Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2018-2019 Mellon Grand Classics Season

April 5, 6 and 7, 2019

EMMANUEL KRIVINE, CONDUCTOR

JOHANNES BRAHMS — Variations on a Theme of Joseph Haydn, Opus 56a
- Chorale St. Antoni: Andante
- Variation I: Poco più animato
- Variation II: Più vivace
- Variation III: Con moto
- Variation IV: Andante con moto
- Variation V: Vivace
- Variation VI: Vivace
- Variation VII: Grazioso
- Variation VIII: Presto non troppo
- Finale: Andante

BORIS BLACHER — Orchestral Variations on a Theme of Niccolò Paganini, Opus 26

Intermission

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY — Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64
- I. Andante — Allegro con anima
- II. Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza
- III. Allegro moderato
- IV. Finale: Andante maestoso — Allegro vivace

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Variations on a Theme of Joseph Haydn, Opus 56a (1873)

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He composed his Variations on a Theme of Haydn in 1873, and it was premiered in Vienna with conductor Otto Dessoff and the Vienna Philharmonic on November 2, 1873. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the Variations at Carnegie Music Hall with conductor Emil Paur in January 1905, and most recently performed them with conductor Marek Janowski in March 2007. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, triangle and strings. Performance time: approximately 19 minutes.

The seed for Brahms' *Haydn Variations* was sown in November 1870 when Karl Ferdinand Pohl, librarian for Vienna's Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, ran across some unpublished manuscripts in his research for a biography of Haydn. Pohl assumed that these works, a set of six *Feldpartiten* (open-air suites for wind instruments), were by Haydn, and, knowing of Brahms' interest in old music, he invited the composer to have a look at the scores. Brahms was especially interested in a movement of the Partita in B-flat that took as its theme a melody labeled "*Choral St. Antoni*." The idea for a set of variations based on this sturdy tune apparently sprang to his mind immediately, and he copied the theme into his notes before he left Pohl's study. He did not begin actual composition of the work until more than two years later, however, but when he did he produced it in two separate versions — the present one for orchestra and another, identical musically, for two pianos. The two were apparently written simultaneously, and he pointed out that one was not a transcription of the other, but that they were to be thought of as two independent works. The piano version was finished by August 1873, when he played it with Clara Schumann, and published in November. The premiere of the orchestral incarnation in November received enthusiastic acclaim from critics and audiences alike, and it marked the beginning of Brahms' international reputation as an orchestral composer. During the next fifteen years, he produced all the symphonic works that continue to assure his name among the musical giants.

Though Brahms did not know it, the theme he copied out of Pohl's manuscript was probably not by Haydn at all. Considerable musicological spelunking has been done to unearth the true source of the tune, but there is still no definitive explanation of its origin. The late H.C. Robbins Landon, who literally spent a lifetime in Haydn research, wrote that the whole series of works in the *Partita* manuscript "is spurious and ... not one note was by Haydn." It has been suggested that the melody was an old Austrian pilgrims' song, though conclusive evidence has never been brought forth to support that theory. We may never know for sure.

To best appreciate the *Haydn Variations,* it is important to recognize the structure of its opening theme, with its irregular five-measure phrases and repeated sections. The eight variations that follow preserve the theme's structure, though they vary greatly in mood: thoughtful, gentle, martial, even frankly sensual, this last being Brahms' rarest musical emotion. The finale is constructed as a passacaglia on a recurring five-measure ostinato derived from the bass supporting the theme. This fragment, repeated many times in the low strings before it migrates into the higher instruments, generates both an irresistible rhythmic motion and a spacious solidity as the finale progresses. It leads inexorably to the spine-tingling moment when (after a minor-mode episode) the original theme bursts forth triumphantly in the strings as the woodwinds strew it with ribbons of scales.

BORIS BLACHER

Orchestral Variations on a Theme of Niccolò Paganini, Opus 26 (1947)

Boris Blacher was born in Yingkou, China, on January 19, 1903, and died in Berlin on January 30, 1975. He composed the Orchestral Variations in 1947, and it was premiered in Leipzig with

conductor Herbert Adlum and the Gewandhaus Orchestra on November 27, 1947. The Pittsburgh Symphony first (and most recently) performed it at Heinz Hall with music director Lorin Maazel in November 1988. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings. Performance time: approximately 15 minutes.

Boris Blacher, one of Germany's foremost 20th-century composers, was born to a German father and a Russian mother in the Manchurian port city of Yingkou in 1903. The family moved to Irkutsk, Siberia when the boy was eleven, and he began his musical training there. From 1920 to 1922, Boris studied in the Manchurian capital of Harbin, earning money by orchestrating operas from piano scores for production. The family then moved to Berlin, where Herr Blacher insisted that his son study architecture and mathematics. In 1924, Boris left his scientific studies and transferred to the Berlin Hochschule für Musik; three years later he enrolled at Berlin University as a student of composition and musicology. Thereafter he worked in the Prussian capital as a composer and arranger until his appointment in 1938 as professor of composition at the Dresden Conservatory. He was soon forced to relinquish his post, however, when the Nazis discovered that one of his grandparents was Jewish. He returned to teaching in 1946, joining the staff of a music school in the Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf. From 1948 until 1970, he taught at the Berlin Hochschule, serving from 1953 until his retirement as its director. As visiting lecturer, he gave summer courses in Bryanston, England (1949, 1950), at the Salzburg Mozarteum (1950, 1951) and at Tanglewood (1955). In 1955, he was appointed a member of the music section of the West Berlin Academy of Arts; he was the Academy's director from 1961 and its president from 1968 to 1971. Among Blacher's many awards were the Bach Prize of Hamburg and the Grosser Kunstpreis of North Rhine-Westphalia.

Boris Blacher's music shows a heady eclecticism. His works through the late 1940s exhibit an extended tonality grown from the music of Milhaud and the French composers rather than from the Austro-German tradition. After 1950, when he adopted important tenets of Schoenberg's serialism, his works were enlivened by a system of shifting meters based on mathematical progressions, a technique influenced by the rhythmic innovations of Stravinsky. During the 1960s, he composed several important electronic pieces. Of the style and effect of Blacher's music, Josef Häusler wrote, "[It] is totally informed by the spirit of play; brooding and tragedy are foreign to it. His ideal is a sparse, transparent instrumentation with delicately traced and colored ornamental lines; and his best works are dominated by a brightness of tone and an unobtrusive logic that reveals both agility of mind and a sure sense of formal proportioning.... In general, Blacher's work is based on the poles of dynamism and lyricism, but even his lyricism is fully awake and expressed with understatement. His lyricism aims at immediate communication in terms of an expressive 'sound-picture' and is determinedly anti-Romantic; in this context the model is clearly revealed as Satie." Blacher's musical catalog comprises two dozen operas and ballets, including works inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Lysistrata*; nearly fifty orchestral pieces, notably the 1947 *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* and *Music for Cleveland*, written in 1957 for the fortieth anniversary of the Cleveland Orchestra; film scores and incidental music for the theater; a *Requiem*, an oratorio and other choral compositions; numerous setting of texts by Brecht, Dante, Sandburg, Wolf and others for solo voice; electronic works; and much music for chamber ensembles and solo piano.

The *Orchestral Variations on a Theme of Niccolò Paganini* of 1947 was the work that secured Blacher's international renown. It takes as its theme the well-known melody that concludes the *24 Caprices for Unaccompanied Violin*, originally treated by Paganini as a set of variations and also appropriated by Liszt, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, Casella, Lutoslawski, Dallapiccola and Andrew Lloyd Webber as the subject for works in variations form. A single violin presents the theme in its original unaccompanied guise to launch the work, and thereafter the melody is treated with brilliance, variety and invention throughout the sixteen variations to produce a virtual concerto for orchestra in which soloists and sections are featured to create a dazzling panoply of instrumental sonorities. The *Paganini Variations* was Blacher's first important post-1945 orchestral composition, and its wit and *joie de vivre* attest to the renewal of his creative spirit after the Second World War.

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64 (1888)

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Votkinsk on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. He composed his Fifth Symphony in 1888, and it was premiered in St. Petersburg by the Orchestra of the Russian Musical Society with Tchaikovsky himself conducting on November 17, 1888. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the Symphony at Carnegie Music Hall with conductor Victor Herbert in November 1898, and most recently performed it with music director Manfred Honeck in May 2016. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings. Performance time: approximately 50 minutes.

Tchaikovsky was never able to maintain his self-confidence for long. More than once, his opinion of a work fluctuated between the extremes of satisfaction and denigration. The unjustly neglected *Manfred Symphony* of 1885, for example, left his pen as "the best I have ever written," but the work failed to make a good impression at its premiere and Tchaikovsky's estimation of it tumbled. The lack of success of *Manfred* was particularly painful since he had not produced a major orchestral work since the Violin Concerto of 1878, and the score's failure left him with the gnawing worry that he might be "written out." The three years after *Manfred* were devoid of creative work. It was not until May 1888 that Tchaikovsky again took up the challenge of the blank page, collecting "little by little, material for a symphony," he wrote to his brother Modeste. Tchaikovsky worked doggedly on the new symphony, ignoring illness, the premature encroachment of old age (he was only 48, but suffered from continual exhaustion and loss of vision), and his doubts about himself. He pressed on, and when the orchestration of the Fifth Symphony was completed, at the end of August, he said, "I have not blundered; it has turned out well."

Tchaikovsky never gave any indication that the Symphony No. 5, unlike the Fourth Symphony, had a program, though he may well have had one in mind. In their biography of the composer, Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson reckoned Tchaikovsky's view of fate as the motivating force in the Symphony No. 5, though they distinguished its interpretation from that in the Fourth Symphony. "In the Fourth Symphony," the Hansons wrote, "the Fate theme is earthy and militant, as if the composer visualizes the implacable enemy in the form, say, of a Greek god. In the Fifth, the majestic Fate theme has been elevated far above earth, and man is seen, not as fighting a force that thinks on its own terms, of revenge, hate, or spite, but a wholly spiritual power which subjects him to checks and agonies for the betterment of his soul."

The structure of the Fifth Symphony reflects this process of "betterment." It progresses from minor to major, from darkness to light, from melancholy to joy — or at least to acceptance and stoic resignation. The Symphony's four movements are linked together through the use of a recurring "Fate" motto theme, given immediately at the beginning by unison clarinets as the brooding introduction to the first movement. The sonata form proper starts with a melancholy melody intoned by bassoon and clarinet over a stark string accompaniment. Several themes are presented to round out the exposition: a romantic tune, filled with emotional swells, for the strings; an aggressive strain given as a dialogue between winds and strings; and a languorous, sighing string melody. All of the materials from the exposition are used in the development. The solo bassoon ushers in the recapitulation, and the themes from the exposition are heard again, though with appropriate changes of key and instrumentation.

At the head of the manuscript of the second movement Tchaikovsky is said to have written, "Oh, how I love … if you love me…," and, indeed, this wonderful music calls to mind an operatic love scene. (Tchaikovsky, it should be remembered, was a master of the musical stage who composed more operas than he did symphonies.) Twice, the imperious Fate motto intrudes upon the starlit mood of this *romanza*.

If the second movement derives from opera, the third grows from ballet. A flowing waltz melody (inspired by a street song Tchaikovsky had heard in Italy a decade earlier) dominates much of the movement. The central trio section exhibits a scurrying figure in the strings. Quietly and briefly, the Fate motto returns in the movement's closing pages.

The finale begins with a long introduction based on the Fate theme cast in a heroic rather than a sinister or melancholy mood. A vigorous exposition, a concentrated development and an intense recapitulation follow. The long coda uses the motto theme in its major-key, victory-won setting.