

program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

LOUISE FARRENC ■ 1804-1875

Overture No. 1 in E minor, Op. 23 (1834)

There are few better examples in the history of music of innate genius, rigorous training, steadfast ambition and sheer hard work overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles than Louise Farrenc. She was born in Paris in 1804 into a distinguished artistic family — her father and brother were both *Prix de Rome*-winning sculptors — and started studying piano and music theory at age six. At fifteen she broke a significant gender barrier by being accepted into the previously all-male composition class at the Paris Conservatoire. Two years later she married Aristide Farrenc, a flutist at the Théâtre Italien, a respected teacher, and founder of a music publishing firm. During the 1830s, Louise Farrenc established an impressive career in Paris as a pianist, composer and teacher, and undertook several concert tours around the country. She began composing seriously during those years, not just small pieces for piano but also large-scale chamber and orchestral works — two piano quintets, two piano trios, a nonet and sextet for mixed ensembles, and sonatas for cello and violin, as well as two overtures and three symphonies, which received notable performances. Hardly any other significant French composer was then writing such challenging abstract works. In 1842, Farrenc was appointed piano professor at the Paris Conservatoire and she distinguished herself in that capacity for the next three decades as the only

woman to hold such a prominent permanent position at the school during the entire 19th century. When Louise Farrenc died in Paris on September 15, 1875 she was regarded as one of the foremost female musicians of her time.

Farrenc first broached the orchestral genres in 1834 with two concert overtures: the first (E minor, Op. 23) was finished that summer, the second (E-flat major, Op. 24) by December. No. 1 was performed in Paris in 1835 and No. 2 in 1840, when Farrenc was in the midst of writing her three symphonies.

Each of Farrenc's overtures follows a well-crafted and finely orchestrated sonata form. The Overture No. 1 opens with an introduction whose broad gait and noble gravity pay homage to the opening of many of Haydn's mature symphonies. The main theme is swift and agitated; the complementary subject, begun by the clarinet, is lyrical and more relaxed in mood. The development section skillfully weaves the lyrical phrases of the second theme with the agitated rhythms of the main theme. After a full stop, the materials of the exposition are recapitulated to close this too-little-known work by one of France's most gifted 19th-century musicians.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN ■ 1809-1847

Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90, "Italian" (1831-1837)

When he was 21, Mendelssohn embarked on an extensive grand tour of the Continent. He met Chopin and Liszt in Paris, painted the breathtaking vistas of

Switzerland, and marveled at the artistic riches (and grumbled about the inhospitable treatment by the coachmen and innkeepers) of Italy. “The land where the lemon trees blossom,” as his friend Goethe described sunny Italy, stirred him so deeply that he began a musical work there in 1831 based on his impressions of Rome, Naples and the other cities he visited. The composition of this “Italian” Symphony, as he always called it, caused him much difficulty, however, and he had trouble bringing all of the movements to completion. “For the slow movement I have not yet found anything exactly right, and I think I must put it off for Naples,” he wrote from Rome to his sister, Fanny. The spur to finish the work was a commission for a symphony from the Philharmonic Society of London that caused Mendelssohn to gather up his sketches and complete the task by 1837.

The “Italian” Symphony is cast in the traditional four movements. The opening movement takes an exuberant, leaping melody initiated by the violins as its principal subject and a quieter, playful strain led by the clarinets as its subsidiary theme. The intricately contrapuntal development section is largely based on a precise, staccato theme of darker emotional hue but also refers to motives from the main theme. A full recapitulation of the exposition’s materials ensues before the movement ends with a coda recalling the staccato theme from the development. The *Andante* may have been inspired by a religious procession Mendelssohn saw in the streets of Naples. The third movement is in the form of a minuet/scherzo whose central trio utilizes the burnished sonorities of bassoons and horns. The finale turns to a tempestuous minor key for an exuberant dance modeled on a whirling *saltarello* Mendelssohn heard in Rome.

JOHANNES BRAHMS ■ 1833-1897

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15 (1854-1859)

In 1854, Brahms set out to produce a symphony in D minor as his first major orchestral work, and, to that end, he sketched three movements in short score. The first movement was orchestrated, but Brahms was not satisfied with the result, and he decided to transform his short score into a sonata for two pianos, but this still did not fulfill his vision — the ideas were too symphonic in breadth to be satisfactorily contained by just pianos, yet too pianistic in figuration to be completely divorced from the keyboard. He was quite stuck. In 1857, the composer Julius Otto Grimm, a staunch friend, suggested that his 24-year-old colleague try his sketch as a piano concerto. Brahms thought the advice sound, and he went back to work. He selected two movements to retain for the concerto and put aside the third, which emerged ten years later as the chorus *Behold All Flesh* in *The German Requiem*. Things proceeded slowly but steadily and only after two more years of work was the Piano Concerto No. 1 ready for performance.

The Concerto’s stormy first movement is among the most passionate and impetuous of all Brahms’ works. This movement follows the Classical model of double-exposition concerto form, with an extended initial presentation of much of the important thematic material by the orchestra alone (“first exposition”). The soloist enters and leads through the “second exposition,” which is augmented to include a lyrical second theme, not heard earlier, played by the unaccompanied piano. The central section of the movement begins with the tempestuous main theme, a Romantic motive

filled with snarling trills and anguished melodic leaps. The recapitulation enters on a titanic wave of sound, as though the crest of some dark, brooding emotion were crashing onto a barren, rocky shore. The lovely second theme returns (played again by the solo piano), but eventually gives way to the foreboding mood of the main theme.

The *Adagio* is a movement of transcendent beauty, of quiet, twilight emotions couched in a mood of gentle melancholy — of “something spiritual” in Clara Schumann’s words. Above the first line of the conductor’s score, Brahms penciled in the phrase “Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini” — “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” This reference, really an informal dedication, is to his friend and mentor Robert Schumann, often addressed by his friends as “Mynheer Domine,” who died while Brahms was working on the Concerto. Such an overt association of his music with definite sentiments was highly unusual for this circumspect composer, and he later crossed out the Latin phrase. The emotion of deep introspection, however, remains.

The finale, perhaps modeled on that of Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 3, is a weighty rondo. Its theme is related to the lyrical second subject of the opening movement by one of those masterful strokes Brahms used to unify his large works. Among the episodes that separate the returns of the rondo theme is one employing a carefully devised fugue that grew directly from Brahms’ thorough study of the music of Bach. After a brief, restrained cadenza, the coda turns to the brighter key of D major to provide a stirring conclusion to this Concerto, a work of awesome achievement for the 26-year-old Brahms.

ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

OCTOBER 9-10, 2021

P R O G R A M

DIANE M. WITTRY MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

Overture No. 1 in E minor, Op. 23

LOUISE FARRENC

Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90, "Italian"

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Allegro vivace

Andante con moto

Con moto moderato

Saltarello: Presto

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Maestoso

Adagio

Rondo: Allegro non troppo

Piano Soloist: George Li