

Rossini, Overture to *The Barber of Seville*

It might be the ultimate sign of the popularity of an orchestral piece in a pop-culture, TV-saturated age, when it appears in a cartoon on Saturday morning. Rossini's *Barber of Seville Overture* – probably the best-known and loved of his many iconic works – was used almost intact as the music (and plot) to one of the greatest 'Looney Tunes' cartoons of all time, "The Rabbit of Seville." Of course, the opera itself has seen nothing but success; *The Barber of Seville*, or *The Useless Precaution* (*Il barbiere di Siviglia, ossia L'inutile precauzione*) was a huge hit at its 1816 première, and has remained a staple of the repertoire ever since, perhaps the most performed comic opera of the last 200 years. This overture has everything – a wealth of catchy tunes, exciting sounds and textures (especially from the scurrying violins and terrifying trombones), driving rhythms, and an uproarious crescendo (a Rossini trademark) to the thrilling ending. It is a piece that we never get tired of in the orchestra, and that entertains every audience, from a room full of 'culture vultures' to an 8-year-old on the couch, watching TV at 6:30 on Saturday morning.

Mozart, Oboe Concerto

Mozart's Oboe Concerto in C has led a complicated existence for what has become such a popular piece of music. It appears that 21-year-old Wolfgang composed it for a new colleague in Salzburg in 1777, shortly before leaving on yet another business trip to Mannheim and Paris in the fall. In Mannheim, he had the opportunity to hear the brilliant oboist Friedrich Ramm, from what was then arguably the best orchestra in Europe (and thus the world). Mozart lost little time in making friends – he was always a gregarious chap – and we know from his letters that within a few months, Ramm had already performed the piece five times. Mozart left Mannheim that winter to pursue his (and his father's) dreams of a great career in Paris; Ramm played the concerto at Mozart's farewell soirée, a poignant mid-winter evening where they bade farewell to some of the closest friends, lovers and musical colleagues of Mozart's short life. Ramm in fact came to Paris with Mozart, and undoubtedly played the piece there a few times as well. But sometime after their Paris sojourn the oboe concerto disappeared, to be rediscovered only in 1920, although we were familiar with a flute concerto in D that Wolfgang reverse-engineered from it for another commission.

The piece is in the standard three-movement 'fast-slow-fast' form of the classical concerto. The first movement is full of charming witticisms, many of which revolve around a single grace-note that disappears and reappears in the main theme in many different disguises. Mozart was unusually cosmopolitan for an 18th Century Austrian, both personally and artistically, and his knowledge of the lighter, charming Italian and French styles is very much in evidence in this music. The second movement is unendingly serene and lyrical, and the Rondo finale clomps along happily, its broad, country rhythms bringing the work to a happy close.

Kelly-Marie Murphy, *Black Sand*

What an honour it is to introduce the world to a wonderful new piece of music! The HPO commissioned Kelly-Marie Murphy's *Black Sand*, for our inaugural What Next? Festival last January. It is a rare and distinct pleasure for a musician: Although we love Beethoven, Bach, Brahms to distraction, nothing equals the feeling when a strong new work is given life for the first time. But, too often, these premièred scores languish in obscurity after their single airing; so in many ways it is just as important a responsibility for us to repeat the good pieces, to do our part in sustaining the great tradition of Canadian music-making by giving talented young composers (and our audiences) a chance to re-hear their music, in the hopes that we might cement a small place for them in the concert halls beside the work of the great geniuses of past generations. Here is a brief description of the piece's inspiration in Kelly's own eloquent words:

Black Sand was inspired by the world of metal work. Specifically, I was interested in making the comparison between the process of annealing (where metal is heated to a very high temperature and then allowed to cool slowly in order to remove any impurities) and the process of composing, which can be extremely intense. In researching types of metal work, I became fascinated with the making of samurai swords. Samurai swords are made from Tamagane steel. The steel is made from black sand. The process of extracting and forging the steel is a traditional ritual that is preformed only three or four times a year under very specific conditions. Black Sand is a journey through colour, from dark and shadowy to bright and intense; warm and cool. There is an overall energy to the piece that is powerful yet controlled. My artistic volition is the black sand and the music is the tamagane. It has been forged and folded, heated and welded, quenched and polished. Through my lonely ritual, the music annealed.

Brahms, *Symphony No. 2*

"Brahms' Second Symphony shines like the warming sun on experts and the lay public alike; it belongs to all who desire good music...Brahms' new symphony radiates a healthy freshness and clarity: Totally comprehensible, there is nevertheless much to listen to and dwell on. It is full of new ideas and nowhere demonstrates that new and regrettable tendency to offer the new in the guise of the strange. The work stands as overwhelming proof that one (not, of course, anyone) can still write symphonies after Beethoven, and indeed in the old forms, on the old foundations." – Eduard Hanslick (the most prominent music critic of Brahms' day)

"...in passing let me say I had very much wanted and attempted to get through the first movement without trombones. But their first entry, that belongs to me and thus I cannot do without it, and the trombones also. If you wanted me to

defend that passage I would have to go further. Then I would have to acknowledge that I am in addition a deeply melancholic person, that the black wings flutter continually over me, that – perhaps not completely accidentally in my oeuvre this Symphony is followed by a small discourse on the great question 'Why?'. It throws the necessary deep shadow onto the happy symphony and perhaps explains those kettledrums and trombones. – but please don't take all this and especially that passage too tragically or seriously." – Brahms

It is so characteristic of Johannes Brahms' nature, both as an artist and a person, that he should always qualify every revealing statement about himself or his works. This is a fundamental quality in everything he wrote, the feeling that every melody that sounds like a wide-open blue sky has a cloud lurking in the harmony at the edge of it; that every storming expression of despair has a winking quality to it, a sense that there are always two or more ways to look at an emotion or a situation, however extreme. It is in the same way that his friends and lovers found him so maddening, so ambivalent, at times distant, impossible to pin down. In many ways, though he knew more success and acclamation in his lifetime than most composers, he led an unfulfilled and frustrating life. We must be thankful that he left behind such a magnificent body of work for us to puzzle over, admire, and continue to be deeply moved by, as his wordless portraits of the human condition never cease to ring true.

After struggling for over fifteen years with his First Symphony, Brahms felt greatly released by its undeniable success, with the result that he was able to compose the Second swiftly and almost effortlessly in less than six months. Where the First had been as it were hewn from rock, the Second seems to bloom as spontaneously as a flower or a sunrise. Its genial, outgoing character, among other factors, sets it apart from Brahms' three other symphonies; this is the one understandably regarded as his "pastoral" symphony, and it is surely the most directly endearing of the four.

Brahms tried, in his joking way, to conceal this geniality from the public and his colleagues up to the time of the work's premiere, even remarking that he ought to wear a crepe armband "in deference to the solemn and mournful nature of my latest child." While some musical analysts have taken him too seriously and have gone to great lengths to show the Second as a "tragic" symphony (the conductor Artur Rodzinski was one who felt "great tragedy" in this music), the very opening of the work assures us that he was only having one of his little jokes, for it establishes at once an ingratiatingly pastoral mood. The radiant second theme is one of Brahms' characteristic outpourings of warm contentment, reminiscent of his beloved "Cradle Song" and the Waltz in A-flat for piano. The first theme is subjected to fugal treatment in the development; new motifs spun off by variations in the rhythm are hailed and dismissed by clipped comments from the brass, and after its path is complete the movement ends even more tenderly than it began.

The serious mood of the second movement has been cited in support of the "tragic" interpretation of the Symphony, but "solemn" and "meditative"—terms

that do characterize this music—are hardly synonyms for "tragic." Certainly there is melancholy here, which deepens with the appearance of the hymn-like second theme, but it is only in the second half of the movement that the basic tranquility is disturbed, briefly, by a passing storm.

This basic element is emphasized on a simpler level in the third movement, a naïve and bucolic little intermezzo. The scoring is lighter here than in the rest of the work, and the fizzy middle section serves to heighten the calm of the Allegretto that surrounds it. At the work's premiere, the audience demanded and got an encore of this movement.

Following the energetic but (typical Brahms!) restrained opening of the final movement, its first theme is restated in an exultant orchestral outburst and then, the way cleared by the good-naturedly crackling winds, the broad second theme makes its entrance in lambent sunset colors. The music builds confidently to a vigorous, thrilling coda in which the second theme is transformed into a blazing fanfare, ending the symphony on a note of sheer exhilaration unparalleled among Brahms' major works, indeed with few equals in the entire repertoire for sheer exuberance and joy.