

CARL MARIA VON WEBER

Composer, Conductor

(Eutin, Germany, 1786 — London, 1826)

OVERTURE TO *OBERON*

Composed: 1825-1826

Premiered: April 12, 1826 in London, conducted by the composer

Duration: ca. 9 minutes

Scoring: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings

Overview

Carl Maria von Weber's Romantic opera *Der Freischütz*, premiered in Berlin in 1821, was one of the greatest successes of its time. It was staged immediately in virtually every German opera house and leaped the English Channel to land in London with five separate productions during the 1824 season. One of the British stagings was at Covent Garden, and that theater's director, Charles Kemble, was so pleased with its success that he determined to commission a new work from Weber specially for London. Late in 1824 Kemble visited Weber in Bad Ems, where the composer, then in the advanced stages of tuberculosis, was having a rest and taking the waters, and presented him with a number of possible subjects for the libretto, one of which was Goethe's *Faust*. Weber decided, however, that the new piece would be *Oberon*, a fantasy opera with a text by the British writer James Robinson Planché. Planché adapted his libretto from Sotheby's translation (1798) of Wieland's German poem (1780) based on the 13th-century French *chanson de geste*, *Huon de Bordeaux*.

Since *Oberon* was to be in English and he would be travelling to London to conduct its premiere, Weber undertook a strenuous course of more than 150 lessons to learn the language from an Englishman named Carey. The composer proved to be a good student, as his letters and text setting attest. The composition of the opera went less smoothly than the English lessons, however, since Planché was sending the libretto scene by scene as he completed it so that Weber had difficulty formulating an overall musico-dramatic structure for the work. Weber began composing the music in January 1825; more than a year later, in February 1826, he left Dresden for London with the score still incomplete, but took time to stop en route in Paris to visit with Rossini and Cherubini. He began rehearsals at Covent Garden on March 9th, forged ahead with the last bits of music to be finished and dated the Overture, the final section to be completed, on April 9th "in the morning at quarter of twelve. *Soli Deo Gloria!*" *Oberon* was premiered at Covent Garden on April 12, 1826 to enthusiastic acclaim — "the greatest success of my life," the composer wrote to his wife. "The emotion produced by such a triumph is more than I can describe. When I entered the orchestra, the house was crammed to the roof and the audience broke into a frenzy of applause. Hats and handkerchiefs were waved in the air.... At the end of the presentation, I was called to the stage by the enthusiastic acclamations of the public, an honor which no composer had ever before attained in England." (Weber curiously discounted the triumphs of Handel and Haydn during the preceding century.)

Weber's success in London was bittersweet. His health had never been good, and the last years of his life saw his strength drained by tuberculosis. He was constantly short of breath, often ran a

fever and taxed his stamina unmercifully with every scrap of work. His physician in Dresden advised against the London venture, warning Weber that the rigors of the trip and the premiere would probably kill him. “Whatever I do, whether I go or not, I will be a dead man within one year,” he answered. “However, if I go my children will have something to eat when their father is dead, and they will be hungry if I stay.” He went, was paid his fee of £500, and died in London, far away from home and family, six weeks after *Oberon* opened. He was 39 years old.

Planché wrote his libretto for *Oberon* to allow for the greatest possible theatrical spectacle, with hardly a shred of character explication or dramatic veracity — “the merest twaddle for regulating the operations of scene-shifters,” according to Sir Donald Tovey. “Its plot,” wrote Sigmund Spaeth, “tells of the quarrel between Oberon and Titania, the fairy king and queen, who will not speak to each other until a pair of faithful lovers has been found. Oberon’s sprightly little errand-boy, Puck, finds the necessary couple in Huon of Bordeaux, a knight of the court of Charlemagne, and Rezia, daughter of the calif of Baghdad, Haroun al Raschid. On their way home from Baghdad, the lovers are shipwrecked and captured by pirates, who sell Rezia to the Emir of Tunis and Huon to his wife, Roxanna. Each resists the temptation to infidelity, and when they are condemned to death by fire, Huon blows upon the magic horn of Oberon, which magically transports them to the court of Charlemagne, where all ends happily, with a reconciliation between Titania and her husband.”

What To Listen For

Weber’s splendid Overture for *Oberon*, cast in traditional sonata form, is based on themes from the opera. The introduction comprises a soft call evoking the horn of Oberon, answered by muted strings; a gossamer figure for high woodwinds borrowed from the opening scene, set in Oberon’s palace; and a tiny, elfin march. The main body of the Overture begins with a dashing theme taken from the accompaniment to the Act II quartet, *Over the Dark Blue Waters*. After a reminder of Oberon’s horn signal, the clarinet introduces the subsidiary melody, Huon’s air from the first act, *From Boyhood Trained*. The impetuous closing theme is taken from Rezia’s Act II aria, *Ocean! Thou Mighty Monster*.

In the biography of his father, Max Maria von Weber wrote of *Oberon*, “From first to last it is in complete sympathy with its fantastic subject. Every picture of the drama is mirrored in it — the world of elves and spirits; the pomp and pride of chivalry and romance; glowing love struggling against slavery, elemental might, separation and death; the majesty of Oriental enchantment.”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

composer, pianist

(Bonn, 1770 — Vienna, 1827)

CONCERTO NO. 1 FOR PIANO IN C MAJOR, OP. 15

Composed: 1795, revised 1800

Premiered: December 18, 1795 in Vienna, with the composer as soloist

Duration: ca. 36 minutes

Scoring: flute, pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani, strings

Overview

“His genius, his magnetic personality were acknowledged by all, and there was, besides, a gaiety and animation about the young Beethoven that people found immensely attractive. The troubles of boyhood were behind him: his father had died very shortly after his departure from Bonn, and by 1795 his brothers were established in Vienna, Caspar Karl as a musician, Johann as an apothecary. During his first few months in the capital, he had indeed been desperately poor, depending very largely on the small salary allowed him by the Elector of Bonn. But that was all over now. He had no responsibilities, and his music was bringing in enough to keep him in something like affluence. He had a servant, for a short time he even had a horse; he bought smart clothes, he learned to dance (though not with much success), and there is even mention of his wearing a wig! We must not allow our picture of the later Beethoven to throw its dark colors over these years of his early triumphs. He was a young giant exulting in his strength and his success, and a youthful confidence gave him a buoyancy that was both attractive and infectious. Even in 1791, before he left Bonn, Carl Junker could describe him as ‘this amiable, lighthearted man.’ And in Vienna he had much to raise his spirits and nothing (at first) to depress them.”

Peter Latham painted this cheerful picture of the young Beethoven as Vienna knew him during his twenties, the years before his deafness, his recurring illnesses and his titanic struggles with his mature compositions had produced the familiar, dour figure of his later years. Beethoven came to Vienna for good in 1792, having made an unsuccessful foray in 1787, and quickly attracted attention for his piano playing, at which he bested such local keyboard luminaries as Daniel Steibelt and Joseph Wölffl to become the rage of the music-mad Austrian capital. His appeal was in an almost untamed, passionate, novel quality in both his manner of performance and his personality, characteristics that first intrigued and then captivated those who heard him. Václav Tomášek, an important Czech composer who heard Beethoven play the C major Concerto in Prague in 1798, wrote, “His grand style of playing had an extraordinary effect on me. I felt so shaken that for several days I could not bring myself to touch the piano.”

Beethoven, largely self-taught as a pianist, did not follow in the model of sparkling technical perfection for which Mozart, who died only a few months before Beethoven’s arrival, was well remembered in Vienna. He was vastly more impetuous and less precise at the keyboard, as Harold Schonberg described him in his fascinating study of *The Great Pianists*: “[His playing] was overwhelming not so much because Beethoven was a great virtuoso (which he probably wasn’t), but because he had an ocean-like surge and depth that made all other playing sound like the trickle of a rivulet.... No piano was safe with Beethoven. There is plenty of evidence that Beethoven was a most lively figure at the keyboard, just as he was on the podium.... Czerny, who hailed Beethoven’s ‘titanic execution,’ apologizes for his messiness [i.e., snapping strings and breaking hammers] by saying that he demanded too much from the pianos then being made. Which is very true; and which is also a polite way of saying that Beethoven banged the hell out of the piano.”

Beethoven composed the first four of his five mature piano concertos for his own concerts. (Two juvenile essays in the genre are discounted in the numbering.) Both the Concerto No. 1 in C major and the Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major were composed in 1795, the Second probably

premiered at the Burgtheater on March 29th and the First at a concert under Joseph Haydn's direction on December 18th; both works were revised before their publication in 1801. Beethoven's C major Concerto sprang from the rich Viennese musical tradition of Haydn and Mozart, with which he was intimately acquainted: he had taken some composition lessons with Haydn soon after his arrival, and he had profound affection for and knowledge of Mozart's work. At a performance of Mozart's C minor Piano Concerto (K. 491), he whispered to his companion, John Cramer, "Cramer, Cramer! We shall never be able to do anything like that!"

What To Listen For

The opening movement of the First Piano Concerto is indebted to Mozart for its handling of the concerto-sonata form, for its technique of orchestration, and for the manner in which piano and orchestra are integrated. Beethoven added to these quintessential qualities of the Classical concerto a wider-ranging harmony, a more openly virtuosic role for the soloist and a certain emotional weight characteristic of his large works. The second movement is a richly colored song with an important part for the solo clarinet. The rondo-finale is written in an infectious manner reminiscent of Haydn, brimming with high spirits and good humor.

JEAN SIBELIUS

Composer

(Hämeenlinna, Finland, 1865 — Järveenpää, Finland, 1957)

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D MAJOR, OP. 43

Composed: 1901-1902

Premiered: March 8, 1902 in Helsinki, conducted by the composer

Duration: ca. 43 minutes

Scoring: pairs of woodwinds, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings

Overview

At the turn of the 20th century, two pressing concerns were foremost in the thoughts of Jean Sibelius — his country and his compositions. His home, Finland, was experiencing a surge of nationalistic pride that called for independence and recognition after eight centuries of domination by Sweden and Russia, and he enthusiastically lent his philosophical and artistic support to the movement. In the 1890s, when Sibelius was still in his twenties, he was drawn into a group called "The Symposium," a coterie of young Helsinki intellectuals who championed the cause of Finnish nationalism. Of them, Sibelius noted, "The 'Symposium' evenings were a great resource to me at a time when I might have stood more or less alone. The opportunity of exchanging ideas with kindred souls, animated by the same spirit and the same objectives, exerted an extremely stimulating influence on me, confirmed in me my purpose, gave me confidence." The group's interest in native legends, music, art and language incited in the young composer a deep feeling for his homeland that blossomed in such early works as *En Saga*, *Kullervo*, *Karelia* and *Finlandia*. The ardent patriotism of those stirring musical testaments became a rallying point and an inspiration to Finns, and they earned Sibelius a hero's reputation

among his countrymen.

In 1900, Sibelius was given a specific way in which to further the cause of both his country and his music. In that year, the conductor Robert Kajanus led the Helsinki Philharmonic through Europe to the Paris Exhibition on a tour whose purpose was less artistic recognition than a bid for international sympathy for Finnish political autonomy. As Sibelius' music figured prominently in the tour repertory, he was asked to join the entourage as assistant to Kajanus. The tour was a success: for the orchestra and its conductor, for Finland, and especially for Sibelius, whose works it brought to a wider audience than ever before. Music and politics usually make contentious bedfellows, but on this occasion they achieved a fortuitous symbiosis.

A year later Sibelius was again travelling. Through a financial subscription raised by Axel Carpelan, he was able to spend the early months of 1901 in Italy away from the rigors of the Scandinavian winter. So inspired was he by the culture, history and beauty of the sunny south (as had been Goethe and Brahms) that he envisioned a work based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*. However, a second symphony to follow the First of 1899 was gestating, and the Dante work was eventually abandoned. Sibelius was well launched on the new Symphony by the time he left for home. He made two important stops before returning to Finland. The first was at Prague, where he met Dvorák and was impressed with the famous musician's humility and friendliness. The second stop was at the June Music Festival in Heidelberg, where the enthusiastic reception given to his compositions enhanced the budding European reputation that he had achieved during the Helsinki Philharmonic tour of the preceding year. Still flush with the success of this 1901 tour when he arrived home, he decided he was secure enough financially (thanks in part to an annual stipend initiated in 1897 by the Finnish government) to leave his teaching job and devote himself full-time to composition. Though it was to be almost two decades before Finland became independent of Russia as a result of the First World War, Sibelius had come into the full ripeness of his genius by the time of the Second Symphony. So successful was the premiere of the work on March 8, 1902 that it had to be repeated at three successive concerts in a short time to satisfy the clamor for further performances.

Because of the milieu in which the Second Symphony arose, there have been several attempts to read into it a specific, nationalistic program, including one by Georg Schneevoight, a conductor and friend of the composer. The intention of this Symphony, he wrote, "was to depict in the first movement the quiet pastoral life of the Finns, undisturbed by the thought of oppression. The second movement is charged with patriotic feeling, but the thought of a brutal rule over the people brings with it timidity of soul. The third, a scherzo, portrays the awakening of national feeling in the people and the desire to organize in defense of their rights. In the finale hope enters their breasts and there is comfort in the anticipated coming of a deliverer!" As late as 1946, the Finnish musicologist Ilmari Kronn posited that the Symphony depicted "Finland's struggle for political liberty." Sibelius insisted such descriptions misrepresented his intention — that it was his tone poems and not his symphonies which were based on specific programs. This Symphony, he maintained, was pure, abstract expression and not meant to conjure any definite meaning. As with any great work, however, Sibelius' Second Symphony can inspire many different interpretations, and the Finns have an understandable devotion to Schneevoight's patriotic view of the music despite Sibelius' words — it is the piece most often performed at Finnish state occasions.

What To Listen For

The influence of German and Russian music bears heavily on the first two symphonies of Sibelius. Echoes of the works of Tchaikovsky and Borodin and, to a lesser extent, Brahms are frequent. However, the style is unmistakably Sibelian in its melodic and timbral attributes, and even in the distinctive technique of concentrated thematic development that was to flower fully in the following symphonies. The first movement of the Second Symphony is modeled on the classical sonata form. As introduction, the strings present a chordal motive that courses through and unifies much of the movement. A bright, folk-like strain for the woodwinds and a hymnal response from the horns constitute the opening theme. The second theme exhibits one of Sibelius' most characteristic constructions — a long held note that intensifies to a quick rhythmic flourish. This theme and a complementary one of angular leaps and unsettled tonality close the exposition and figure prominently in the ensuing development. A stentorian brass chorale closes this section and leads to the recapitulation, a compressed restatement of the earlier themes.

The second movement, though closely related to sonatina form (sonata without development), is best heard as a series of dramatic paragraphs whose strengths lie not just in their individual qualities but also in their powerful juxtapositions. The opening statement is given by bassoons in hollow octaves above a bleak accompaniment of timpani with cellos and basses in pizzicato notes. The upper strings and then full orchestra take over the solemn plaint, but soon inject a new, sharply rhythmic idea of their own which calls forth a halting climax from the brass choir. After a silence, the strings intone a mournful motive that soon engenders another climax. A soft timpani roll begins the series of themes again, but in expanded presentations with fuller orchestration and greater emotional impact.

The third movement is a three-part form whose lyrical, unhurried central trio, built on a repeated note theme, provides a strong contrast to the mercurial surrounding scherzo. The slow music of the trio returns as a bridge to the closing movement, one of the most inspiring finales in the entire symphonic literature. It has a grand sweep and uplifting spirituality that make it one of the last unadulterated flowerings of the great Romantic tradition. Of this work, David Ewen wrote, "It has the ardor, passion and vitality of youth; it overflows with sensual lyricism and Slavic sentimentality; it is dramatized by compelling climaxes and irresistible rhythmic drive." To which Milton Cross added, simply, "It has an overwhelming emotional impact."