

Steven Schick, Music Director
David Chase, Choral Director

Mandeville Auditorium
Saturday, November 1, 2008, 8 P.M.
Sunday, November 2, 2008, 3 P.M.

SMETANA **Vltava (The Moldau)**

TAKEMITSU **From me flows what you call Time**

Introduction
Entrance of the Soloists
A Breath of Air
Premonition
Plateau
Curved Horizon
The Wind Blows
Premonition
Mirage
Waving Wind Horse
The Promised Land
Life's Joys and Sorrows
A Prayer

INTERMISSION

BRAHMS **Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Opus 73**

Allegro non troppo
Adagio non troppo
Allegretto grazioso (Quasi Andantino)
Allegro con spirito

Vltava (The Moldau)

BEDRICH SMETANA

Born March 2, 1824, Litomyšl, Bohemia

Died May 12, 1884, Prague

Two quite different forces combined to help create Smetana's *Moldau*, one of the most popular orchestral works ever written. The first of these was Smetana's own intense Czech nationalism. After three hundred years of German domination, Smetana and his fellow Czechs longed for their own homeland, an independent nation with its own language, customs, and heritage. That longing fired Smetana's music, just as it would later shape the music of his countrymen Dvořák and Janáček. The other force was the music of Franz Liszt. Smetana was a friend of Liszt, and he particularly admired the Hungarian composer's symphonic poems, brief orchestral works that set out to tell a tale in music. Smetana tried his hand at several symphonic poems based on literary topics (Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Schiller's *Wallenstein*, and others), but it was not until he turned to his own Czech heritage that the form came to memorable life for him. Between 1872 and 1879, when he was in his sixties, Smetana composed a cycle of six symphonic poems on Czech subjects—its landscape, heroic past, and legends—and collected them under the title *Má Vlast*: "My Fatherland."

This was a miserable time for Smetana personally. He had fallen into his horrifying final illness and found himself assailed by buzzing in his ears, skin rashes, disorientation, throat and ulcer problems, and—devastating to a composer—deafness. In the fall of 1874, while working on *The Moldau* (which would be the second of the symphonic poems that make up *Má Vlast*), Smetana went completely deaf in his right ear and asked to be removed from his position as director of the Prague Provisional Theatre. His condition did not improve, and he gradually sank into complete deafness and insanity, dying in poverty ten years later. Yet there is not a trace of what must have been personal agony in *Má Vlast*, which rings with a pride in his Czech identity. Smetana pressed on in the face of increasing deafness and disorientation to complete *The Moldau* on November 18, 1874, and the first performance took place in Prague on April 4, 1876.

Some of the movements of *Má Vlast* focus on historical figures or settings, but *The Moldau* is a portrait of the great river that begins in the Bohemian forests southwest of Prague, runs north through that city, and eventually joins the Elbe and flows to the sea at Hamburg. The Czech name for this river is the Vltava (pronounced as three even syllables: “Vol-ta-vah”), and the irony of course is that a piece of music written expressly to help encourage the cause of Czech independence from Germany is best known under the German name for that river, Moldau.

Smetana left a detailed program note that explains what each of the eight sections of *The Moldau* depicts, and these events can be easily followed. Legend has it that the Moldau begins deep in the forest as two rivulets—one cold, one warm—flow together to form the headwaters of the mighty river. *The Moldau* opens with these two delicate rivulets (the flute is the cold source, the clarinet the warm), which gradually intertwine and begin to flow. Smetana marks this beginning *lusingando*, an Italian term that does not translate easily into English: “charming, coaxing”—the literal translation—catches only some of what Smetana wants from this delicate beginning. The rivulets combine, and now Smetana gives us the theme of the river itself, a great soaring melody in E minor for the violins that will become the backbone of this music. As the river flows toward Prague, it passes different scenes, and Smetana describes these in detail: a hunt in the woods, with the sound of hunting horns ringing out, is followed by a peasant wedding with its charming folk-dance. The opening rivulets return to introduce a quiet episode as nymphs play on the moonlit waters of the Moldau; muted strings cast a mist over the water, and Smetana makes another nod to his homeland’s past when he notes that in the water “many fortresses and castles are reflected as witnesses to the past glories of knighthood and the vanished warlike fame of bygone ages”—these heroic echoes are heard as distant fanfares for the horns. Next, the river smashes its way through the St. John’s Rapids and proceeds grandly out on the plain toward Prague, with the Moldau theme now transformed into E major. The music reaches a climax as the river flows past Vyšehrad, the site of a fortress established in the ninth century and regarded as the birthplace of Prague. Its heroic journey complete, the river flows on, and it is worth quoting Smetana on the ending: “Welcomed by the time-honored fortress, Vyšehrad, it sweeps past the quais and under the bridges of the city, to vanish in the dim distance where the poet’s gaze can no longer follow.”

From me flows what you call Time

TORU TAKEMITSU

Born October 8, 1930, Tokyo

Died February 20, 1996, Tokyo

From me flows what you call Time, a concerto for five percussionists and orchestra, was commissioned by Carnegie Hall for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the percussion ensemble NEXUS to mark the hundredth anniversary of the opening of that hall. The Boston Symphony and NEXUS gave the premiere in Carnegie Hall on October 19, 1990 (local audiences may recall that in March of that same year, NEXUS had appeared with the La Jolla Symphony in works by Cowell and Cahn). In his program note at the time of the premiere, Takemitsu said that he “suddenly imagined 100 years of time flowing through this man-made space, so full of special meaning, called Carnegie Hall. It was as if I could hear the Hall murmuring from the numberless cracks between the layers of those years, ‘From me flows what you call Time.’ Thus, the me in the title is meant to be ‘Carnegie Hall,’ not the composer.”

But if the notion of one hundred years was important to the creation of this music, a different number gave it shape. The number five dominates this music—it was written for five soloists, the principal theme has five notes, that theme spans a perfect fifth, and so on. Takemitsu noted an even more important influence of the number five, and it is worth quoting him at length:

As soon as I had chosen the number five as the principal motif of the work, I immediately recalled the Tibetan “Wind Horse” (*rlungria*). The “Wind Horse” is a custom observed by the highland nomads of Tibet when they migrate in search of new land. Used like divination during a ceremony, it consists of five cloth streamers, each a different color, strung up on a rope, and allowed to wave in the wind. Blown by the seasonal winds, the myriad wind-horses then point out the way the nomads must take to find the location of their new life.

The five colors of the cloth streamers—white, blue, red, yellow, green—have separate meanings and are the same as the colors emitted by the five Buddhas who sit at the center of a mandala. Blue is the color of water, red of fire, yellow of the earth, green of the wind, and white, as the color created by the other four, signifies the sky, the air, the heavens, and finally “nothingness.”

Though this is a concerto, audiences should not look for the brilliance and extroversion

that are normally part of concerto form. The orchestra is divided in unusual ways, with the woodwinds set at a distance behind the violins, the brass set at a distance behind the lower strings; the five soloists are themselves separated and stationed at various points within the orchestra. Takemitsu has called this “an orchestral work in which the orchestra, like nature, surrounds us limitlessly, and out of that limitlessness the soloists materialize in limited forms such as earth, wind, water, and fire, then once again dissolve into limitless nature.”

That last note is important because it points to the fact that while this music plays out over a thirty-minute span, it really exists outside time. Western audiences have almost taken for granted that music should be teleological, or end-oriented—we conceive of music as based on conflict and resolution. Takemitsu, however, did not, and in an oft-quoted remark he has compared his music to the experience of walking through a Japanese garden: there is no direct path and no end, and instead one is free to wander, to pause, and to experience without the need to be getting someplace.

Takemitsu has said that “the ruling emotion” of *From me flows what you call Time* is “prayer,” and he has divided the work into thirteen brief sections, which are listed on the program page. Listeners should use these titles only as a general guide. This is not descriptive music, nor is there a dramatic progression across the span of these movements. This is music to be enjoyed at the moment it is happening—and for its connection to something outside time.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Opus 73

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born May 7, 1833, Hamburg

Died April 3, 1897, Vienna.

Brahms was haunted by the example of Beethoven’s nine symphonies. “You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us,” Brahms remarked to the conductor Hermann Levi, and he worked on his own *First Symphony* for nearly twenty years before he was ready to take it before audiences. The premiere in November 1876 was a success, and Brahms himself conducted the new work throughout Europe during the winter concert season. With the stress of that tour behind him, he spent the summer of 1877 in the tiny town of Pörtschach on the Wörthersee in southern Austria, and there he began another symphony. This one went quickly. To Clara Schumann he wrote, “So many melodies fly about that one must be careful not to tread on them.” Brahms’ *First Symphony* may have taken two

decades, but his *Second* was done in four months, and its premiere in Vienna on December 30, 1877, under Hans Richter was a triumph.

While the *Second Symphony* is quite different from the turbulent *First*, this music is not all pastoral sunlight. The first two movements in particular are marked by a seriousness of purpose and a breadth of expression. Brahms' friend Theodor Billroth spoke of only one side of the *Second Symphony* when he said: "It is all rippling streams, blue sky, sunshine and cool green shadows. How beautiful it must be at Pörschach!" For all the sunshine in this symphony, the first two movements explore some of those shadows in depth.

The hand of a master is everywhere evident in the *Second Symphony*, particularly in Brahms' ingenious use of the simple three-note sequence (D-C#-D) heard in the cellos and basses in the first measure. This figure recurs hundreds of times throughout the *Second Symphony*, giving the music unusual thematic and expressive unity. The constant repetition of so simple a figure might become monotonous or obsessive in the hands of a lesser composer, and it is a mark of Brahms' skill that he uses this figure in so many ways. It gives shape to his themes, serves as both harmonic underpinning and blazing motor-rhythm, is by turns whispered softly and shouted at full-blast. Once aware of this figure, a listener can only marvel at Brahms' fertile use of what seems such unpromising material.

The *Allegro non troppo* opens with this figure, and a rich array of themes quickly follows: a horn call, a flowing violin melody (derived from the opening three-note motto), a surging song for lower strings (Brahms characteristically sets the cellos above the violas here), and a dramatic idea built on the violins' octave leaps. This wealth of thematic material develops over a very long span (the only longer movement in a Brahms symphony is the massive finale of the *First*) before the movement comes to a relaxed close.

The expressive *Adagio non troppo* opens with the cellos' somber melody; while this is in B major, so dark is Brahms' treatment that the movement almost seems to be in a minor key. The center section, with its floating, halting melody for woodwinds, brings relief, but the tone remains serious throughout this movement, which comes to a quiet conclusion only after an eruption in its closing moments.

After two such powerful movements, the final two bring welcome release. The charming third movement comes as a complete surprise. Instead of the mighty scherzo one expects, Brahms offers an almost playful movement in rondo form. The oboe's opening melody (Brahms

marks it *grazioso*: “graceful”) leads to two contrasting sections, both introduced by strings and both marked *Presto*. Brahms’ rhythms and accents here are imaginative and complex: phrases are tossed easily between instrumental families and complicated rhythms are made to mesh smoothly as one section gives way to the next. This movement so charmed the audience at the symphony’s premiere that it had to be repeated.

The *Allegro con spirito* opens quietly and quickly—so quickly that one may not recognize that its first three notes are exactly the same three notes that began the symphony. In sonata-form, the finale features a broad second subject that swings along easily in the violins. Full of energy and explosive outbursts, this movement drives to a mighty conclusion. We do not usually think of Brahms as a composer much concerned with orchestral color, but the writing for brass in the closing measures of this symphony is thrilling, no matter how often one has heard it.