

Program Notes for the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra

By Beth L. Buelow, ©2011

Barber, Chopin & Mozart

2:30 p.m. Sunday, February 26, 2012

Rialto Theater

Torke: *Ash*

Chopin: Piano Concerto No. 2

Barber: Adagio for Strings

Mozart: Symphony No. 31 "Paris"

Michael Torke (1961-)

***Ash* (1991)**

American composer Michael Torke was born in Milwaukee in 1961. He demonstrated an early aptitude for music, so his parents started him on piano lessons at a young age. It wasn't long before he added composing to his musical activities; he began formal composition lessons at age nine. Continued cultivation of his talents eventually led him to the Eastman School, where he studied with Joseph Schwantner and Christopher Rouse. Interestingly, he had little exposure to more popular forms of music until he reached Eastman. Torke absorbed the new sounds and came to the conclusion that he could integrate elements of rock, pop and jazz into his more classically oriented approach.

In 1985, the Brooklyn Philharmonic commissioned a new work from Torke, and the resulting "Ecstatic Orange" was his first orchestral score and one of his many compositions influenced by the personal feelings conjured up by colors. Yet another opportunity came along that same year when his publisher introduced Torke to Peter Martins, director of the New York City Ballet. Martins was so taken by the brilliance and energy of Torke's work, he choreographed "Ecstatic Orange." Torke's relationship with the New York City Ballet has since yield multiple commissions and premieres, including *Purple* (1987), *Black & White* (1988), *Slate* (1989), *Mass* (1990) and the piece we'll enjoy today, *Ash* (1991).

Listening to *Ash*, you'll hear what sounds like a contemporary take on Beethoven. The instrumentation and tonal palette are reminiscent of the classical tradition, with the strings and winds creating a rousing opening, punctuated by the timpani. Less familiar is the off-kilter, almost skittish, rhythm that resists toe-tapping. The theme is angular and jaunty, almost like a scherzo. The first section segues to a more lyrical middle that highlights the woodwinds. Here, Beethoven takes a back seat, and one can hear hints of Copland and even Tchaikovsky in the colors and voicing. The driving pulse returns for the concluding portion, bringing us back to classical roots with a Torke twist.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21 (1830)

- I. **Maestoso**
- II. **Larghetto**
- III. **Allegro vivace**

During Chopin's short life, he produced some of the most sublime and extraordinary music for the piano. He was self-taught at a very young age both in piano and composition; at seven, he improvised a polonaise that his teacher

transcribed and published. His next piano teacher taught him to notate music, and he went on to publish a rondo for solo piano, opus one, at age 15.

Only five short years later, Chopin had graduated to the full concerto form. He premiered his F Minor piano concerto in 1830 in Warsaw to great critical acclaim. One writer proclaimed that Chopin was “the Paganini of the piano,” referring to the virtuoso violinist. He then moved to Paris, his reputation solidified by accolades from the likes of Robert Schumann, who said of one of Chopin’s smaller works, “Hats off, gentleman – a genius!”

Despite his success, Chopin detested the performing life. He performed fewer than forty concerts as a pianist, far less than today’s touring soloist. Chopin preferred his privacy and was able to carve out a comfortable Parisian lifestyle as a highly regarded piano teacher who enjoyed generous royalties.

The young pianist was a romantic, and during the time he was composing the F Minor concerto, he happened to be infatuated with a fellow student at the Warsaw Conservatory, a soprano named Constantia Gladkowska. Rather than tell her of his feelings, he shared them with his closest friend and put the energy of his unrequited love into the concerto.

(A quick side-note about the number: The F Minor was composed first; the story goes that the numbering of his two concerti was switched because Chopin misplaced the orchestral parts to the F Minor concerto. By the time they were found, the E Minor concerto had already gone to print as No. 1.)

The piece is undeniably a showcase for the soloist, with the orchestra playing, almost literally, second fiddle. Writing for orchestra was not Chopin’s strength; he never wrote for orchestra again after his two concerti. The work is structured in the traditional three-movement format: fast-slow-fast. The first movement begins with an orchestra introduction of the dark principal theme, followed by the winds in a second, gentler theme. Chopin biographer Frederick Niecks describes the moment when the soloist enters and takes up the first theme: “It is as if we were transported into another world and breathed a purer atmosphere. First there are some questions and expostulations, then the composer unfolds a tale full of sweet melancholy in a strain of lovely, tenderly entwined melody ... In the second subject he seems to protest the devotion of his hear, and concludes with a passage, half upbraiding, half beseeching, which is quite captivating – nay more, even bewitching in its eloquent persuasiveness.”

The second movement, *Larghetto*, was inspired by his unspoken romantic interest in Constantia. The music moves from agitation to passion. Franz Liszt, a friend of Chopin’s, said of this movement: “of a perfection almost ideal, its expression, now radiant with light, now full of tender pathos.”

The concerto concludes in a lively dance reminiscent of the Polish *mazurka*. The rhythm shifts beneath the pianist’s fingers, easily moving between duple and triple meter. A solo horn heralds the movement’s closing passages. Orchestra and soloist race to the finish in a brilliant, virtuosic fashion, leaving no doubt about Chopin’s mastery of the piano’s musical capacity.

Samuel Barber (1910 - 1981) **Adagio for Strings (1936)**

The saying "less is more" is often true in music, and never more true than in Barber's haunting work, "Adagio for Strings." Based on one simple, yearning melody and benefiting only from the shifting shades of violins, violas, celli and double bass, the Adagio has earned that special honor of being both popular and a respected addition to the orchestral repertoire.

In the fall of 1936, Barber was 26-years-old and had just completed a symphony. He had the opportunity to turn his attention to a smaller-scale composition when some friends from the Curtis Institute commissioned him to compose a string quartet. The resulting Quartet in B Minor was premiered in December 1936. Barber sensed, even

before he heard the first notes played, that the central adagio movement had a special quality. Soon after, he arranged the movement for string orchestra, and sent the score off to the revered conductor Arturo Toscani, along with his "Essay for Orchestra." When Toscani returned the scores some time later, without comment, Barber was wounded and disappointed. When Toscani learned that Barber was upset, he passed along the message, "Tell him not to be mad. I'm not going to play one of his pieces, I'm going to play them both." Toscani had memorized the scores, and not needing them, returned them unceremoniously. Upon its premiere, the Adagio was an instant success. It has taken on a life of its own apart from the quartet from which it was extracted. The work is almost synonymous with mourning and sadness, having been played at the funerals of Presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy, as well as the composer's own memorial service. It will also be forever associated with two films: Oliver Stone's "Platoon" and David Lynch's "The Elephant Man."

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Symphony No. 4 in A Major, "Italian" (1833)

Like Rossini, Mendelssohn was a prolific and talented composer from a relatively early age. During his eleventh year, he composed no fewer than 40 works! His parents were supportive of his gifts but wanted him to explore and broaden his horizons through travel. When Mendelssohn was 21, his family nudged him out the door of their German home, encouraging him to "examine the various countries closely." Generously underwritten by his successful banker father, Mendelssohn first traveled to Britain, where he began composition of his Symphony No. 3, the "Scottish," and composed the *Hebrides Overture*. His next stop was Italy. On the advice of his mentor and friend, poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, he toured Venice, Rome, Naples, Pompeii, Genoa and Milan between 1830 and 1831. He was completely entranced by the beautiful Italian countryside. Rather than continue work on the third symphony, he began sketching out what would become known as the "Italian" symphony. His enthusiasm was unbridled; in a letter to his sisters, he stated "it will be the jolliest piece I have ever done, especially the last movement."

He ultimately finished the piece in 1833 after time back in Germany and a winter in Paris. A commission from the Philharmonic Society of London provided the motivation to complete it. It premiered that same year in London. Despite its positive reception, Mendelssohn was not entirely pleased with the first and last movements. After about a year, he pulled the work from being performed further, and continued to rework it through 1837. The score does not exist in an authorized version, but conductors over time have agreed on a version that incorporates Mendelssohn's edits. It was finally published in 1851, four years after his death.

The symphony wastes no time conjuring up a brilliant landscape through an exuberant opening theme presented by the strings. This winds down to playful contrasting theme, expressed by the clarinets. The opening theme returns, keeping the feeling of urgency and motion high. The underlying dance rhythms of this theme suggest an Italian tarantella, a feverish dance intended to cure the dancer from a tarantula bite. In stark contrast the first movement, the *Andante con moto* is more reflective, full of gentle grace and a touch of sadness. It is believed to be inspired by a solemn religious procession the composer witnessed in Naples. The third movement, a traditional minuet and trio, feels like a lazy afternoon by a stream: flowing, relaxed, with some drama injected by a hunting party making its presence known in the distance. Time for relaxation is over by the fourth movement. Like the first measures of the symphony, it jumps right in with an energetic and insistent melody. There are times when the writing is reminiscent of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, composed nearly 6 years before. The wild Italian dance continues at a break-neck pace, right up until the final bars put an exclamation point on the entire symphony.