

## **PROGRAM NOTE by ERIC BROMBERGER**

### **Overture to *The Barber of Seville***

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Born February 29, 1792, Pesaro

Died November 13, 1868, Paris

From the moment of its premiere in Rome on February 20, 1816, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* has been an audience favorite. The opera is one of the finest examples of opera buffa, full of witty music and comic intrigue in the battle of the sexes, and one of the most popular parts of *The Barber* has always been its overture, which sets exactly the right mood for all the fun to follow.

Yet this overture had originally been composed three years earlier as the introduction to a tragic opera, *Aureliano in Palmira*. And, two years later, Rossini used it again as the overture to his historical opera about Queen Elizabeth I, *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra*. Finally, in 1816, it became the overture to *The Barber of Seville*. It seems hard to believe that an overture composed for a tragic opera could function so perfectly as the introduction to a comic tale, yet it does, and—on the stage or in the concert hall—this music continues to work its charm.

In modified sonata-form, the overture is scored for Mozart's orchestra (pairs of winds, plus timpani and strings) with the addition of one very non-classical instrument, a bass drum. The overture begins with a slow introduction marked *Andante maestoso*, which features crashing chords, gathering energy, and a beautifully-poised melody for violins. The music rushes ahead at the *Allegro con brio*, with its famous "laughing" main theme, full of point and expectancy. Solo oboe introduces the second theme-group, marked *dolce*, and this alternates with the main violin theme. Along the way are several of the lengthy crescendos that were a virtual Rossini trademark (his nickname was "Monsieur Crescendo"), and one of these drives this sparkling music home in a great blast of energy.

### **Violin Concerto in D Major, Opus 61**

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

In the spring of 1806 Beethoven finally found time for new projects. For the previous three years his energies had been consumed by two huge works—the *Eroica* and his opera *Leonore* (later re-named *Fidelio*). Now with the opera done (for the moment), the floodgates opened. Working at white heat over the rest of 1806, Beethoven turned out a rush of works: the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, the *Fourth Symphony*, the three *Razumovsky Quartets*, and the *Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor*. He also accepted a commission from violinist Franz Clement for a concerto, and—as was his habit with commissions—put off work on the concerto for as long as possible. Clement had scheduled his concert for December 23, 1806, and Beethoven apparently worked on the music until the last possible instant—legend has it that at the premiere Clement sightread some of the concerto from Beethoven’s manuscript.

Beethoven’s orchestral music from the interval between the powerful *Eroica* and the violent *Fifth Symphony* relaxed a little, and the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, *Fourth Symphony*, and *Violin Concerto* are marked by a serenity absent from those symphonies. The *Violin Concerto* is one of Beethoven’s most regal works, full of easy majesty and spacious in conception (the first movement alone lasts 24 minutes—his longest symphonic movement). Yet mere length does not explain the majestic character of this music, which unfolds with a sort of relaxed nobility. Part—but not all—of the reason for this lies in the unusually lyric nature of the music. We do not normally think of Beethoven as a melodist, but in this concerto he makes full use of the violin’s lyric capabilities. Another reason lies in the concerto’s generally broad tempos: the first movement is marked *Allegro*, but Beethoven specifies *ma non troppo*, and even the finale is relaxed rather than brilliant. In fact, at no point in this concerto does Beethoven set out to dazzle his listeners—there are no passages here designed to leave an audience gasping, nor any that allow the soloist consciously to show off. This is an extremely difficult concerto, but a non-violinist might never know that, for the difficulties of this noblest of violin concertos are purely at the service of the music itself.

The concerto has a remarkable beginning: Beethoven breaks the silence with five quiet timpani strokes. By itself, this is an extraordinary opening, but those five pulses also perform a variety of roles through the first movement—sometimes they function as accompaniment, sometimes as harsh contrast with the soloist, sometimes as a way of modulating to new keys. The movement is built on two ideas: the dignified chordal melody announced by the woodwinds immediately after the opening timpani strokes and a rising-and-falling second idea, also first

stated by the woodwinds (this theme is quietly accompanied by the five-note pulse in the strings). Beethoven delays the appearance of the soloist, and this long movement is based exclusively on its two main themes.

The *Larghetto*, in G major, is a theme-and-variation movement. Muted strings present the theme, and the soloist begins to embellish that simple melody, which grows more and more ornate as the movement proceeds. A brief cadenza leads directly into the finale, a rondo based on the sturdy rhythmic idea announced immediately by the violinist. But this is an unusual rondo: its various episodes begin to develop and take on lives of their own (for this reason, the movement is sometimes classified as a sonata-rondo). One of these episodes, in G minor and marked *dolce*, is exceptionally haunting—Beethoven develops this theme briefly and then it vanishes, never to return. The movement drives to a huge climax, with the violin soaring high above the turbulent orchestra, and the music subsides and comes to its close when Beethoven—almost as an afterthought, it seems—turns the rondo theme into the graceful concluding gesture.

A NOTE ON THE CADENZAS AT THIS PERFORMANCE: Beethoven wrote no cadenzas for the *Violin Concerto*, preferring to leave that to Clement at the premiere, and many subsequent musicians have supplied cadenzas of their own, notably Fritz Kreisler and Leopold Auer. But in a sense Beethoven *did* write cadenzas for this concerto, and this makes a very interesting story.

In May 1807, five months after the premiere of the *Violin Concerto*, the pianist-composer-publisher Muzio Clementi commissioned Beethoven to make a piano arrangement of it. Beethoven was generally not enthusiastic about such arrangements, but Clementi's offer was generous, and he agreed. This arrangement was made sometime in 1807, though it is unclear how much of it is the work of Beethoven himself and how much he may have delegated to others. The piano version of the *Violin Concerto* has never been very successful—such eminently violinistic music does not translate idiomatically to the piano—but in the process of arranging this concerto for his own instrument, Beethoven did compose cadenzas for each of the three movements. The cadenza for the first movement is spectacular. Here the piano is joined along the way by the timpani, and the two engage in an impressive and at times violent dialogue—Beethoven's dramatic cadenza makes us re-consider the entire nature of the first movement. The composer would remember this combination of piano and timpani when he composed his "*Emperor*" *Concerto* two years later.

But now the story takes one more turn. In the 1950s Austrian violinist Wolfgang

Schneiderhan, for many years concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic, reversed the process once again: he took Beethoven's cadenzas for the piano version of this concerto and arranged them for violin. His motives were clear: he wanted to play the Beethoven *Violin Concerto* with authentic Beethoven cadenzas, and he found the piano cadenzas fully worthy of this great music. At these concerts David Bowlin performs Schneiderhan's rarely-heard violin arrangement of the only cadenzas Beethoven wrote for this concerto, complete with the surprisingly fierce duet between soloist and timpanist in the first movement, a fanfare-like anticipatory cadenza as the bridge between the second and third movements, and brilliant outburst in the finale.

### **Sinfonia**

LUCIANO BERIO

Born October 24, 1925, Oneglia, Italy

Died May 27, 2003, Rome

The New York Philharmonic, which had been founded in 1842 is the oldest symphony orchestra in the United States, and for its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary the Philharmonic commissioned a new work from Luciano Berio. Berio, then 43 and teaching at Juilliard, was known largely as the composer of electronic music, vocal music and virtuoso pieces for solo performers. Now he found himself faced with composing a large-scale work for a major orchestra. It was an invigorating challenge, and it came at a tumultuous moment: 1968 was a violent, unsettling year—it saw the Vietnam War and the protests against it at their most intense, the assassinations of both Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the student uprising in Paris, the riots at the Democratic convention in Chicago, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The times seemed to call the established order into doubt, and in his new work Berio consciously rethought classical form. He titled the piece *Sinfonia*, which is normal enough (*sinfonia* is Italian for “symphony”), but he stressed that this was not the classical symphony of Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms. Instead, he invoked the literal meaning of *sinfonia*, which comes from the Greek *symphonia*: “a grand playing-together.” To the full resources of the large modern symphony orchestra, Berio added an important role for eight amplified vocal soloists, and he wrote those parts specifically for the Swingle Singers, a vocal ensemble that had made its reputation “vocalizing” instrumental works by Bach and other composers.

Berio composed *Sinfonia* across the span of 1968 and conducted the premiere with the Swingle Singers and New York Philharmonic on October 10 of that year. The work was warmly

received by audiences and critics in New York, but Berio was not entirely satisfied, and the following year he composed another movement, which became the finale. *Sinfonia*, which Berio dedicated to Leonard Bernstein, has become one of the classics of twentieth-century music—it is Berio's most famous work, and it has been frequently performed and recorded.

Listeners encountering *Sinfonia* for the first time may find it useful to approach the music through two different paths. The first is the conception of fragmentation. Much of the *Sinfonia* is made up of fragments, both of the spoken word and of music by other composers. The technique of setting these fragments against each other is central to work, which deals not just in fragmentation but in the effort to find order amidst that splintering of language and music. The second path is the metaphor of water, particularly of water in motion. Berio compared the technique of the third movement to a continuously-flowing river that sometimes drops out of sight, only to return, still flowing. The metaphor of moving water might be applied with some justice to all of *Sinfonia*: the music flows, its myriad fragments jostle against each other and re-emerge, and by the end a sort of order is achieved.

The *Sinfonia* is in five movements that span about half an hour, and it calls for a huge orchestra, one that includes full wind, brass, and string sections, as well as harpsichord, piano, electric organ, and two saxophones. Berio divides the violins into three sections, with the third violins positioned behind the firsts and seconds. The eight vocal soloists, each of whom is miked individually, are seated in a semi-circle immediately in front of the conductor.

The first movement presents a series of fragments from the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' 1964 study *La cru et le cuit* ("The Raw and the Cooked"), particularly entries that speak of Brazilian myths about the creation of water. The second movement, titled *O King*, may be understood as a tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been assassinated in April 1968. The vocalists exchange bits of sound that make up King's name until these fragments finally anneal in a complete statement of his name.

Longest of the movements in *Sinfonia*, the third has become its most famous and perhaps the movement that best encapsulates Berio's technique in this music. Here Berio uses the third movement, the scherzo, of Mahler's "*Resurrection*" *Symphony* as a structuring element: Mahler's music flows throughout this movement, sometimes disappearing altogether, only to reappear moments later. Over Mahler's music, which originally set an ironic song about St. Anthony's sermon to the fishes, Berio lays down a cascade of fragmentary quotations. The vocal

fragments are from Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel *The Unnamable* about an armless and legless man who lives in a jar, completely cut off from life. The musical fragments, however, are from the entire range of Western art music: listeners will make out quotations from *La Mer*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *The Rite of Spring*, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, Bach, Berlioz, Ravel, Hindemith, Schoenberg, Webern, and many others. Berio integrates all these quotations, both verbal and musical, within the framework of Mahler's great (and slightly demonic) movement.

The fourth movement opens with another recall of the "*Resurrection*" *Symphony*, this time of its fourth movement, "O Röschen Rot," which finds mankind in direst need. The shortest movement in *Sinfonia*, it recalls verbal fragments heard earlier.

The fifth movement is the one Berio added after conducting the premiere of *Sinfonia* in its four-movement version in 1968. Of this movement Berio said: "The first four parts of *Sinfonia* are obviously different one from the other. The task of the fifth and last movement is to delete these differences and bring to light and develop the latent unity of the preceding four parts. In fact the development that began in the first part reaches its conclusion here, and it is here that other parts of the work flow together, either as fragments (third and fourth parts) or as a whole (the second)."

Listeners may not immediately perceive the unity Berio speaks of, and he knew that audiences would neither comprehend nor grasp all the quotations on a first hearing of *Sinfonia* (or even after many hearings). Berio said that he hoped that a listener's experience would be one of "not quite hearing" all that he had written. Faced with writing a large-scale work for full symphony orchestra at a tumultuous moment, Berio turned to both the past and the present for his sources and made *Sinfonia* the vehicle by which he could simultaneously evoke and question the ideas and the great symphonic tradition of Western civilization.