Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2019-2020 Mellon Grand Classics Season

March 13 and 15, 2020

JAKUB HRŮŠA, CONDUCTOR
ALINA İBRAGIMOVA, VIOLIN

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Concerto No. 1 in A minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 99

I. Nocturne: Moderato
II. Scherzo: Allegro — Poco più mosso — Allegro — Poco più mosso
III. Passacaglia: Andante — Cadenza —
IV. Burlesca: Allegro con brio

Ms. Ibragimova

Intermission

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Opus 68

I. Un poco sostenuto — Allegro
II. Andante sostenuto
III. Un poco allegretto e grazioso
IV. Adagio — Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Concerto No. 1 in A minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 99 (1947-1948)

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He composed his First Violin Concerto in 1947-1948, and it was premiered by the Leningrad Philharmonic with conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky and violinist David Oistrakh on October 29, 1955. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the concerto at Syria Mosque with Music Director William Steinberg in November 1961, and most recently performed it with conductor Susanna Mälkki and violinist Leila Josefowicz in November 2010. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, two harps and strings.
Performance time: approximately 36 minutes

In 1948, Shostakovich, Prokofiev and many other important Soviet composers were condemned for threatening the political and emotional stability of the nation with their "formalistic" music. Through Andrei Zhdanov, head of the Soviet Composers' Union and the official mouthpiece for the government, it was made known that any experimental or modern or abstract or difficult music was no longer acceptable for consumption by the Russian peoples. Only simplistic music glorifying the state, the land and the people would be performed. In other words, symphonies, operas, chamber music — anything involving too concentrated an intellectual effort or critical thought — were out; movie music, folk song settings and patriotic cantatas were in.

Shostakovich saw the iron figure of Joseph Stalin behind the purge of 1948, as he was convinced it had been for an earlier one in 1936. After the 1936 debacle, Shostakovich responded with the Fifth Symphony, and kept composing through the years of World War II, even becoming an international figure representing the courage of the Russian people with the lightning success of his Seventh Symphony ("Leningrad") in 1941. The 1948 censure was, however, almost more than Shostakovich could bear. He determined that he would go along with the Party prerogative for pap, and withhold all of his substantial works until the time when they would be given a fair hearing — when Stalin was dead. About the only music Shostakovich made public between 1948 and 1953 was that for films, most of which had to do with episodes in Soviet history (*The Fall of Berlin*, *The Memorable Year 1919*), and some jingoistic vocal works (*The Sun Shines Over Our Motherland*). The only significant works he released during that half-decade were the *24 Preludes and Fugues* for Piano, Op. 34. The other works of that time — Violin Concerto No. 1, *Songs on Jewish Folk Poetry*, Fourth and Fifth String Quartets — were all withheld until later years. The Violin Concerto, composed for David Oistrakh in 1947-1948 as Op. 77, was not heard in public until 1955, when it was re-numbered as Op. 99.

In his purported memoirs, *Testimony*, Shostakovich revealed the inspiration behind the First Violin Concerto: "Jewish folk music has made a most powerful impression on me. I never tire of delighting in it; it's multifaceted, it can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It's almost always laughter through tears.... [But] this is not purely a musical issue, this is also a moral issue. The Jews became the most persecuted and defenseless people of Europe [during World War II]. It was a return to the Middle Ages. Jews became a symbol for me. All of man's defenselessness was concentrated in them. After the war, I tried to convey that feeling in my music. Despite all the Jews who perished in the camps, all I heard people saying was, 'They went to Tashkent to fight.' And if they saw a Jew with military decorations, they called after him, 'Hey, where did you buy the medals?' That's when I wrote the Violin Concerto, the *Jewish* cycle, and the Fourth Quartet." After he premiered the work, David Oistrakh, who helped in the preparation of the score and was probably privy to the composer's thoughts, wrote, "In the Violin Concerto, as in many other of Shostakovich's works, I am attracted by the amazing seriousness and profundity of the idea, the truly symphonic thinking. There is nothing accidental in the score of the Concerto, nothing that is used for its outward effect and is not supported by the inner logic, by the development of the material. Behind Shostakovich's symphonic thinking you can always sense the profoundest meditation on life, on the fate of mankind."

Shostakovich likened the First Violin Concerto to "a symphony for solo violin and orchestra," and, with its four-movement structure, gravity of expression and fully developed musical argument, it bears little

resemblance to the traditional virtuoso concerto. A personal touch is woven into the fabric of the music by the recurring notes of Shostakovich's musical signature: D–E-flat–C–B, a motive that also occurs in the Tenth Symphony and Eighth Quartet. (The note D represents Shostakovich's initial. In German transliteration, the composer's name begins "Sch": S [ess] in German notation equals E-flat, C is C, and H equals B-natural.)

The brooding opening movement, titled *Nocturne*, is an extended, accompanied soliloquy for the violin that grows continuously from the plaintive melody presented at the beginning by the low strings. The movement, without clear structural divisions, takes the shape of a huge arch, quiet at beginning and end, intense in its central portion. The second movement, a raucous *Scherzo* whose theme resembles that of the comparable movement in the Tenth Symphony, provides the utmost contrast to the introspective music of the preceding *Nocturne*. The expressive heart of the Concerto lies in its third movement, the darkly hued and deeply emotional *Passacaglia*. The passacaglia is an ancient musical form, serious in expression, built on a short invariable melody to which are added elaborating lines on each repetition. The Soviet musicologist and critic Vasily Kukharsky wrote of this music, "In the *Passacaglia*, there is philosophic meditation, there is sorrow and sad lyricism, and there is courage.... It may be said that Shostakovich has never achieved such magnificent simplicity, such an inspiration of melodic thinking." A massive cadenza for the soloist, almost a separate movement in itself, links the pensive end of the third movement to the surging energy of the finale, a brilliant, whirling *Burlesca* that recalls in its closing pages themes from earlier movements.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Opus 68 (1855-1876)

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg on May 7, 1833 and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He composed his First Symphony over a 20 year period from 1855 to 1876, eventually devoting two years to it beginning in the summer of 1874. It was premiered in Karlsruhe by the Orchestra of the Grand Duke of Baden with conductor Felix Otto Dessoff on November 4, 1876. The Pittsburgh Symphony gave its first performance of the symphony in Carnegie Music Hall with Music Director Victor Herbert in November 1900, and it was most recently performed with Music Director Manfred Honeck in February 2017. The score calls for pairs of woodwinds plus contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.
Performance time: approximately 47 minutes

Brahms, while not as breathtakingly precocious as Mozart, Mendelssohn or Schubert, got a reasonably early start on his musical career: he had produced several piano works (including two large sonatas) and a goodly number of songs by the age of nineteen. In 1853, when Brahms was only twenty, Robert Schumann wrote an article for the widely distributed *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, his first contribution to that journal in a decade, hailing Brahms as the savior of German music, the rightful heir to the mantle of Beethoven. Brahms was extremely proud of Schumann's advocacy and he displayed the journal with great joy to his friends and family when he returned to his humble Hamburg neighborhood after visiting Schumann in Düsseldorf, but there was the other side of Schumann's assessment as well, that which placed an immense burden on Brahms' shoulders.

Brahms was acutely aware of the deeply rooted traditions of German music extending back not just to Beethoven, but even beyond him to Bach and Schütz and Lassus. His knowledge of Bach was so thorough, for example, that he was asked to join the editorial board of the first complete edition of the works of that Baroque master. He knew that, having been heralded by Schumann, his compositions, especially a symphony, would have to measure up to the standards set by his forebears. At first he doubted he was even able to write a symphony, feeling that Beethoven had nearly expended all the potential of that form, leaving nothing for future generations. "You have no idea," Brahms lamented, "how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven."

Encouraged by Schumann to undertake a symphony ("If one only makes the beginning, then the end comes of itself," he cajoled), Brahms made some attempts in 1854, but was unsatisfied with the symphonic potential of the sketches, and diverted them into the First Piano Concerto and *German Requiem*. He began again a year later, perhaps influenced by a performance of Schumann's *Manfred*, and set down a first movement, but that music he kept to himself, and even his closest friends knew of no

more than the existence of the manuscript. Seven years passed before he sent this movement to Clara, Schumann's widow, to seek her opinion. With only a few reservations, she was pleased with this C minor sketch, and encouraged Brahms to hurry on and finish the rest so that it could be performed. Brahms, however, was not to be rushed. Eager inquiries from conductors in 1863, 1864 and 1866 went unanswered. It was not until 1870 that he hinted about any progress at all beyond the first movement.

The success of the superb *Haydn Variations* for orchestra of 1873 seemed to convince Brahms that he could complete his initial symphony, and in the summer of 1874 he began two years of labor — revising, correcting, perfecting — before he signed and dated the score of the First Symphony in September 1876. It is a serious and important essay ("Composing a symphony is no laughing matter," according to Brahms), one that revitalized the symphonic sonata form of Beethoven and combined it with the full contrapuntal resources of Bach, a worthy successor to the traditions Brahms revered. In the years since its premiere, it has become the most performed of Brahms' symphonies and one of the most cherished pieces in the orchestral literature.

The success and popularity of the First Symphony are richly deserved. It is a work of supreme technical accomplishment and profound emotion, of elaborate counterpoint and beautiful melody. Even to those who know its progress intimately, it reveals new marvels upon each hearing. The first movement begins with a slow introduction in 6/8 meter energized by the heart-beats of the timpani supporting the full orchestra. The violins announce the upward-bounding main theme in the faster tempo that launches a magnificent, seamless sonata form. The second movement starts with a placid, melancholy song led by the violins. After a mildly syncopated middle section, the bittersweet melody returns in a splendid scoring for oboe, horn and solo violin. The brief third movement, with its prevailing woodwind colors, is reminiscent of the pastoral serenity of Brahms' earlier Serenades.

The finale begins with an extended slow introduction based on several pregnant thematic ideas. The first, high in the violins, is a minor-mode transformation of what will become the main theme of the finale, but here broken off by an agitated pizzicato passage. A tense section of rushing scales is halted by a timpani roll leading to the call of the solo horn, a melody originally for Alphorn that Brahms collected while on vacation in Switzerland. The introduction concludes with a noble chorale intoned by trombones and bassoons, the former having been held in reserve throughout the entire Symphony just for this moment. The finale proper begins with a new tempo and one of the most famous themes in the repertory, a stirring hymn-like melody that resembles the finale of Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony. (When a friend pointed out this affinity to Brahms, he shot back, "Any fool can see that!") The movement progresses in sonata form, but without a development section. The Symphony closes with a majestic coda in the brilliant key of C major featuring the trombone chorale of the introduction in its full splendor.