PROGRAM NOTES
Quincy Symphony Orchestra
Myth & Mystery
November 16, 2019 Quincy, Illinois

The repertory we hear this evening was composed within the space of forty-five years—1833 to 1877. Mendelssohn was only twenty-four with he composed *Die schöne Melusine*; Brahms was in his forties when he finished creating his four symphonies. Strauss, principal horn of the Bavarian Opera Orchestra for forty years, was also in his forties when he composed his first horn concerto. Each contributed to what is now considered the standard repertory of orchestral music. The three works also exemplify the various directions that Romantic Era instrumental music took: story-telling, virtuosic "showing-off," and an abstract "absolute" music.

Die schöne Melusine, by Felix Mendelssohn

Young Mendelssohn was already well known when he took inspiration from the fairy tale about a young maiden/water nymph, who married her noble suitor only on the condition that once a week he could not visit her. On that day she turned into her sea creature form (with fish tails instead of legs). Although Mendelssohn did not produce an opera or incidental music based upon the story, he did write what he titled an overture, *The Fair Melusina*, dedicated to his sister, Fanny, for her birthday.

Later he denied that the work told the story, but evidence of musical portrayal can be discerned in the way the music evokes the characteristics of mystery, the mythical story, and our sense of music portraying human feelings or natural wonders. The cascading arpeggios at the beginning immediately suggest the water of Melusina's origins; a lilting melody, easy and memorable, creates a mood of calm. Suddenly, vigorous string scrubbing evokes a disturbing turn to the story. Moods intersect when the melodic idea tries to interrupt but is then again underscored by the rhythmic activity. Calm and waves return, yet supported by the more agitated musical ideas. Ultimately, the work ends with a sigh motive that introduces the water image and initial tune perhaps signaling resignation.

Concerto in C Minor, Op. 8 by Franz Strauss

Franz Strauss was one of the many Strauss musician-composers of 19th and 20th century Austria. Though his family was perhaps not as well-known as the Viennese "waltz-kings," it became equally prominent both due to his incredible virtuosity as a performer, but also his son (and student) Richard Strauss, the eminent composer of tone poems and operas. Franz also was a composer, writing many works featuring the horn. Although he was a fairly conservative composer considering the tastes of the 19th century, Wagner was so taken by his performing capabilities that he composed several challenging horn passages in his operas that were either premiered or later performed by Franz Strauss.

This kind of virtuosic ability is evident in his compositions, including the First Horn Concerto we hear this evening. The conservative characteristics of this composition are apparent in the traditional three-movement form, the alternation of musical moods creating the internal shape of the movements, and a rather traditional harmonic vocabulary. Yet, entirely 19th-century is the challenge he gives to anyone who dares to perform the work. You will hear tuneful melodies that are complemented by virtuosic

rapid arpeggios, scale patterns, and fast tonguing. Most amazing is the demand for both very high and low pitches that extend the traditional range for the instrument.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73 by Johannes Brahms

Brahms' second symphony was premiered on December 30, 1877 with Hans Richter conducting the Vienna Philharmonic. He created it within the space of a year, after struggling to write a first symphony for nearly twenty-five years. Tradition says that he was intimidated by Beethoven's greatness. More likely, he was both quite self-critical and cowed by the expectations Robert Schumann expressed when he wrote in 1853: "This [young Brahms] is a chosen one."

The symphony itself follows the common four-movement format, traditional since the time of Haydn. Yet, Brahms infuses the musical substance with what Schoenberg later admired and called "developing variation." This involves using initial, small musical gestures and constantly changing or "developing" them to create the longer musical lines that inform the work. In this case, the first three notes in the bass and cello, note-step down-back to note, are the initial gesture. The second in the horn immediately follows, an arpeggio of four notes--from the middle note of the tonic triad up a small interval-down a large interval-then back up to tonic (continued by the inversion of the initial three notes). Then, after another cello/bass three-note pattern, a stepwise melodic idea leads to a repetition of the two initial gestures at a different pitch level. This introduction gets louder by increments and eventually leads to the main theme in the violins which combines all the gestures into a "real" melody. In such a way, the later musical substance you hear are mostly derived from these three gestures.

The scholar Peter Brown[1] describes the initial critical reception and substance of the work:

> "Nearly every critic recognized that this symphony was of a different character [than the First Symphony], with a pastoral nature whose pervading calm was broken only by a stormy episode, its joyful Finale, and the warm qualities of its timbres. Some found the second movement the most difficult to comprehend, . . . Views of the third movement centered on its serenade and intermezzo character. One critic found the Finale to be Hungarian in style. Another columnist viewed the entire symphony in very explicit pastoral terms as almost an echo of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony: the first movement portrays the murmurs of the forest; the second leads to the deeply green portion of the woods; in the third movement insects, among other things, are to be found; and with the Finale one is led out of the forest to a scene with happy peasants."

It has long been acknowledged that the "three-B's" of great composers consists of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. You will experience one of them tonight. You will also experience another, Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, next spring. Curious that it is the one with which Brahms' Second Symphony is compared in the paragraph above.

Dr. Paul Borg

[1]Brown, A. Peter. *The Symphonic Repertoire,* Vol. 4, *The Second Golden Age of the Viennese Symphony: Brahms, Bruckner, Dvorák, Mahler, and Selected Contemporaries.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003, p. 69.