

Heart and Home

November 7-8, 2009

Richard Wagner
(1818-1833)

Siegfried Idyll

William Grant Still
(1895-1978)

From the Hearts of Women

I. Little Mother

II. Coquette

III. Mid Tide

IV. Bereft

Rochelle Small, soprano

INTERMISSION

Carl Nielsen
(1865-1931)

Clarinet Concerto, op. 57
Ian Buckspan, clarinet

Antonín Dvořák
(1841-1904)

Czech Suite in D Major, op. 39

I. Preludium (Pastorale): Allegro moderato

II. Polka: Allegretto grazioso

III. Sousedská (Minuetto): Allegro giusto

IV. Romanza: Andante con moto

V. Finale (Furiant): Presto

He had one mistress to whom he was faithful to the day of his death: Music. Not for a single moment did he ever compromise with what he believed, with what he dreamed. There is not a line of his music that could have been conceived by a little mind. Even when he is dull, or downright bad, he is dull in the grand manner. There is greatness about his worst mistakes. Listening to his music, one does not forgive him for what he may or may not have been. It is not a matter of forgiveness. It is a matter of being dumb with wonder that his poor brain and body didn't burst under the torment of the demon of creative energy that lived inside him, struggling, clawing, scratching to be released; tearing, shrieking at him to write the music that was in him. The miracle is that what he did in the little space of seventy years could have been done at all, even by a great genius. Is it any wonder that he had no time to be a man? – Deems Taylor

No composer ever polarized audiences like **Richard Wagner** (1813-1883). From the megalomania of the Bayreuth Festival, which Wagner founded himself in the small Bavarian town, to the detractors who see Wagner as longwinded or boring, to those who cite his Teutonic and anti-Semitic leanings as having paved the way for the rise of Nazism fifty years after his death, all listeners are left with a body of music that is undeniably original and inspired. The fact remains that Wagner was as complicated and elusive a man as his music.

Wagner's family heritage has never been fully established. His father might have been Carl Friedrich Wagner or his mother's lover, Ludwig Geyer. (This might be a reflection of the surprising number of characters in Wagner's operas whose fathers are unknown to them—Siegfried, Siegfried, and Parsifal.) Carl Friedrich died a year after Richard's birth, and his widow married Geyer. An actor and painter, Geyer raised Wagner in the environs of the theatre, so Richard was writing plays in his early teens. Wanting incidental music for his plays, Wagner studied composition, though his earliest works from his teenage years are mostly lost. He wrote his first opera, *Die Feen*, when he was twenty, while he was working in the theatre as a chorus-master.

By the age of thirty, his reputation was firmly established with *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman). As a result, he was appointed Kapellmeister to the Saxon court in Dresden, where he worked on *Lobengrin* and *Tannhäuser* and made early sketches for *The Ring* and *Die Meistersinger*. He involved himself in the republican movement that was gaining popularity in Europe in the late 1840s, and when his participation was undeniable, an arrest warrant was issued in 1849. With the aid of Liszt, Wagner fled to Zürich, focusing his energies on writing essays, including his influential *Artwork of the Future* and *Opera and Drama*.

Also in this exile, he finished the libretti for the four *Ring* operas and started composing the music, but his work stopped when he fell in love (despite his marriage to Minna Planer) with Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of one of his Swiss patrons. His thoughts on romance, he turned instead to *Tristan und Isolde*, which he hoped would achieve enough popularity to finance a new hall to stage *The Ring*. Before long, Wagner obsessed over yet another woman, Cosima von Bülow, Franz Liszt's daughter and wife of conductor Hans von Bülow. Minna died in 1866, but Richard and Cosima had been living together two years already. In 1869, Cosima's marriage was annulled and in 1870 she married Richard.

Meanwhile, "mad" King Ludwig II of Bavaria took a passionate interest in Wagner's music and spared no expense in support of him. After much political intrigue, construction began in 1872 on the hall in Bayreuth that would be the ideal setting for *The Ring*. Four years later, the hall opened with the first performances of *The Ring*. Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*, was completed in 1882, and six months after the premiere, Wagner died of a heart attack while traveling in Venice.

At precisely 7:30 on Christmas morning in 1870, Cosima Wagner was awakened with familiar music played by a small orchestra inside her home. This was the first performance of *Siegfried Idyll*, with the musicians playing from memory on the staircase and Wagner conducting from the landing. Christmas was also Cosima's birthday, and Wagner had chosen music from his

Siegfried and interwoven the folk song *Schlafe mein Kind, schlafe ein*. Naturally, the household premiere was a great success and was even repeated several times the same day. Originally scored for flute, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, trumpet and individual strings, Wagner later authorized performance with a full string section.

William Grant Still (1895-1978) was born in Woodville, Mississippi. His mother was a teacher and his father was a local bandleader. They were of mixed origin: African-American, Native American, Spanish and Anglo. His father died when William was a few months old and his mother took him to Little Rock, Arkansas where she remarried and taught high school English. Charles B. Shepperson, William's stepfather, nurtured his musical interests by taking him to operettas, buying recordings of classical music, and paying for violin lessons.

Still attended Wilberforce University in Ohio, founded as an African-American school. He conducted the university band, learned to play various instruments and started to compose and orchestrate. He also studied with Friedrich Lehmann at the Oberlin Conservatory, George Whitefield Chadwick at the New England Conservatory, and with the ultra-modern composer Edgard Varèse.

Initially, Still composed in modernist style, but later merged aspects of his African-American heritage with traditional European classical forms. In 1931 his First Symphony was performed by the Rochester Philharmonic under the direction of Howard Hanson, making him the first African-American composer to receive such recognition. In 1936, Still conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic, becoming the first African-American to conduct a major American orchestra.

In 1949, his opera *Troubled Island* was performed by the New York City Opera—the first opera by an African-American to be performed by a major company. In 1955, conducting the New Orleans Philharmonic, he became the first African-American to conduct a major orchestra in the deep South. Additionally, he was the Recording Manager of the Black Swan Phonograph Company.

Between 1919 and 1921, Still worked as an arranger for W.C. Handy's band and later played in the pit orchestra for Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake's musical "Shuffle Along." Later in the twenties, he served as the arranger of Yamekraw, a "Negro Rhapsody" composed by the noted Harlem Stride pianist, James P. Johnson. In the 1930s, Still worked as an arranger of popular music, writing for Willard Robison's "Deep River Hour" and Paul Whiteman's "Old Gold Show," both popular NBC Radio broadcasts. Still eventually moved to Los Angeles, California, where he arranged music for films and television, including *Pennies from Heaven* (1936) and *Lost Horizon* (1937).

Still married Verna Arvey, a journalist and concert pianist, in 1939. They remained together until he died of heart failure in Los Angeles, California in 1978.

From the Hearts of Women (1961) is a suite of four songs for soprano and string orchestra with text by Verna Arvey. The lyrics highlight different phases of a woman's life. The "Little Mother" of the first movement is a girl singing to her rag doll. In adolescence, the "Coquette" plays a game of flirtation. In middle age ("Mid Tide"), she reminisces coldly of her lost love and lost youth. "Bereft," she sings as she nears the end of her life with painful memories of having lost her son, with the faintest reflections of the rag doll.

I. Little Mother

Baby sweetheart, Baby darling,
Baby on my knee!
My sweetheart, Little angel,
by my side the night long.
Little playmate, Dear companion,
with me through the day!
'Cause I love you,
You will listen to the things I tell you.
Baby, please don't be naughty now:
You'll get a spanking if you bad!
Mommy tells you, be good,
Stop your crying, and you'll get a reward.
Little playmate, Dear companion,
with me through the day!
'Cause I love you,
You will listen to the things I tell you.
Daddy says you're only a rag doll,
but I know better.
Now go to the sleep, and
when you wake up
we'll have more fun together.

II. Coquette

By the sea, in the streets, at the ball,
I go forth wanting romance, wanting fun.
With a word, with a glance, with a gesture,
I'm seeking someone to adore me.

When I find him I'll greet him with pleasure.
When I greet him I'll wait for his smile.
For in this game we'll be partners,
in this gay game of flirtation.

In the spring, in the fall, in the summer,
I go forth wanting romance, wanting fun.
In the light, in the dark, 'neath the moon,
I'm seeking someone to adore me.

When I find him I'll join him in banter.
In that moment I'll look far afield.

For in this game I seek new partners,
Since the game is worth more than the prize.

III. Mid Tide

Gone are the years of my youth,
Gone the fire in my soul.
Empty my heart, empty my life
Now only the waiting!

I can remember days full of sunlight,
of joy, of laughter.
I can remember the blessed moments,
time shared, lives joined!

Gone are the things that I cherished,
Gone all my dreams!
Empty my thoughts, and the hours
they used to fill—now only a blank wall!

I can remember vows made in faith,
in warmth, in passion!
I can remember each word of our pledge,
our trust, our promise!
Now lost.

Each tender moment I spent waiting
the sound of your voice!
For gone in my love, gone my only love!

IV. Bereft

By his bedside I sat with love in my heart
As I had sat long ago,
in childhood to bring sleep to his eyes,
but now to hold back the last sleep.
My son departing for isles uncharted!
My boy!
His life an unvoiced thought,
His future lost in the mist!
I hoped, though there was no hope.
Too soon died too!

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) was born on the island of Funen in eastern Denmark, in a peasant community that was also the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen. At fourteen, he played in a military band in Odense. A decade later, he joined the violin section of the Royal Theatre Orchestra in Copenhagen and, in 1890, won a scholarship to study in Dresden and Berlin, where he was influenced by the music of Wagner and Brahms. His First Symphony was premiered by the Royal Theatre Orchestra in 1894, solidifying his career as a composer.

The rest of his life was devoted to composition, with a lesser focus on conducting. His compositional output is dominated by his six symphonies, which have an improvisational character similar to Sibelius and have won increasing popularity in recent years. Nielsen suffered a serious heart attack in 1925 which slowed his creative pace, but he continued composing until his death in 1931.

After the premiere of his *Wind Quintet* (1922), Nielsen decided to write a concerto for each member of the quintet, but only completed concerti for flute and clarinet before his death. The **Clarinet Concerto**, written for the quintet's clarinetist Aage Oxenvad shows a rather unusual side of Nielsen, reminiscent of the angular modernism of Stravinsky, with a solo clarinet part that demands a faultless technique. Completed August 15, 1928, it was first heard in a private concert at the summer home of Carl Johan Michaelsen, in Humlebaek, on September 14, with Oxenvaad as soloist and Emil Telmányi conducting. The same performers gave the premiere in Copenhagen on October 11 of that same year, when it met with a decidedly mixed reception. Since that time, it has gained much wider acceptance.

The Clarinet Concerto was conceived during the most difficult period in Nielsen's life, which might reflect in a constant conflict between two tonalities—F Major and E Major. Every time hostilities seem to be at an end, a snare drum incites the combatants to renewed conflict. Another explanation for this is that Oxenvad had a bi-polar disorder, so Nielsen might have been poking fun at his constant mood swings.

Born in Bohemia, **Antonín Dvořák** (1841-1904) spent his uneventful younger days assisting his family and studying music whenever possible. A public scholarship enabled him to get a good education and made him a lifelong supporter of state arts funding and grants. Deeply influenced by the music of Wagner, Dvořák had the opportunity to play in a concert of Wagner excerpts led by the composer. Dvořák not only considered the experience life-changing, but even followed Wagner in the streets, completely fascinated with him. Dvořák played viola in the Prague National Theatre Orchestra from 1864-1873. Bedrich Smetana became principal conductor in 1866, also having a powerful impact. Dvořák left the orchestra in 1873 to devote his life to composition, and his Third Symphony was premiered soon after, winning him the Austrian national prize and the attention of Johannes Brahms, who was on the jury. Two years later, Dvořák won the same prize with his *Moravian Duets*, but his *Slavonic Dances* would soon establish him as the most significant and most popular Czech composer. His fame and fortune on the rise, Dvořák found himself in a difficult position: Leading composers of the day were expected to live in Vienna, but he knew his folksy style would only bring ridicule among the polished Viennese. Under intense pressure from his publisher to move to Vienna, Dvořák luckily won a position as Professor of Composition at the Prague Conservatory, but quickly gave it up when he was offered a shockingly lucrative directorship of the National Conservatory of Music in New York in 1891.

Once in the United States, Dvořák turned his attention primarily to Native American and African American music, which eventually culminated in his *New World Symphony*. In 1895, he returned to teach at the Prague Conservatory and became its director in 1901, and his sixtieth

birthday was celebrated as a national holiday. His final years were spent working on tone poems and operas, though sadly only one of his operas—*Rusalka*—ever gained any popularity. He died of heart failure in 1904.

The low opus number of his *Czech Suite* was a bit of deception by Dvořák, who disliked publishers and was evading an agreement for future works by pretending that this was an old one. It was probably written in 1879. All but one of the five movements contains elements of Czech folk dance.