

QUINCY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

PROGRAM NOTES

October 1, 2017

Dr. Paul Borg and Megan Small

The Quincy Symphony Orchestra celebrates its 70th Season this year—a *Milestone!* We also celebrate Bruce Briney's 10th season with the Symphony—another *Milestone!* Today's program includes the symphony that Maestro Briney programmed on his first QSO concert, Brahms' First Symphony, an *Awakening* for Brahms and for Briney.

Short Ride in a Fast Machine (1986)

John Adams (born 1947)

First on the program is the energetic *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by the minimalist composer John Adams. Megan Small, our 2nd horn player, writes about this work:

John Adams is one of the most performed living American composers. In honor of his 70th birthday, ensembles around the world are performing his works throughout 2017. A native of Boston, Adams learned the clarinet from his father and received his music degrees from Harvard University. Although a talented performer (clarinet in the Boston Symphony), teacher (San Francisco Conservatory), and conductor (Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra), his compositions have garnered him the highest esteem. Adams is known for writing works based on recent history, such as his operas *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic*. His *On the Transmigration of Souls* for choir and orchestra, which reflects on the events of 9/11, received the Pulitzer Prize and three Grammy Awards.

Short Ride in a Fast Machine, an orchestral fanfare, is a bright and energetic work inspired by a ride that Adams took in a fast Italian sports car. He designed the piece to capture both the excitement and anxiety of the ride. Here, Adams' unique style of minimalism is evident. The piece opens with a sounding woodblock that sets the pace and maintains an unrelenting energy throughout the work. In the clarinets, a repeated three-note motive is off-set between the players to create a shimmering phasing effect akin to the rush of wind. This sharply contrasts with the fanfares in the brass and the unison repeated motor rhythms in the strings. As the piece nears the end, triumphant melodic lines in the trumpets and horns drive the music to its final destination. Indeed, this invigorating ride never runs out of gas.

Concerto for Oboe and Strings

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

The oboe has been a staple instrument in the symphony orchestra since the beginning of the concept "symphony." In fact, a pair of oboes, together with a pair of horns, were often the only winds in early symphonies. As a solo instrument in a concerto, however, the oboe shares the fate of other wind instruments—they are never as frequently featured as the piano, the violin, or even the cello. The restricted range (about 2 1/2 octaves) and the necessity to breathe create challenges for any composer. Yet, the ability to overcome those restrictions is the very measure of virtuosity for an oboist.

Vaughan Williams composed his oboe concerto in 1943-4 for the oboe virtuoso Leon Goossens who premiered the work in Liverpool on September 30, 1944. The premiere had been scheduled for the London Proms concert of July 5, 1944; however, the threat of rocket raids from Germany curtailed the season including that particular concert. The three movements offer a wide range of musical moods. It begins with three soft chords. The oboe floats over the continuation of these chords with a supple modal theme. A second section is somewhat livelier and develops into a canon between oboe and strings. A return to the opening material, a cadenza, precede the closing. Two 18th-century dance forms give the meter and character to the second movement; however, they are seamlessly connected and quite modern in sound. The third movement alternates tempos, character (lively, soulful, and even wistful), and various harmonic devices. The concerto closes with the three chords that began the composition.

Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Brahms' Symphony No. 1 was composed over the period of nearly fifteen years. The tradition is that Brahms was so intimidated by the quality of Beethoven's nine symphonies that he struggled with the genre until 1876 when he finally finished this composition. It was performed in several cities that year, and Brahms made some changes to the second movement before having it published as Op. 68 in 1877.

Brahms was not enthused by the so-called "New German School," Wagner and Liszt the best known among them. In 1860, he joined several other musicians in declaring that the ideals of the new movement were "contrary to the innermost spirit of music, strongly to be deplored, and condemned." So, his inclination was to build upon the strongly Classical tradition, not to upset or replace it. Thus, inevitable comparisons with Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann created unusually exacting expectations for his work.

Early reviews were somewhat mixed. But a review by Eduard Hanslick offers a neat, mostly positive summary of the new symphony:

"Even the layman will immediately recognize it as one of the most individual and magnificent works of the symphonic literature. In the first movement, the listener is held by fervent emotional expression, by Faustian conflicts, and by a contrapuntal art as rich as it is severe. The Andante softens this mood with a long-drawn-out, noble song, which experiences surprising interruptions in the course of the movement. The Scherzo strikes me as inferior to the other movements. The theme is wanting in melodic and rhythmic charm, the whole in animation. The abrupt close is utterly inappropriate. The fourth movement begins most significantly with an Adagio in C minor; from darkening clouds the song of the woodland horn rises clear and sweet above the tremolo of the violins. All hearts tremble with the fiddles in anticipation. The entrance of the Allegro with its simple, beautiful theme, reminiscent of the "Ode to Joy" in the Ninth [Beethoven] Symphony, is overpowering as it rises onward and upward, right to the end."

One could quibble with his assessment of the third movement (Scherzo), but his evocative description remains apt for listeners today.