sizzle cymbal, snare drum, suspended cymbal, 4 tom-toms, triangle, vibraphone, whip, wood blocks, xylophone, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 8 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Praised as “a real talent” (*The Seattle Times*) with “vivid, dramatic” (*San Francisco Chronicle*) and “enjoyable” (*Gramophone Magazine*) scores, Shuying Li is an award-winning composer who began her musical education in her native China. While she was studying music at the Shanghai Conservatory, Li received a scholarship that brought her to the United States to finish her undergraduate music studies at The Hartt School in Connecticut. Li went on to earn doctoral and master’s degrees from the University of Michigan. In addition to her composition activities, Shuying is a passionate educator. Currently, she is a member of the music faculty at California State University, Sacramento.

Shuying writes, “*Purple Mountains* is an orchestral overture filled with dramatic contrast, graceful melodies, and energetic rhythms. Musical ideas are drawn from my opera, *When the Purple Mountains Burn*, which explores the connection between Iris Chang and Shiro Azuma and the Nanking Massacre in China during World War II. Just like how the opera asks the question: What is it in us humans that could unleash the catastrophic power for one part of humanity to massacre and defile another part of humanity, *Purple Mountains* depicts this heavy subject in an abstract and absolute musical way: the fast whirlwind of panic and destruction, melancholy melody with dark and heavy harmonies, and uprising waves and textures that hijack the piece into a thought-provoking ending.”

The opera centers on two figures connected to the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, also known as The Rape of Nanking (after the Japanese captured the city of Nanking in December 1937, they launched a six-week campaign of mass murder and rape against the civilian population of the city). Shuying’s opera focuses on Iris Chang, the Chinese American author of the 1997 best-selling book, *The Rape of Nanking*, and Japanese soldier Shiro Azuma, who openly admitted to participating in the massacre and other war crimes against the Chinese during World War II. The overture is vivid, stark, and dramatic, and Shuying makes skilled use of the orchestra’s full range of timbres to evoke wartime terror and chaos.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Opus 98



COMPOSER: Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, Vienna

WORK COMPOSED: Brahms composed the Fourth Symphony during the summers of 1884-1885 in Mürzzuschlag, his summer retreat in the mountains southwest of Vienna.

WORLD PREMIERE: Brahms led the Meiningen Court Orchestra on October 25, 1885

INSTRUMENTATION: Piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, triangle, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 40 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

In a 1947 essay titled “Brahms the Progressive,” Arnold Schoenberg described Johannes Brahms as one of only a few composers whose music emerges from a simultaneous and indivisible combination of inspiration and intellectual skill. Brahms’ Fourth Symphony is an exquisite synthesis of heart and mind; its elegance suggests a mathematical equation whose deceptively simple formula expresses new, startling, and intriguingly complex concepts.

Brahms composed the Fourth Symphony during the summers of 1884 to 1885 in Mürzzuschlag, his summer retreat in the mountains southwest of Vienna. In September 1885, Brahms wrote to Hans von Bülow, conductor of the Meiningen Orchestra, expressing his hope that von Bülow would take on the new symphony. Brahms also admitted his doubts about the work’s appeal: “I’m really afraid it [the Fourth Symphony] tastes like the climate here. The cherries don’t ripen in these parts; you wouldn’t eat them!” Brahms needn’t have worried. After his first rehearsal of Opus 98, von Bülow wrote, “No. 4 gigantic, altogether a law unto itself, quite new, steely individuality. Exudes unparalleled energy from first note to last.”

Despite Brahms’ misgivings that the public would not respond well to his “neue traurige Symphonie” (new tragic symphony), the audience reacted enthusiastically at the premiere, applauding each movement. The influential 19th-century critic Eduard Hanslick, a lifelong champion of Brahms’ music, included this encomium in his review: “Brahms is unique in his resources of genuine symphonic invention; in his sovereign mastery of all the secrets of counterpoint, harmony, and instrumentation; in the logic of development combined with the most beautiful freedom of fantasy.”

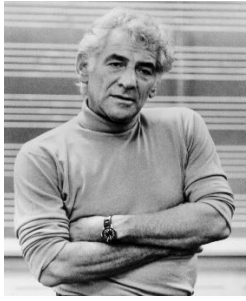
The main theme of the Allegro non troppo reveals Brahms’ gift for economy: the essence of this lyrical sighing melody is its first four notes. Brahms’ endlessly inventive elaborations and development of these four notes generate much of the music of this movement. Countering the criticisms of his work as “too cerebral,” Brahms writes music of pure aural pleasure in the Andante moderato.

The Allegro giocoso begins with an energetic wallop of sound and an amusingly odd rhythm; here, Brahms gives us a glimpse of his humorous side. At the premiere, the audience delighted in this rowdy, ebullient music and called for an encore. While Brahms was pleased with the reaction, he declined the request.

For many years, Brahms had been drawn to the Baroque form of the chaconne, a series of variations in a slow tempo, usually in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. In an 1877 letter to Clara Schumann, Brahms shared his fascination with this format: “If I could picture myself writing, or even conceiving, such a piece, I am certain that the extreme excitement and emotional tension would have driven me mad.” For the Allegro energico e passionato, Brahms wrote a chaconne with 32 variations and a coda. Hanslick described the last movement as exhibiting “an astonishing harmonic and contrapuntal art never conspicuous as such and never an exercise of mere musical erudition.” Brahms’ absolute mastery of form is revealed in this music of profound depth and power.

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Symphony No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra, *The Age of Anxiety*



COMPOSER: Born August 25, 1918, Lawrence, MA; died October 14, 1990, New York City
WORK COMPOSED: Summer 1947 – March 20, 1948. Commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and dedicated to “Serge Koussevitzky, in tribute.”

WORLD PREMIERE: April 8, 1949. Serge Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony with Bernstein at the piano at Boston’s Symphony Hall.

INSTRUMENTATION: Solo piano, piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, celesta, piano, bass drum, cymbals, drum set, glockenspiel, snare drum, tam tam, temple blocks, tenor drum, triangle, xylophone, harp, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 35 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

“W. H. Auden’s fascinating and hair-raising poem, *The Age of Anxiety: a Baroque Eclogue*, began immediately to affect me lyrically when I first read it in the summer of 1947,” Leonard Bernstein wrote in an essay published with the score to his second symphony. “From that moment the composition of a symphony based on *The Age of Anxiety* acquired an almost compulsive quality ...”

Bernstein’s symphony features a solo piano and might, for that reason, have been mistaken for a concerto, but Bernstein explained, “I imagine that the conception of a symphony with piano solo emerges from the extremely personal identification of myself with the poem. In this sense, the pianist provides an almost autobiographical protagonist set against an orchestral mirror ... The work is therefore no ‘concerto’ in the virtuosic sense, although I regard Auden’s poem as one of the most shattering examples of pure virtuosity in the history of British poetry.” (Auden, however, did not reciprocate Bernstein’s admiration. When asked his opinion of Bernstein’s symphony, he replied, “It really has very little to do with me. Any connections with my book are rather distant.”)

Auden’s 80-page Pulitzer prize-winning poem features four characters, Quant, Malin, Rosetta, and Emble, who explore issues of identity, purpose, alienation, and faith during a long night in a 3rd Avenue New York bar during WWII. Despite their dissimilarities, the four bond through their shared loneliness and conflicting impulses. Bernstein wrote, “The essential line of the poem (and of the music) is the record of our difficult and problematical search for faith. In the end, two of the characters enunciate the recognition of this faith – even a passive submission to it – at the same time revealing an inability to relate to it personally in their daily lives, except through blind acceptance.”

Bernstein did not intend to write an overtly programmatic symphony with specific musical illustrations of Auden’s text. However, Bernstein found many of Auden’s narrative elements had made their way into his music nonetheless. Bernstein observed, “[These] details ... had ‘written themselves,’ wholly unplanned and unconscious. Since I trust the unconscious implicitly, finding it a sure source of wisdom and the dictator of the condign in artistic matters, I am content to leave these details in the score.”

Reviews were generally favorable. “Even in its most meditative and introspective moments, it has the soberness of youth ... it is vigorous and ebullient ...” wrote one critic. Even Olin Downes, who called *The Age of Anxiety* “a triumph of superficiality,” went on to ask, “But just what is sincerity? Is not the glitter of this score, its restlessness, its unease, its obvious artificiality, precisely the sincere expression by a young musician of today, of today’s ‘anxiety’?”

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR’s “Performance Today,” (now heard on American Public Media.)

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