

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2017-2018 Mellon Grand Classics Season

October 13 and 15, 2017

KRZYSZTOF URBAŃSKI, CONDUCTOR
RAY CHEN, VIOLIN

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN Overture to Goethe's *Egmont*, Opus 84

MAX BRUCH
26 Concerto No. 1 in G minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus

- I. Prelude: Allegro moderato
 - II. Adagio
 - III. Finale: Allegro energico
- Mr. Chen**

Intermission

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH Symphony No. 5, Opus 47

- I. Moderato
- II. Allegretto
- III. Largo
- IV. Allegro non troppo

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Overture to *Egmont*, Opus 84 (1809-1810)

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn on December 16, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed the Overture to *Egmont*, for the play by Goethe, in 1809 and 1810, and it was premiered at the Hofburgtheater in Vienna on June 15, 1810. The Pittsburgh Symphony first premiered the Overture at Carnegie Music Hall with Frederic Archer on May 7, 1896, and most recently performed it on subscription with Manfred Honeck on June 6, 2009. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.

Performance time: approximately 8 minutes

“The first casualty when war comes,” observed Senator Hiram Johnson in 1917, “is truth.” So when Napoleon invaded Vienna in May 1809, convinced that the Austrian Empire was the major stumbling-block to his domination of Europe, it is not surprising that censorship of literature, of the press, and of the theater were instituted immediately. The months until the French departed in October were bitter ones for the Viennese. The value of the national currency dwindled, food was in short supply, and freedoms were limited. Soon after the first of the year, with Napoleon’s forces gone, the director of the Hofburgtheater, Josef Härtel, arranged for the production of a series of revivals of the dramas of Schiller and Goethe, the great figures of the German stage. Appropriately, two plays that he chose dealt with the oppression of a noble people by a foreign tyrant, and of the eventual freedom the patriots won for themselves — Schiller’s *William Tell* and Goethe’s *Egmont*.

Beethoven was commissioned to write the music for Goethe’s 1789 play. (Adalbert Gyrowetz was assigned *William Tell*. Rossini’s setting of the tale was still two decades in the future.) *Egmont*, based on an incident from 1567, depicts the subjugation of the Netherlands to the tyrannical Spanish rulers, the agony of the people, and their growing defiance and dreams of liberty, and ends with Count Egmont’s call for revolution and his vision of eventual victory in the moments before his execution.

The theme of political oppression overthrown in the name of freedom was also treated by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*, and the musical process employed there also served well for *Egmont*. The triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness, is portrayed through the overall structure of the work: major tonalities replace minor at the moment of victory; bright orchestral sonorities succeed somber, threatening ones; fanfares displace sinuous melodies. The Overture compresses the action of the play into a single musical span. A stark unison begins the introduction. Twice, stern chords from the strings are answered by the lyrical plaints of the woodwinds. The main body of the Overture commences with an ominous melody in the cellos. A storm quickly gathers (note the timpani strokes), but clears to allow the appearance of the contrasting second theme, a quicker version of the material from the introduction. The threatening mood returns to carry the music through its developmental central section and into the recapitulation. A falling, unison fourth followed by a silence marks the moment of Egmont’s death. Organ-like chords from the winds sustain the moment of suspense. Then, beginning almost imperceptibly but growing with an exhilarating rapidity, the stirring song of victory is proclaimed by the full orchestra. Tyranny is conquered. Right prevails.

MAX BRUCH

Concerto No. 1 in G minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 26 (1865-1866)

Max Bruch was born in Cologne on January 6, 1838, and died in Fiedenau, near Berlin, on October 20, 1920. He composed his First Violin Concerto in 1865 and 1866, and it was premiered at the Music Institute of Coblenz with Bruch conducting and Otto von Königslöw as soloist on April 24, 1866. The Pittsburgh Symphony premiered the concerto at Carnegie Music Hall with Frederic Archer conducting and Friedrich Voelker as soloist on November 18, 1897, and most recently performed it with Manfred Honeck and violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter on the 2014 Gala. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings.

Performance time: approximately 26 minutes

Max Bruch, widely known and respected in his day as a composer, conductor and teacher, received his earliest music instruction from his mother, a noted singer and pianist. He began composing at eleven, and by fourteen had produced a symphony and a string quartet, the latter garnering a prize that allowed him to study with Karl Reinecke and Ferdinand Hiller in Cologne. His opera *Die Loreley* (1862) and the choral work *Frithjof* (1864) brought him his first public acclaim. For the next 25 years, Bruch held various posts as a choral and orchestral conductor in Cologne, Coblenz, Sondershausen, Berlin, Liverpool and Breslau; in 1883, he visited the United States to conduct concerts of his own choral compositions. From 1890 to 1910, he taught composition at the Berlin Academy and received numerous awards for his work, including an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University. Though Bruch is known mainly for three famous compositions for string soloist and orchestra (the G minor Concerto and the *Scottish Fantasy* for violin, and the *Kol Nidrei* for cello), he also composed two other violin concertos, three symphonies, a concerto for two pianos, various chamber pieces, songs, three operas and much choral music.

The G minor Violin Concerto brought Bruch his earliest and most enduring fame. He began sketching ideas for the piece in 1857, when he was a nineteen-year-old student just finishing his studies with Ferdinand Hiller in Cologne, but they only came to fruition in 1865, at the start of his two-year tenure as director of the Royal Institute for Music at Coblenz. The piece was not only Bruch's first concerto but also his first large work for orchestra, so he sought the advice of Johann Naret-Koning, concertmaster at Mannheim, concerning matters of violin technique and instrumental balance. The Concerto was ready for performance by April 1866 with Naret-Koning slated as soloist, but illness forced him to cancel, and Otto von Königslöw, concertmaster of the Gürzenich Orchestra and violin professor at the Cologne Conservatory, took over at the last minute. This public hearing convinced Bruch that repairs were needed, so he temporarily withdrew the Concerto while he revised and refined it during the next year with the meticulous advice of the eminent violinist and composer Joseph Joachim (who was to provide similar assistance to Johannes Brahms a decade later with his Violin Concerto). Joachim was soloist in the premiere of the definitive version of the Concerto, on January 7, 1868 in Bremen; he received the score's dedication from Bruch in appreciation. The Concerto was an enormous hit, spreading Bruch's reputation across Europe and, following its first performance in New York in 1872 by Pablo de Sarasate, America. Its success, however, hoisted Bruch upon the horns of a dilemma later in his career. He, of course, valued the notoriety that the Concerto brought to him and his music, but he also came to realize that the work's exceptional popularity overshadowed his other pieces for violin and orchestra. "Nothing compares to the laziness, stupidity and dullness of many German violinists," he complained to the publisher Fritz Simrock in a letter from 1887. "Every fortnight another one comes to me wanting to play the First Concerto; I have now become rude, and tell them: 'I cannot listen to this Concerto any more — did I perhaps write just this one? Go away, and play the other [two] Concertos, which are just as good, if not better.'" Bruch's vehemence in this matter was exacerbated by the fact that he had sold the rights to the G minor Concerto to the publisher August Cranz for a one-time payment, and he never received another penny from its innumerable performances. In a poignant episode at the end of his life, he tried to recoup some money from the piece by offering his original manuscript for sale in the United States, but he died before receiving any payment for it. The score is now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

The G minor Violin Concerto is a work of lyrical beauty and emotional sincerity. The first movement, which Bruch called a "Prelude," is in the nature of an extended introduction leading without pause into the slow movement. The Concerto opens with a dialogue between soloist and orchestra followed by a wide-ranging subject played by violin over a pizzicato line in the basses. A contrasting theme reaches into the instrument's highest register. A stormy section for orchestra recalls the opening dialogue, which softens to usher in the lovely *Adagio*. This slow movement contains three important themes, all languorous and sweet, which are shared by soloist and orchestra. The music builds to a passionate climax before subsiding to a tranquil close. The finale begins with eighteen modulatory bars containing hints of the upcoming theme before the soloist proclaims the vibrant melody itself. A broad theme, played first by the orchestra before being taken over by the soloist, serves as the second theme. A brief development, based on the dance-like first subject, leads to the recapitulation. The coda recalls again the first theme to bring the work to a rousing close.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 5, Opus 47 (1937)

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He composed his iconic Fifth Symphony in 1937, and it was premiered by the Leningrad Philharmonic and conductor Vevgeny Mravinsky on November 21, 1937. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the work at the Syria Mosque with Fritz Reiner on January 31, 1941, and most recently performed it on subscription with Manfred Honeck on June 7-9, 2013, which was recently released on a disc with Barber's *Adagio for Strings* by Reference Recordings. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta, piano and strings.

Performance time: approximately 46 minutes

"COMPOSER REGAINS HIS PLACE IN SOVIET," read a headline of *The New York Times* on November 22, 1937. "Dmitri Shostakovich, who fell from grace two years ago, on the way to rehabilitation. His new symphony hailed. Audience cheers as Leningrad Philharmonic presents work."

The background of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony is well known. His career began before he was twenty with the cheeky First Symphony; he was immediately acclaimed the brightest star in the Soviet musical firmament. In the years that followed, he produced music with amazing celerity, and even managed to catch Stalin's attention, especially with his film scores. (Stalin was convinced that film was one of the most powerful weapons in his propaganda arsenal.) The mid-1930s, however, the years during which Stalin tightened his iron grasp on Russia, saw a repression of the artistic freedom of Shostakovich's early years, and some of his newer works were assailed with the damning criticism of "formalism." The storm broke in an article in *Pravda* on January 28, 1936 entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." The "muddle" was the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mzensk District*, a lurid tale of adultery and murder in the provinces that is one of Shostakovich's most powerful creations. The denunciation, though it urged Shostakovich to reform his compositional ways, also encouraged him to continue his work, but in a manner consistent with Soviet goals. As "A Soviet composer's reply to just criticism" — a phrase attributed to Shostakovich by the press, though it does not appear in the score — the Fifth Symphony was created and presented to an enthusiastic public. Shostakovich had apparently returned to the Soviet fold, and in such manner that in 1940 he was awarded the Stalin Prize, the highest achievement then possible for a Russian composer.

Since the appearance in 1979 of the purported memoirs of Shostakovich (*Testimony*), however, the above tale needs some reconsideration. The prevailing interpretation of the Fifth Symphony had been that generally it represented triumph through struggle, à la Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, and specifically the composer's renunciation of his backslidden ideological ways. But in *Testimony*, Shostakovich, bitter, ill, disillusioned, said, "I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the [finale of the] Fifth Symphony. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.' What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that. People who came to the premiere in the best of moods wept." Shostakovich's thoughts about the Fifth Symphony bear directly on the listener's perception of the work. The key to the work's meaning, its finale, can no longer be seen as a transcendence or negation of the tragic forces invoked in the earlier movements, especially the third, but rather as an affirmation of them. The boisterous trumpets and drums are not those of a festival or a peasant dance, but of a forced death march — Stalin's "exterminations" outnumbered those of Hitler. The Fifth Symphony arose not from Shostakovich's glorification of his nation. It arose from his pity.

The sonata form of the Symphony's first movement begins with a stabbing theme in close imitation. A group of complementary ideas is presented before the tempo freshens for the second theme, an expansive melody of large intervals. The sinister sound of unison horns in their lowest register marks the start of the development. The intensity of this section builds quickly to a powerful, almost demonic march. The recapitulation rockets forth from a series of fierce brass chords leading to a huge, sustained climax after which the music's energy subsides to allow the second theme to be heard in a gentle setting for flute and horn. Quiet intensity pervades until the movement ends with ethereal scales in the celesta. The scherzo has much of the sardonic humor that Shostakovich displayed in such movements throughout his life. The Symphony's greatest pathos is reserved for the *Largo*. This movement is best heard not in a specific formal context but as an extended soliloquy embracing the most deeply felt emotions. For much of its length, the expression is subdued, but twice the music gathers enough strength to hurl forth a mighty, despairing cry. The finale is in three large sections, determined as much by moods as by themes. The outer sections are boisterous and extroverted, the central one, dark-hued and premonitory. Whether

the mood of rough vigor of this framing music or the tragedy of the central section stays longer in the mind is a matter listeners must determine for themselves. The delicate formal balance that Shostakovich achieved here could be tipped in either direction depending on the experience the individual brings to it. Only great masterworks can simultaneously be both so personal and so universal.