

## PROGRAM NOTES

### *Prelude to "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg"*

Richard Wagner  
(1813 – 1883)

The idea of a great operatic comedy first took shape in Wagner's mind in 1845 as a sort of parody play to follow his opera, "*Tannhäuser*," that he was working on at the time. Seventeen years later, in March 1862, Wagner describes in his autobiography the moment of inspiration for his concept:

One evening from the balcony of my house as I watched a fine sunset light up in glory the splendid view of "golden" Mainz and the majestically flowing Rhine, the prelude to my "*Meistersinger*" suddenly sprang up clearly in my mind as I had once before beheld it in a troubled mood, as if it had been a distant mirage, and I proceeded to draft the prelude precisely as it appears today in the score, that is, setting forth very definitely the main motives of the whole drama.

Those main motives provide in order, a miniature digest of the entire work that follows.

1. The opening Meistersinger motive.
2. Awakening love of Walther for Eva.
3. The banner march of the Meistersingers.
4. Continued fragments of Walther's love for Eva.
5. Walther's declared love statement for Eva.

After a straightforward statement of each of these motives, Wagner provides polyphonic combinations of them.

The work is scored for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel, harp, and strings. Dr. Baker and the YSO last performed the work November 18, 1984.

### *Ritual Fire Dance from "El Amor Brujo"*

Manuel de Falla  
(1876 – 1946)

Falla was the principal Spanish composer of the early twentieth century. He had a strong interest in national folk songs and dances as demonstrated in his 1915 ballet, *El Amor Brujo* (*Love, the Sorcerer*). Although the story, inspired by Gypsy Andalusian folklore, is somewhat complicated, the music more than makes up for the effort to place the characters and events in place. There are three living characters plus a ghost. The heroine, Candela is a pretty young woman whose earliest love was with a turbulent and unfaithful man who died. After his death, Candela is courted by a young Gypsy man, Carmelo, who is passionately in love with her. But whenever he encounters Candela the ghost of her first lover appears and threatens him. In order to divert the threatening ghost, Carmelo persuades one of his longtime friends, Lucia, to come to his aid by trying to distract the ghost by means of exorcising it as an evil spirit through the *Ritual Fire Dance*. The process of exorcism is carried out successfully through Falla's compelling oboe solo in the dance.

The work is scored for piccolo, 2 flutes, oboe, 2 clarinets, bassoon, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, piano, bells, and strings. Dr. Baker and the YSO last performed the work on March 13, 1999.

*Variations on a Rococo Theme, for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 33*

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky  
(1840 – 1893)

- I. Introduction: *Moderato assai quasi Andante* – A major – 2/4
- II. Theme: *Moderato semplice* – A major – 2/4
- III. Variation 1: *Tempo della thema* – A major – 2/4
- IV. Variation 2: *Tempo della thema* – A major – 2/4
- V. Variation 3: *Andante – d minor* – 2/4
- VI. Variation 4: *Allegro vivo* – A major – 2/4
- VII. Variation 5: *Andante grazioso* – A major – 2/4
- VIII. Variation 6: *Allegro moderato* – A major – 2/4
- IX. Variation 7: *Andante sostenuto* – C major – 3/4
- X. Variation 8 and Coda: *Allegro moderato con anima* A major – 2/4

In December, 1876, Tchaikovsky wrote his *Variations on a Rococo Theme, for Cello and Orchestra* and dedicated the work to Wilhelm Fitzenhagen (1848 – 1890), then principal cellist of the Orchestra of the Imperial Russian Music Society in Moscow and also professor at the conservatory there. The twenty-eight year old Fitzenhagen gave the first performance in Moscow on 30 December, 1877, with Nicolai Rubinstein conducting. Tchaikovsky took his manuscript of the concerto to his publisher, P. I. Jürgenson, and told him that he had asked Fitzenhagen to go through the work and “fix” any difficult passages. Not satisfied with revising the dynamics, phrasing, and articulation of the “*Rococo Variations*,” the cellist reordered the variations, in the process entirely eliminating the difficult last one. When in 1876 the piano/cello score came out, it was in Fitzenhagen’s “edition.” Inexplicably, when the full orchestra score was finally issued in 1889, it was in Fitzenhagen’s format. Fitzenhagen made drastic changes to Tchaikovsky’s score and that edition is what the world heard until 1941 when Tchaikovsky’s original composition was played in Moscow without Fitzenhagen’s changes. It is now the only version appearing in the authoritative Russian edition.

If listeners are looking for help in applying the term “rococo” to the theme that Tchaikovsky used as the melodic basis for his set of variations, there is nothing uniquely rococo about the melody except that it fits comfortably into the general style of a simple and innocent sounding early eighteenth century tune. It is not particularly Russian, nor Italian, nor French. Tchaikovsky’s variations may be considered rococo in the sense that they are progressively more ornamented and embellished. But it is Tchaikovsky’s musical genius that becomes the center of attention in such places as the changes from the original key of A major that occur in the third and seventh variations and the refreshing change of meter in the seventh variation. The tempo changes also add interest to the melody, especially when combined with the increasingly spectacular artistry called for from the soloist. Admirers of Tchaikovsky who have a store of music in their memories may hear hints of their favorite sections from *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, or other of his huge repertory of popular symphonic, ballet, and operatic output.

The work is scored for solo cello, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons 2 trumpets, 2 French horns, and strings. Dr. Baker and the YSO last performed the work with Paul Tobias, cellist, on October 9, 1988.

*Meditation* from “*Thaïs*”

Jules Massenet  
(1842 – 1912)

“*Thaïs*” is Massenet’s 1894 French opera based on the novel of the same name by Anatole France (1844 – 1924) with a libretto by Louis Gallet (1835 – 1898). The opera begins in the desert near Thebes sometime in the fourth century. Athanaël is a young cenobite monk. Thaïs is a

legendary courtesan of great beauty. Athanaël determines to find Thaïs and persuade her to become a virtuous woman and exchange profane love for holy love. He finds her and pleads his case, not only for her own sake but also for that of the general population. Thaïs is intrigued by his argument and also drawn to his person. The *Meditation* is an instrumental expression of Thaïs' thoughts during an interlude of the opera when the scene is changing.

The work as played in the opera calls for a solo violin, orchestra and chorus. As played this evening, it is scored for solo cello, 2 flutes, 2 oboes with one part for English horn, 3 clarinets with one part for bass clarinet, 3 bassoons with one part for contrabassoon, 4 horns, timpani, harp, and strings. This is the first time that Dr. Baker and the YSO have performed the work.

*Academic Festival Overture, Op. 80*

Johannes Brahms  
(1833 – 1897)

Brahms is reported to have described this work as a . . . “jolly potpourri of student songs á la Suppe.” Brahms was not well-known for his sense of humor. However, his discovery that a mere thank-you note was (back in 1879) considered insufficient gratitude for an honorary doctorate (“Rector magnificus”), conferred *in absentia* by the University of Breslau, provoked a little jest. The citation described him as a “composer of serious music”, so Brahms notified Barnard Scholz (the conductor at Breslau) of his proposed work's title. Scholz, taking it at face value, thought it “devilish academic and boring”. It is hard to imagine old stuffy Brahms chortling with glee as he penned his now-famous medley of student songs. With his usual self-effacing modesty, he made little of the honor bestowed on him, but he was clearly pleased enough about the honor to compose this work and to appear and conduct the first performance at the school on January 4, 1881. It was no mere “medley”: like everything Brahms wrote it is built like a tank, and, once set in motion, twice as impressive. The joke does not end there. Having a low opinion of Bruckner symphonies (he called them “symphonic boa-constrictors”), he took the opportunity to lay out his undergraduate drinking song send-up exactly like a Bruckner first movement. There are three subject groups, the first having four themes with a marching character, the second with a contrasting lyrical flow, and the third (introduced in the bassoons) bouncing along on an off-beat rhythm. The development section is telescoped into the recapitulation; we only become aware of the latter with the re-emergence of the second subject. The unexpected and unbuttoned appearance at the end of the best-known song, *Gaudeamus Igitur* (Let us now enjoy ourselves), serving as the coda, must have brought the house down at the premiere!

The orchestration is one of the largest and most colorful in Brahms' output. The work is scored for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings. According to YSO archives, this is the first time that Dr. Baker and the YSO have performed the work.

*Overture to “Semiramide”*

Gioacchino Rossini  
(1792 – 1868)

Rossini, 31 years old when he composed this opera, said that he was able to work at a “leisurely pace” and that he finished in thirty-three days. The story is based on Voltaire's drama of 1748, *Semiramis*. The premiere took place in Venice's Teatro La Fenice in 1823. Rossini's wife, the soprano, Isabella Colbran, sang the leading role. The overture is in traditional sonata-allegro form. The slow introduction features the horn section in music taken from the first act of the opera. Queen Semiramide's Babylonian subjects sing a hymn of loyalty to her as she is about to announce her choice for a new king. The first theme of the allegro section is also taken from the opera, from

the final scene that takes place in the burial vault of King Ninus, Semiramide's husband, who was murdered by her lover, Arsace.

The score calls for piccolo, flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, bass drum, and strings. YSO and Dr. Baker last performed this work on February 14, 1993.

*Overture to "William Tell"*

Gioacchino Rossini  
(1792 – 1868)

Rossini finished his last opera, "*William Tell*," in 1829, at age 37. It was his thirty-sixth opera written in a nineteen-year span. Generations of Rossini's admirers have wondered why he stopped composing at such an early age. Since his health had not failed, and several of his operas were enormously successful, it would appear to many that Rossini would have found it more rewarding to continue doing what he did so very well, rather than to retire into non-productivity for nearly forty years after this opera. His reasons are, of course, his business and not ours, but music lovers are understandably selfish in wishing for more of a good thing. Another of his creations, the gourmet beef dish *Tournedos Rossini*, can be found in fine restaurants to this day. There is some controversy as to whether Rossini or Escoffier came up with the recipe.

The overture is organized into four sections. The first three suggest Swiss mountain scenes that serve as background for the opera. The opening section, for five solo cellos, represents a mountain sunrise scene. This serene music changes into sounds of an Alpine storm. The third section is a pastoral scene with a Swiss cattlemen's call played on English horn, in duet with a bird-like solo flute. The final section, made popular by the Lone Ranger programs, begins with a trumpet fanfare, calling Swiss patriots to revolt, and merges with a march that is to fire their spirits. The dramatic spirit of his overture makes it a model of music for romantic grand opera.

The work is scored for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings. Dr. Baker and the YSO last performed the work on April 21, 2001.

Program notes by Jim Mohatt