



EROICA

Beethoven & Blue Jeans

November 23 & 24, 2019 – Saenger Theatre

SPECK SPEAKS

Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto

We sometimes forget that our favorite music was once brand new and got lousy reviews. And nowhere is that more common than in the world of solo concertos. There's a long tradition of soloists disliking the concertos that were written for them.

For example, Peter Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto and his violin concerto both received scathing criticism from the men he wrote them for. ("Unplayable! Worthless! Clumsy! Vulgar! Stolen! Hostile to the instrument!") It's enough to make you give up. You'd truly have to have the courage of your convictions to keep going in the face of this kind of invective. But Tchaikovsky refused to alter a single note.

A similar thing happened to Samuel Barber (who, spoiler alert, is a strong contender for my "favorite 20th-Century composer" award). In 1939 a Philadelphia industrialist commissioned Barber to write a violin concerto for his favorite violinist and ward, Iso Briselli to premiere the following January. Barber enthusiastically set about composing the piece. The violinist was happy with the first two movements but – perhaps spurred on by his patron – had plenty of reservations about the perpetual motion finale. He considered it "unviolinistic," too light and frothy to be substantial, and (maybe most to the point) too tricky to get into good shape for the premiere. And he asked Barber to rewrite it.

Like Tchaikovsky before him, Samuel Barber had the courage of his convictions. He refused to alter the concerto. Briselli refused to play it in January – and so the planned premiere did not take place. In Barber's words, "I could not destroy a movement in which I have complete confidence, out of artistic sincerity to myself. So we decided to abandon the project, with no hard feelings on either side." He did ask to keep his \$500 advance, though.

– **Scott Speck**, MSO Music Director



PROGRAM NOTES

World Premiere

Austin Wintory

BORN: September 9, 1984 / Denver, Colorado, USA

This piece will be announced later.

Violin Concerto, Op. 14

Samuel Barber

BORN: West Chester, Pennsylvania, USA / March 9, 1910

DIED: New York, New York, USA / January 23, 1981

This heartfelt concerto was commissioned by Samuel Fels, a wealthy industrialist and philanthropist from Philadelphia, as a vehicle for Iso Briselli, a gifted young violinist who was Fels's ward and protégé. Barber sketched the first two movements in Switzerland during the summer

of 1939. Due to the increasing threat of war, he returned to the USA in September. He completed the first two movements in mid-October and dispatched them to Briselli. Briselli was pleased with them, but his approval did not extend to the finale that Barber sent him in November. He considered it insufficiently substantial to balance the first two movements. He suggested that Barber rewrite the finale, but the composer declined to do so. The concerto was premiered by the distinguished American soloist, Albert Spalding, on February 4, 1941. Eugene Ormandy conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Dispensing with preliminary gestures, Barber launched the concerto with a lyrical, gracious opening theme on solo violin. Throughout the first movement, humor and

drama make themselves felt, but the overall mood is sweet and restrained. This atmosphere continues in the slow second movement, with an added overlay of melancholy. Barber prefaces the violin's first entry with lovely solos for wind instruments. Tension later builds gradually to an orchestral climax of darkened fervor. The "perpetual motion" finale brings a strong change in tone and a greatly heightened energy level. Brief, concentrated and Barber's most "modern" creation to date, it offers plenty of rhythmic thrust and virtuoso fireworks, for soloist and orchestra alike.

This piece is scored for solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, percussion, piano and strings.

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 "Eroica"

Ludwig van Beethoven

BORN: Bonn, Germany / December 15, 1770

DIED: Vienna, Austria / March 26, 1827

In 1802, Beethoven declared to a friend, "I am not satisfied with my works up to the present time. From today I mean to take a new road." On the symphonic front, he did so by composing his Third. It is an astonishing watershed in the history of orchestral music; a stirring declaration of artistic and spiritual independence; and in both physical size and visionary spirit a model for countless compositions by later composers.

A dedicated humanitarian such as Beethoven heartily endorsed the French Revolution and the early career of Napoleon Bonaparte. He composed the Third during the summer of 1803. His friend Ferdinand Ries relates that

a draft of the title page originally bore simply the words "Bonaparte" at the top, and "Ludwig van Beethoven" at the bottom, with the balance to be filled in later.

On May 20, 1804, Bonaparte declared himself Emperor of France. Ries recalled that Beethoven "flew into a rage and cried out: 'Then he, too, is nothing but an ordinary mortal! Now he, too, will trample on the rights of man and indulge only his own ambition! He will raise himself above all others and become a tyrant!' Beethoven went to the table, took hold of the title page by the top, tore it apart and flung it on the ground. The first page was rewritten and not until then was the symphony entitled Sinfonia eroica (Heroic Symphony)."

The first movement is the most clearly "heroic" of the four. Instead of basing it upon two short, contrasting themes, as Haydn did in his first movements, Beethoven used what are in effect groups of themes, and his development of them is more expansive, subtle and intricate. Another innovation was the inclusion, as the second movement, of a funeral march. This type of composition had never before been featured in a symphony. The third movement is an immensely vital, red-blooded piece that sweeps away the funeral march's emotional clouds. The finale is a set of variations on a rather naïve theme that Beethoven drew from his ballet, *The Creatures of Prometheus*. Here it reaches its apotheosis, transformed into material fit to crown this mightiest of symphonies.

This piece is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings.

– Program Notes by Don Anderson © 2019