THE CHELSEA SYMPHONY

TURBULENCE
SEPTEMBER 23 & 24, 2022

PROGRAM NOTES

Overture

GRAŻYNA BACEWICZ (1909 - 1969)

Polish composer Grażyna Bacewicz studied violin, piano and composition at the Warsaw Conservatory, then went on to Paris, where she studied composition with Nadia Boulanger and violin with Carl Flesch. Bacewicz developed into an outstanding violinist: she gave concerts throughout Europe, was a prize-winner at the 1935 Wieniawski Competition and served for three years in the 1930s as concertmaster of the Polish Radio Orchestra. She spent the war years in Warsaw, though she had to flee the city after the uprising in the summer of 1944. In 1954 Bacewicz was so seriously injured in an automobile accident that she had to give up performing. She devoted the rest of her career to composing and to

teaching in Warsaw. She died in that city just a few weeks before her sixtieth birthday.

As a composer Bacewicz was extremely prolific. She wrote seven violin concertos, two cello concertos, as well as concertos for piano and for viola, plus four symphonies, seven string quartets, five violin sonatas and a vast amount of chamber music, piano music (Bacewicz was also a superb pianist), vocal music and two ballets. She would sometimes write in unusual forms: among her works are a quartet for four cellos, a quartet for four violins, several unaccompanied violin sonatas and a trio for oboe, harp and percussion. As might be expected of a student of Boulanger, Bacewicz wrote with clarity of texture and form, and she has inevitably been classified as a neoclassical composer, though she disliked that term. After the cultural thaw of 1956 brought more freedom to Polish music life, Bacewicz experimented with serial music and avant garde techniques, but – unlike Lutosławski, Górecki, and Penderecki – she did not evolve far from her pre-war idiom. Her music is only now, 50 years after her death, being discovered in this country.

Bacewicz wrote the present overture while living in Warsaw during the war; its original title ***Overture 1943*** is an indication

of its date rather than the suggestion that it is in any way a reflection of the war. The compact overture (only six minutes long) is in a curious form. It gets off to a blistering start, marked ***Allegro***, that races along via some busy perpetual-motion writing for strings, soon punctuated by bold declarations from the brass. The tempo slows for the second theme-group, which arrives as an interlude, a moment of calm after the breathless rush of the beginning. This ***Andante*** is introduced by the woodwinds, and Bacewicz achieves some nice instrumental color here, with unusual combinations of instruments and the delicate sound of bells. With these two sharply-contrasted themes, we seem set for a sonata-form movement, but the music plunges back into the energy of the opening, and the second theme vanishes, never to return. Instead, Bacewicz steadily builds the non-stop energy of the opening ***Allegro*** into a rush to the powerful concluding chord.

Written during the German occupation, ***Overture 1943*** had to wait until after Poland's liberation for its premiere. It was first performed on September 1, 1945, at the Krakow Festival of Contemporary Music with Mieczyslaw Mierzejewski leading the Krakow Philharmonic.

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Clarinet Concerto

MICHAEL BOYMAN (B. 1989)

This piece was born of the pandemic and reflects the troubled times in which it was written. It is a tragic clarinet concerto. Like the other music on this program, it has no implied story, relying instead on abstract forms to convey its emotions and message.

The first movement is a throwback to the classical concerto of Mozart and Beethoven. It is in sonata form and has a double exposition, meaning the orchestra introduces the main musical ideas, after which the solo clarinet enters and provides her own take on the material. Following a turbulent development and recapitulation, the solo clarinet plays a cadenza, or an extended unaccompanied solo. This serves as a meditation on the musical ideas and foreshadows what is to come. The orchestra rejoins and crescendos to a shattering climax.

The second movement, entitled "Chaconne Fantasy," uses a repeating and descending bass line as its foundation. It opens

with a mournful melody in the English horn, followed by the solo clarinet rhapsodizing above the chaconne bass. After an orchestral interjection, the solo clarinet breaks free of the bass to present a new tranquil melody that acts as a reprieve from an otherwise gloomy atmosphere. The orchestra takes up this melody, only to have the mournful opening idea reemerge in the strings, followed by the chaconne bass. After a dissonant climax, the music slowly winds down, with the solo clarinet in dialogue with bassoon and English horn, each playing fragments of melody.

The third movement, entitled "Toccata & Trio," is a study in perpetual motion and features a jagged and rhythmically irregular theme in the solo clarinet and woodwinds, reminiscent of the first movement. A more lyrical central trio section, with the solo clarinet in dialogue with the brass, provides some relief from the otherwise unrelenting forward momentum of the toccata, which the solo clarinet rides like a wave to the very end.

— ***Michael Boyman***

Oboe Concerto in D Major, TrV 292

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864 - 1949)

Early in [World War II], [Richard Strauss] wrote what was to be his last opera—further activities in that sphere were simply unfeasible in the crumbling Third Reich. He retired with his family to his sumptuous villa in Bavaria, far from the horrors of the war, and underwent a remarkable renewal of creativity—and in new, or rather, old, directions. As the war ground to an end, and in the aftermath, up to his death in 1949, he turned again to instrumental music. The legacy of this period is significant: two major works for wind ensemble, the remarkable Metamorphosen for twenty-three solo strings, and his second horn concerto. Of course, the most beloved of his last works is the very last of them, the immortal Four Last Songs—four beautiful meditations by an old man, who has lived a long rich life, on the meaning and experience of death. In all of these late works, there is much of a return to an earlier, lush Germanic romantic style, of which he was the master when young. And from this time, as well, is a work in a genre in which he had averred no interest—an oboe concerto.

The story is a well-known one. During the first days of peace in May of 1945, Bavaria was filled with American soldiers, generally poking around. As soon as it was known that the man whom many considered the most important composer of the century was living nearby, those with an artistic bent beat a path to the great man's door. Among them was a young enlisted man, John de Lancie, first oboe with the Pittsburgh Symphony before being drafted. De Lancie, observing that there were so many solicitous and beautiful solos for the oboe in all his works, had Strauss ever considered writing an oboe concerto? Strauss dismissed the idea with a "harrumph," and that was the end of that. Or so he thought. In 1946 de Lancie was informed to his utter surprise that Strauss' oboe concerto was finished and that de Lancie had first American dibs on it. In the meantime de Lancie had moved on to the position of second oboe in the Philadelphia Orchestra (he later became Director of the Curtis Institute of Music) and protocol would not allow him to perform it, since the principal had no interest. In matter of fact, the first performance was given in America with M. Miller as the soloist. You may remember him as "Mitch" of "Sing Along with Mitch" on 1950s television—he was a professional oboist before all of that, though.

The concerto soon became a central part of the repertoire for all advanced oboists—it's a real challenge. It has much that folks who love Strauss look for: lyrical, soaring lines, bold harmonic shifts, virtuoso solo writing, nuance without preciosity, and remnants of a great German classic and romantic tradition—all rolled into one. It certainly doesn't spare the soloist, however. It begins, after a little fluttering in the cellos, with the infamous, unstinting oboe solo—over fifty measures without even a tiny break! While the solo oboe rhapsodizes, the fluttering continues almost unabated in the accompaniment to set the active tone of the movement; it's also a clever way to set off the opportunity for the lyricism of the soloist to come to fore. The characteristic harmonic adventuresome of Strauss' late period is part of the charm, as well. The "fluttering" gently has the last say as the movement ends. The composer chooses to open the second movement more or less as he began the first: the nervous little figure that pervaded before is with us again—more gently--and the soloist, once more, spins forth a long soaring solo. The leisurely pace continues, with ample opportunity for lyricism in both the orchestra and the solo oboe. At the end a cadenza for the soloist is softly accompanied by pizzicato strings, almost like an operatic recitative—not altogether

inappropriate for such a composer of opera as Strauss. It leads us directly to the last movement, a happy, energetic affair that bounces merrily along until another cadenza for the soloist ensues in the middle of the movement.

— Wm. E. Runyan

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Symphony No. 4 in F Minor

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872 - 1958)

The premiere of Vaughan Williams's Symphony in F minor of 1931–34, given at the Queen's Hall on 10 April 1935 by the recently formed BBC Symphony Orchestra also under Adrian Boult, brought a startling change of tone. At the time of the premiere of the 'Pastoral' Symphony the composer was in his fiftieth year; a dozen years later he had witnessed global unrest, culminating in Germany with Adolf Hitler becoming chancellor in January 1933. Although Vaughan Williams always denied that his F minor symphony was in any way a reaction to contemporary events—he could point to other recent works of his: the oratorio Sancta civitas, the 'masque for dancing' Job, and the piano concerto, all of which contain passages of similar power and conflict—no artist could remain

aloof from what was happening in Europe. Nonetheless, the ferocity of the F minor symphony, to ears more accustomed to the Tallis Fantasia, The lark ascending and the Mass in G minor, was as powerful as it was unexpected.

As with the composer's programme note for the first performance of the 'Pastoral', that which he provided for the premiere of the F minor symphony is concerned entirely with musical matters, but once again it is the composer's widow who explains the everyday moment of creative impulse. It appears he had read a fictional 'Freak Festival' account: 'In which a symphony … was described in some detail … his breakfast-time reaction was an immediate 'il faut je compose cela'. So, without any philosophical, prophetic or political germ, No 4 took its life from a paragraph in The Times.'

Whatever mundane circumstance was the initial spur to begin the symphony, the result after three years' work was music of genius. Such is the symphony's immediate impact that we may well imagine its ferocious expression to have been welling up in the composer's creative subconscious, awaiting that spur.

The symphony is dedicated to Sir Arnold Bax. In 1922, Bax had dedicated his Lyrical Interlude for string quintet, and later his String Quartet No 2 of 1925, to Vaughan Williams. It may be

that Vaughan Williams's inscription of his F minor symphony to Bax was in return for those dedications.

The symphony opens with a grinding semitonal fortissimo clash, from which emerge two principal themes that are to run through the entire work. Virtually throughout they are treated to the composer's complete mastery of contrapuntal devices, and are always aligned to their emotional and expressive nature as the inherently compact structures unfold. If the overriding impression given by this symphony is one of ferocious concentration, leavened at various points by elements of relaxation (in particular, the pianissimo coda to the first movement, wherein the 'triplanar harmony' of the 'Pastoral' is put to quite different expressive use by way of a soft major key reminiscent of an earlier intense cantilena), the attentive listener is gripped by the range, power and expressive immediacy of the music, from the all-pervasive four-note figure that inhabits much of the work to the intensity of the composer's inspiration and seemingly limitless variation of that figure. From the four nobly rising chords that open the second movement to the solo flute cadenza that heralds its conclusion, this unfolding andante moderato offers no escape from serious matters, leading by way of that cadenza to the scherzo whose trio section (in strict classical

terms) is a fugato on elements from both preceding movements.

As the composer wrote: ‘After a recapitulation of the Scherzo a long crescendo on a pedal leads direct to the Finale. This opens with a more energetic version of the cadence figure from the second movement.’ Here Vaughan Williams has utilized the same joining-of-movements device found in Beethoven’s fifth symphony—but this is no slavish imitation: it is wholly organic to Vaughan Williams’s quite different expressive purposes, as the symphony struggles to free itself from the obsessions that have constantly threatened it. Even in the epilogue, ‘an extraordinarily powerful use of fugal devices’ (as Edmund Rubbra described it), there is no way out: as the symphony races to its closing pages, the very opening of the work returns, shutting the door on any attempt to escape and thus binding together the symphony as a whole.

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