

PROGRAM NOTES
Quincy Symphony Orchestra, Illinois
October 2, 2022
Dr. Paul Borg

In our 75th season the QSO is celebrating our past musicians, favorite works, commissioned compositions, and a future that is now before us post-pandemic. Our season begins with a composition written for us by one of our former conductors to honor QSO founder and first maestro George M. Irwin, and to honor the QSO's first harpist Sarama Schnack. The program continues with a composition featuring concertmaster Kristina Lowe, who has served us for 30 years. The concert ends with a famous and popular symphony chosen by almost every QSO Maestro, having graced six QSO programs over as many decades.

Song of the Harp (Overture), CN 360

Thom Ritter George

The harp has been an important instrument in many different cultures and eras. Yet, it only became an integral part of the symphony orchestra at the beginning of the 19th century.

The composer writes:

Traditionally, an overture is an instrumental piece performed before a play, opera, or ballet. The *Song of the Harp*, however, is a stand-alone concert overture where the music itself is the subject.

At the outset, it was agreed that the harp was to have a prominent role, so the composer decided to start with the harp alone playing the principal theme of the entire score. Certainly, this theme had to come back, preferably at the end. The final statement was given to the brass instruments to provide a dramatic change in tone color. The harp is a gentle and intimate instrument which works its magic by plucking the notes on its strings. The brass choir produces its music by buzzing lips on mouthpieces before sending the sound through the bodies of the instruments. Contrasted with the harp, the brasses are quite extroverted. These two presentations of the principal theme form the feet of a musical arch. The body of the arch is the central and longest part of the overture. It introduces two new themes. The first is happy and dance-like; the second is lyric in nature. All the new material is scored to highlight woodwinds, horns, and strings. Once the new themes are presented, they are developed over a web of moving harp figuration.

The *Song of the Harp* overture is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings. The score was completed on January 21, 2014, in Appleton, Wisconsin.

In honor of QSO founder George M. Irwin, who was a lover of all arts and an avid visual art collector, the QSOA commissioned artist Jennifer Bock-Nelson to create a visual accompaniment to be played on the theater's large-format screen. Images are from Bock-Nelson's extensive catalog of original works and transitions are determined by the artist throughout the live performance.

Chaconne in G Minor

Tomaso Vitali

orchestrated by Léopold Charlier

Tomaso Vitali (1663-1745) was among the many Italian string virtuosos of the late Baroque period. Although his works are not as well-known as those of Vivaldi or Corelli, his Chaconne in G Minor has become an aspirational work for violinists ever since Heifetz performed the Charlier arrangement of it in 1917.

A chaconne is a work that originally allowed melodic improvisation over a repeated bass line. In this case, you hear a four-note descending bass (G F E-flat D) over-and-over. Vitali's virtuosity is amply evident in the many difficult passages created over the bass.

After a quiet initial statement of the bass line, the work itself consists of a melodic presentation by the violin, then increasingly difficult violin passagework that occasionally is interrupted with bold statements of the initial melodic theme underpinned by the orchestra. It ends with a stunning version of the melody/bass/violin combination, much like Romantic-period flourishing that came a hundred years after the Baroque idiom.

Scholars have debated whether Vitali in fact composed the work. Léopold Charlier (1867-1936) based his version (accompanied by piano or orchestra) on one by Ferdinand David (1810-1873). Certainly, the overwhelming effect we experience in the 21st century is not characteristic of the 17th-18th centuries. None-the-less, this Chaconne remains an impressive musical experience.

Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky composed his 5th symphony in May-August 1888, ten years after his 4th Symphony. In 1885, he did create a symphonic work, the so-called *Manfred* Symphony that he called a "Symphony in 4 Tableaux after the dramatic poem by Byron." He did not include it in his numbered cycle, however, because it told a story rather than being a purely musical work. The 5th Symphony did not have such extra-musical inspiration. In fact, he wrote in a letter (June 1888) to Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov that he was writing "... a symphony without a programme . . ." This did not prevent later reviewers from creating some underlying story line since the

composition does offer an emotional appeal which audiences still experience today. Current scholarship does not agree. It was intended as a musical composition by itself.

The symphony follows a standard 4-movement pattern—I. Introduction-Fast sonata form, II. Slow, III. Dance form, IV. Finale. It integrates the movements by incorporating a musical motive (somewhat varied, of course) into all the movements. This type of binding within a symphony was not common at the time, and it led to the suggestions that there must be a story underlying the work. Whatever was in Tchaikovsky's mind we will never know. But the work remains powerful, popular, and an extraordinary experience for both performers and listeners.

We hear the rhythmic motive in the initial statement of the first movement: long-short-short-long. The melodic idea is that the rhythm is repeated on the same pitch. This reappears at different times in the various movements. For example, the second movement incorporates it in the middle of the lyric melody played by the French horn. Later, the motive interrupts the movement with a military-sounding pronouncement. The third movement, a swaying Valse, relieves the seriousness of the previous movements. The Finale is introduced by a reinterpretation of the symphony's opening followed by a heroic statement culminating in a bravura ending. What occurs during the entire symphony is a progression from mournful to joyous, from minor key to major key, from dark to light.

It is somewhat surprising that the symphony was not initially considered a success. Even Tchaikovsky wondered about his work. During the 20th century, however, it achieved as much acclaim as the 4th and 6th symphonies. Thus, it is not surprising that it was voted one of the most popular compositions that the QSO has performed during its 75-year history.