QUINCY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
PROGRAM NOTES
September 30, 2018
Dr. Paul Borg

Our season opens with a joyous *Festive Overture* by Dmitri Shostakovich. The initial reason for him to compose this work was a concert in 1947 celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution of 1917. The work was ultimately not performed on this occasion. Seven years later (after the death of Josef Stalin), he was again asked to contribute to a concert at the Bolshoi Theater honoring the Great October Revolution. Within three days he revised the overture, and it was performed on November 6, 1954.

Shostakovich lived his entire compositional life under communist rule in the Soviet Union. He endured the control that the government demanded. For example, he withdrew his fourth symphony after his 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* received scathing reviews from the "official" press. He rehabilitated himself by writing his very successful Fifth Symphony, and the "war" symphonies (6, 7, 8). Then, he abided the post-WWII governmental expectations for individual artistic expression. After Stalin died (on the same day that composer-colleague Sergei Prokofiev passed away), Shostakovich was recognized as the preeminent Soviet composer and then felt more secure to produce more individual, personal compositions.

The *Festive Overture* follows a predictable pattern for a celebratory work. It opens with a startling fanfare, followed, then underlined, by a ponderous bass line. After securing attention of the audience, the work launches into a fast, active main section that emphasizes fast, scalar melodic lines underlined by an active, rhythmic accompaniment. It continues with a lyric tune accompanied by mostly "off-beat" accompaniment. Occasional startling accents interrupt an increasing excitement until, finally, the initial fanfare reoccurs. After a final statement of the lyric tune, the overture ends in very loud chords.

One of the most engaging solo-clarinet works is the *Introduction, Theme and Variations,* composed apparently by Gioachino Rossini. A favorite show piece for deft clarinetists, it is also widely popular among audiences. The theme is based on an aria from Rossini's opera *La Donna del Lago* (1819). However, the putative date of composition is 1809. So, the aria might have been inspired by this theme but not necessarily written by him. None-the-less, today Rossini is considered the likely composer of the work we hear today.

All the various capabilities of the clarinet are displayed in full force: lyric expressiveness, facile technique, wide leaps, and an extremely large range. The Introduction presents a lyric melody, interspersed with many fast scale or arpeggio passages. The Theme consists of balanced phrases, repetition, and a recognizable return to the beginning phrase. That form is reproduced in the five ensuing variations. First, the tune appears in triplets. Second in faster notes--both scales and arpeggios, emphasizing the wide range of the clarinet. Third, a series of fast arpeggios reaching the highest pitches of the clarinet.

Fourth, a slow, expressive variation in the minor mode with many sensitive, ornamental passages. Finally, a return to the fast, scale and arpeggio activity leading to a coda that alternates an orchestral passage with active phrases in the clarinet. The ending is especially notable. An *a piacere* chromatic scale spans the instrument's entire range in a manner reflected a century by the clarinet smear that opens Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

In 1936 Walton contributed the musical score for a film version of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* starring Laurence Olivier. The film score was relatively unknown until a recording by Carl Davis offered some excerpts and became very popular. In 1991 Christopher Palmer created the "Orchestral 'Poem'" we hear on this program, using materials recorded four years earlier. He describes the work as "a continuous piece, a 'poem' for medium-sized orchestra . . ."

1. *Prelude*. Introduces a melody . . . in the form of a short choral dance.
2. *Moonlight*. Night in the Forest of Arden; rustling leaves and murmuring streams. Orlando's new-found love for Rosalind leads him to rush from tree to tree, carving her name in ecstasy.
3. *Under the Greenwood Tree.* A tribute to Jacobean lutenist composers like Morley or Dowland. The vocal melody is heard in the clarinet.

    Under the greenwood tree
    Who loves to lie with me,
    And turn his merry note
    Unto the sweet bird's throat,
    Come hither, come hither, come hither:
    Here shall he see
    No enemy
    But winter and rough weather.

    Who doth ambition shun
    And loves to live i' the sun,
    Seeking the food he eats
    And pleased with what he gets,
    Come hither, come hither, come hither:
    Here shall he see
    No enemy
    But winter and rough weather.

4. *The Fountain.* Dreamy reminiscences of the second section, a *tempo di menuetto* whose tune becomes a study in changing colors and crescendo. Its goal is the:
5. *Wedding Procession.* Orlando and Rosalind, Oliver and Celia are married in a double wedding and rustics and locals congregate to join in the festivities.

Notes adapted from those by
Christopher Palmer and
Oxford University Press (1991)

Our final work is Johannes Brahms' last symphony, his fourth. Among his symphonies, it is perhaps the most unusual in terms of its overall construction and its amazing musical details. Notwithstanding its emotional appeal, it was originally received both with acclaim and hesitation by audiences and critics after it was premiered in 1885. Hans von Bülow arranged for Brahms to conduct it with the Meiningen Court Orchestra on October 25 of that year. During the next month the orchestra traveled to several cities in Germany and performed the symphony.

Brahms' symphonic output, only four, reflects his hesitance to write symphonic works that would be judged compared to Beethoven's from early in the 19th century. Famously, Brahms took most of 17 years to create a first symphony (premiered in 1877), even though during that time he produced other orchestral works—the two piano concertos and two serenades. His four symphonies were composed in two pairs: 1 and 2 premiered in 1877 and 1878; 3 and 4 premiered in 1884 and 1885. After the death of Wagner in 1883, Brahms generally was considered the most eminent German composer. He responded to such pressure by being even more self-critical, more intent on being original, creative, and not derivative. Since the ideas of Wagner and Liszt suggested that dramatic or extra-musical content was the future of musical works, Brahms' devotion to "absolute" music (no story or text needed) came under critical questioning. Yet, Brahms' symphonies, viewed over time, have come to exemplify his individual genius.

The Fourth Symphony follows a traditional four-movement pattern: 1. fast/lyric in sonata form; 2. slow/intense in an altered sonata form; 3. fast/dance-like/active in an adapted sonata form; 4. fast/serious, a set of variations. The movements' key scheme is also not unusual: e minor-E major-C major-e minor. Several features of the symphony, however, have been noted in critical commentary of the past century. First, the expectation for a minor-key symphony of a last movement in a "triumphant" major mode (as in Beethoven Symphonies 5 and 9) does not happen here. The somber, tragic conclusion was not always well received by early critics. Second, an original motivic unity among the movements makes use of the interval of a third (the first two melodic notes you hear) to bind the entire symphony. That interval appears in various guises, both on the audible "surface level" and in underlying structural concerns. (The overall key scheme is an example of this.) Third, and perhaps most remarkable, is the basis for the variations of the last movement. Brahms spoke and wrote of his admiration for Bach and often mentioned the chaconne in Cantata 150. In creating the eight-measure theme for the fourth movement, Brahms adapted the bass line of that chaconne to create a melodic line. He then harmonized it using two descending thirds (notes 1-2 and 3-4) to begin the bass line. Those first eight chords underlie the variations throughout the final movement. The result is the powerful musical emotion that concludes our concert.