Program Notes for Günther Herbig Conducts Schubert & Brahms
May 28 & 29

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, D. 485
FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Composed in 1816.

Schubert kept a perfunctory diary for a few months during 1816. Among the scraps of home-spun philosophy ("Man resembles a ball, to be played with by chance and passion." "Happier he who finds a true man-friend. Happier still he who finds a true friend in his wife.") is an entry for June 17th: "Today I composed for money for the first time. Namely, a cantata for the name-day of Professor Watteroth. The fee is 100 florins." Schubert, age nineteen, had metamorphosed into a professional composer. At least he thought that there was sufficient reason at the time to leave his irksome teaching post at his father's school in order to live the life of an artist. Thus began the bohemian existence of his last dozen years — living by the gladly proffered aid of friends, daily climbing up to Grinzing to haunt the cafés, avoiding society for dislike of buying and wearing good clothes. And music, always music. He composed incessantly. Out of bed shortly after dawn (sometimes he slept with his glasses on so as not to waste any time getting started in the morning), pouring out music until early afternoon, then off to who-knows-where for a bit too much *Heuriger* wine and a few pipes of cheap tobacco. Compositions filled his head all the while, sometimes scratched out on napkins or envelopes if they could not wait until the next morning. Evenings were spent making music. His devoted band of friends were delighted to sing and play what he wrote. Franz von Hartmann recorded of one of these *Schubertiads*, "There was a huge gathering [including] Gahy, who played four-hand piano music gloriously with Schubert, and Vogl, who sang almost thirty splendid songs.... When the music was over there was grand feeding and dancing. At 12:30 [we went] home. To bed at 1 o'clock."

Supplementing the songs and piano works for these Schubertiads was a growing collection of orchestral pieces composed for other amateur musical soirées. A family string quartet, comprising his brothers Ferdinand and Ignaz on violins, his father on cello and Franz on viola, attracted other players and soon evolved into a small orchestra. They rehearsed at first in the Schubert household, but as the membership grew new quarters had to be found for their activities, and they moved in 1816 to the apartments of Leopold von Sonnleithner. It was for one of those informal evenings that Schubert composed the sparkling B-flat Symphony.

Most important in the repertory of the Schubert family orchestra were the works of Mozart and Haydn. Mozart, especially, was regarded by the young composer as a musical god. In his 1816 diary, he wrote, "O Mozart, immortal Mozart, what countless images of a brighter and better world thou hast stamped upon our souls!" The Symphony in B-flat joins the sparkling elegance of Mozart with Schubert's characteristic melodic fecundity and harmonic daring. "[The Symphony] is full of Schubert's peculiar delicacy," wrote Donald Tovey, "and its form escapes stiffness like a delightful child overawed into perfect behavior, not by fear of priggishness but by sheer delight in giving pleasure." Tovey concludes that the work is "a pearl of great price."

The Symphony opens with a delicate curtain of woodwind harmonies. The violins present the main theme, a gracious melody built on the notes of the common chords. A shadow passes quickly over the music (technically, a brief excursion into the minor key — an expressive device Schubert learned from Mozart) before the main theme is repeated and extended (more shadows) as transition to the second theme. The compact development begins with a decorated version of the opening woodwind harmonies; a discussion of the decorating figure ensues. The main theme is recapitulated not in the tonic key of B-flat, but in the brighter tonality of E-flat. This bit of harmonic legerdemain allows the second theme to reappear in the

"proper" key of B-flat with virtually no alteration of the music from the exposition. A brief, lively coda brings this buoyant movement to a close.

The lovely second movement not only breathes the sweet Mozartian air, but may even derive its melodic inspiration from that composer's Violin Sonata in F, K. 377. The movement is built on two extended themes: the first (in E-flat) is given immediately by the strings; the second (in C-flat) is also played by the strings, with obbligato phrases from the oboe and bassoon. Eschewing a development, the second half of the movement is simply a restatement of the two themes. Though the third movement (G minor) is marked "Menuetto," in tempo and temperament it is truly a scherzo. The bucolic trio, in which the bassoon figures prominently, is in G major. The closing movement recalls the vibrant finales of Haydn in its clear melodic structure, rhythmic vivacity and witty use of dynamics.

Milton Cross' words about Schubert's musical style apply precisely to this wonderful B-flat Symphony. "There is about a Schubert work the radiant joy of creation," Cross wrote. "Everything flows naturally and without obstruction — not only his copious ideas and his warm sentiments, but even his frequently novel effects, his poignant and striking modulations, an unexpected harmony, a breath-taking progression. He wrote only for his delight and according to his own conscience; that delight shines on every page."

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73
JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Composed in 1877.
Premiered on December 30, 1877 in Vienna, conducted by Hans Richter.

"The new symphony is merely a 'sinfonia,' and I shall not need to play it for you beforehand. You have only to sit down at the piano, put your little feet on the two pedals in turn, and strike the chord of F minor several times in succession, first in the treble, then in the bass, fortissimo and pianissimo, and you will gradually gain a vivid impression of my latest work." With the premiere of his pastoral Second Symphony only a month away, Brahms served up this red herring in early November to his friend, correspondent and supporter Elisabeth von Herzogenberg to playfully mislead her about the character of this lovely work. He tossed another false clue to Clara Schumann when he told her that the halcyon first movement was "quite elegiac in character," and, again to Elisabeth, that so sad a piece would require the orchestra to play with crepe bands on their sleeves and the printed score would have to bordered in black. "The new Symphony is so melancholy that you will not be able to bear it," he told his publisher, Fritz Simrock. Such statements are characteristic of Brahms both in their eccentric, sometimes cranky humor, and their reticence to divulge any information about a work that had not been publicly displayed. He was always reluctant to discuss or even mention new pieces to anyone, even to such trusted friends as Clara Schumann. (Clara begged him for years to complete his First Symphony without knowing that the project was almost constantly on his mind and on his desk during the time.) He usually destroyed all his drafts and tentative sketches for a finished composition so that his preliminary thoughts and working procedures remain a mystery. He refused to be disturbed while composing. Once, a youthful admirer, unable to gain an audience with Brahms, set up a ladder to climb to the composer's second-story window to deliver his encomium. Brahms, deep in work and detesting any distraction, angrily threw the ladder from the sill, causing the young man no little harm. It is because of such secretiveness that little is known about the actual composition of the Second Symphony.

In the summer of 1877, Brahms repaired to the village of Pörtschach in the Carinthian hills of southern Austria. He wrote to a Viennese friend, "Pörtschach is an exquisite spot, and I have found a lovely and apparently pleasant abode in the Castle! You may tell everybody this; it will impress them.... The place is replete with Austrian coziness and kindheartedness." The lovely country surroundings inspired Brahms' creativity to such a degree that he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, "So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them." Brahms plucked from the gentle Pörtschach breezes a surfeit of beautiful music for his Second Symphony, which was apparently written quickly during that summer — a great contrast to the fifteen-year gestation of the preceding symphony. He brought the manuscript with him

when he returned to Vienna at the end of the summer, and played it at an informal gathering in a four-hand piano version with Ignaz Brüll in September. Brahms kept the true nature of the piece from the friends who were not at that gathering, and he was delighted by their surprised response at the public premiere late in December.

Brahms' misleading statements depicting the Second Symphony as a tragic work were plausible in view of the stony grandeur of its predecessor. The premiere audience had every expectation of hearing a grand, portentous statement similar in tone to the First Symphony, but was treated instead to the composer's most gentle and sun-dappled music. After their initial befuddlement had passed, they warmed to the occasion as the performance progressed, and such was their enthusiasm at the end that they demanded an encore of the third movement. Brahms himself allowed, "[The work] sounded so merry and tender, as though it were especially written for a newly wedded couple." Early listeners heard in it "a glimpse of Nature, a spring day amid soft mosses, springing woods, birds' notes, and the bloom of flowers." Richard Specht, the composer's biographer, found it "suffused with the sunshine and warm winds playing on the waters." Comparisons with Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony were inevitable, though Brahms never revealed any specific programmatic intention rippling among these notes. Despite its exploration of a new, gentler world of emotions, the work displays again the peerless technical mastery that marked the First Symphony. The conductor Felix Weingartner thought it the best of the four symphonies: "The stream of invention has never flowed so fresh and spontaneous in other works by Brahms, and nowhere else has he colored his orchestration so successfully." To which critic Olin Downes added, "In his own way, and sometimes with long sentences, he formulates his thought, and the music has the rich chromaticism, depth of shadow and significance of detail that characterize a Rembrandt portrait."

Its effortless technique, rich orchestral writing and surety of emotional effect make this composition a splendid sequel to Brahms' First Symphony. The earlier work, probably the best first symphony anyone ever composed, is filled with a sense of struggle and hard-won victory, an accurate mirror of Brahms' monumental efforts over many years to shape a worthy successor to Beethoven's symphonies. ("You have no idea how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven," Brahms lamented.) The Second Symphony, while at least the equal of the First in technical mastery, differs markedly in its mood, which, in Eduard Hanslick's words, is "cheerful and likable … [and] may be described in short as peaceful, tender, but not effeminate." So taken aback by the work's pastoral quality was the Leipzig critic Dörffel that he wrote of the performance conducted by the composer in his city only two weeks after the Viennese premiere, "We require from him music that is something more than simply pretty … when he comes before us as a symphonist." Though this Symphony is more "simply pretty" than any other by Brahms, there is also a rich emotional vein and inevitable structural logic that motivates the music. It is understandable that, of the four he wrote in the genre, this one has probably had, over its history, the most performances.

The Symphony opens with a three-note motive, presented softly by the low strings, which is the germ seed from which much of the thematic material of the movement grows. The horns sing the principal theme, which includes, in its third measure, the three-note motive. The sweet second theme is given in duet by the cellos and violas. The development begins with the horn's main theme, but is mostly concerned with permutations of the three-note motive around which some stormy emotional sentences accumulate. The placid mood of the opening returns with the recapitulation, and remains largely undisturbed until the end of the movement.

The second movement plumbs the deepest emotions in the Symphony. Many of its early listeners found it difficult to understand because they failed to perceive that, in constructing the four broad paragraphs that comprise the Second Symphony, Brahms deemed it necessary to balance the radiant first movement with music of thoughtfulness and introspection in the second. This movement actually covers a wide range of sentiments, shifting, as it does, between light and shade — major and minor. Its form is sonata-allegro, whose second theme is a gently syncopated strain intoned by the woodwinds above the cellos' pizzicato notes.

The following *Allegretto* is a delightful musical sleight-of-hand. The oboe presents a naive, folk-like tune in moderate triple meter as the movement's principal theme. The strings take over the melody in the first Trio, but play it in an energetic duple-meter transformation. The return of the sedate original theme is again interrupted by another quick-tempo variation, this one a further development of motives from Trio I. A final traversal of the main theme closes this delectable movement.

The finale bubbles with the rhythmic energy and high spirits of a Haydn symphony. The main theme starts with a unison gesture in the strings, but soon becomes harmonically active and spreads through the orchestra. The second theme is a broad, hymnal melody initiated by the strings. The development section, like that of many of Haydn's finales, begins with a statement of the main theme in the tonic before branching into discussion of the movement's motives. The recapitulation recalls the earlier themes, and leads with an inexorable drive through the triumphant coda (based on the hymnal melody) to the brazen glow of the final trombone chord.

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