

PROGRAM NOTE by ERIC BROMBERGER

Overture to *Beatrice and Benedict*

HECTOR BERLIOZ

Born December 11, 1803, La Côte-St. André, Grenoble

Died March 8, 1869, Paris

On the night of September 11, 1827, a fiery young French composer named Hector Berlioz—then not quite 24—attended a performance of *Hamlet* in Paris. He came out of the theater a changed man, smitten by the beauty of Harriett Smithson, the actress who played Ophelia, and moved by the language and power of Shakespeare’s drama. Berlioz’s life was transformed that evening. He vowed on the spot to marry Harriett, and six years later he did. Their union would prove unhappy, but Berlioz’s infatuation with Shakespeare would last a lifetime and would lead him to compose a number of works inspired by Shakespeare’s plays. These include his “dramatic symphony” *Romeo and Juliet*, an overture to *King Lear*, and various short works inspired by *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. And Shakespeare would be the inspiration for Berlioz’s final opera.

During the 1850s Berlioz toured as a guest conductor of his own works, and his concerts in Baden-Baden were particularly successful. Encouraged by that success, Edouard Bénézet, the owner of the casino and theater in Baden-Baden, commissioned an opera from Berlioz for that theater. Berlioz was just coming off the overpowering effort that had gone into composing and producing *Les Troyens*, and now he was ready for something lighter. For the final time in his career, he turned to Shakespeare, in this case *Much Ado about Nothing*. Berlioz drew up his own libretto, keeping many lines from Shakespeare but also introducing characters and scenes of his own devising. The result was what Berlioz called “an opéra comique” in two acts. He took the focus off the potentially tragic relationship between Claudio and Hero, choosing instead to enjoy the battle of the sexes as exemplified by Beatrice and Benedick: that couple may express their disdain for marriage in general and for each other in particular, but they end up married at the happy conclusion of Shakespeare’s play. First produced at Baden-Baden on August 9, 1862, *Beatrice and Benedict* enjoyed a successful premiere and was performed several times over the following seasons. Its success was one of the few pleasures of Berlioz’s unhappy final years—he died just a few years later, in 1869.

Beatrice and Benedict is seldom staged today—its vast amount of spoken dialogue makes it difficult for opera companies—but Berlioz’s lively overture lives on in the concert hall. That overture bursts to life on its skittering, playful main theme, which is tossed easily between strings and woodwinds. Berlioz reins in this energy for the solemn second theme-group, marked *Andante un poco sostenuto*. The rest of the overture treats these two themes, but there is never much of what might be called development in the textbook sense of that term. Instead, Berlioz simply alternates his themes, embellishes them as they go, and finally drives matters to a grand close on a ringing G-major chord for the whole orchestra. It is a sparkling introduction to the tale of love gone wrong—and love gone right—that will follow.

Verklaerte Nacht, Opus 4

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

Born September 13, 1874, Vienna

Died July 13, 1951, Los Angeles

Verklaerte Nacht was one of Schoenberg’s first successes, and it remains his most popular work. He wrote this thirty-minute piece for string sextet (string quartet plus extra viola and cello) in the final months of 1899, when he was 25, but could not get it performed. When he submitted it for performance to the Tonkünstlerverein, Vienna’s chamber music society, the judges rejected it because the score contained a chord they could not find in their harmony textbooks. Referring to its unusual tonalities, one of the judges made a now-famous crack, saying that *Verklaerte Nacht* sounded “as if someone had taken the score of *Tristan* when the ink was still wet and smudged it over.”

Verklaerte Nacht was finally performed in 1903 in Vienna by the Rosé Quartet. The leader of that quartet, Arnold Rosé, was Mahler’s brother-in-law, and Mahler met Schoenberg at rehearsals for *Verklaerte Nacht* and became his champion, though he confessed that some of Schoenberg’s music was beyond him. The first performance brought howls from conservatives, but this music made its way quickly into the repertory. In 1917 Schoenberg arranged *Verklaerte Nacht* for string orchestra, and he revised this version in 1943; at this concert, the music is heard in Schoenberg’s final version for string orchestra.

Verklaerte Nacht—the title translates *Transfigured Night*—is based on a poem of the same name by Richard Dehmel (1863-1920), a German lyric poet. The subject of Dehmel’s poem may have been as difficult for early Viennese audiences as Schoenberg’s music. It can be

summarized briefly: a man and a woman walk together through dark woods, with only the moon shining down through the black branches above their heads. The woman confesses that she is pregnant, but by another man—her search for happiness led her to seek fulfillment in physical pleasure. Now she finds that nature has taken vengeance on her. The man speaks, and—instead of denouncing her—he accepts her and the child as his own: their love for each other will surround and protect them. The man and woman embrace, then continue their walk through the dark woods. But the night has now been transfigured, or transformed, by their love. The first line of Dehmel's poem—"Two people walk through bleak, cold woods"—is transformed in the last line: "Two people walk through exalted, shining night."

Musically, Schoenberg's *Verklaerte Nacht* can be understood as a tone poem depicting the events of Dehmel's poem, and it falls into five sections: *Introduction*, *Woman's Confession*, *Man's Forgiveness*, *Love Duet*, and *Apotheosis*. *Verklaerte Nacht* may look forward to the music of the twentieth century, but its roots are firmly in the nineteenth: the influences are Brahms (in the lush, dramatic sound), Wagner (in the evolving harmonies), and Richard Strauss (whose tone poems served as models). The music is dark and dramatic, and Schoenberg drives it to several intense climaxes. Particularly interesting are the harmonies: this music begins in dark D minor and evolves through troubled and uncertain tonalities to the bright D major of the *Man's Forgiveness* and the concluding walk through the transfigured night.

The Lovers, Opus 43

SAMUEL BARBER

Born March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died January 23, 1981, New York City

The arc of Samuel Barber's career was a strange one, and its final chapters were unhappy. Success had come early. While Barber was still in his twenties, a program of his music was broadcast nationally, Toscanini premiered his *Adagio for Strings*, and his *First Symphony* was the first work by an American composer ever performed at the Salzburg Festival. Barber's music was championed by such performers as Koussevitzky, Horowitz, and Ormandy, and in the years around his fiftieth birthday Barber was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes: for his opera *Vanessa* in 1958 and for his *Piano Concerto* in 1962. Perhaps it was only natural that when the new Metropolitan Opera House opened in Lincoln Center in the fall of 1966, it was Barber who was commissioned to compose an opera for its gala opening night. But what should

have been the crowning moment of a career instead became a disaster. Barber conceived *Antony and Cleopatra* as a subtle story of age and accommodation, but stage designer Franco Zeffereilli saw it as the occasion for a gaudy production full of live animals and spectacular stage effects. The reviews were savage, and the badly-stung Barber retreated to Italy, where he spent the next several years. His confidence shaken by his experience with the opera and by a sense that his music was badly out of fashion, Barber's productivity fell off sharply during the remaining fifteen years of his life, and under the additional burden of depression, creative stasis, and illness, he published only eight more works during those years, most of them songs or small-scaled compositions. But there *was* one major work from those years. *The Lovers*—scored for baritone soloist, chorus, and large orchestra and spanning well over half an hour—is Barber at his best, and it is almost unknown.

The original impetus for *The Lovers* came when the Girard Bank of Philadelphia commissioned a work from Barber, who had grown up in the Philadelphia area and attended the Curtis Institute there. The composer had long wanted to set the work of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and now he prepared his own text, incorporating ten poems from Neruda's *Twenty Poems of Love and a Song of Despair*. Barber based his text on English translations of Neruda's poetry and noted that he had "arranged them in a kind of scenario so that the love affair has a direction." More specifically, Barber's sequence tells the story of a failed love affair. Barber completed the score for *The Lovers* in May 1971, and it was premiered the following September by baritone Tom Krause and the Philadelphia Orchestra and Temple University Chorus under the direction of Eugene Ormandy.

Barber was a very dignified man—refined and restrained—and so the explicit imagery and language of Neruda's love poems caught early audiences by surprise. Barber's biographer Barbara Heyman tells the amusing story of what happened when the composer read the text of *The Lovers* to the conservative board members of the Philadelphia bank that had commissioned it. Sensing a hostile reception, Barber became more and more nervous as he read, and when he finished one of the board members offered a chillingly neutral response: "Very interesting, Mr. Barber." "My God! Don't you have love affairs in Philadelphia?" burst out Barber, and the bank official replied: "That's about all we have left." The premiere, however, was warmly received, and—five years after the painful experience of *Antony and Cleopatra*—Barber was able to enjoy the success of what would be his final large-scale work.

Barber opens *The Lovers* with an orchestral *Prelude* that flows without pause into the sequence of nine vocal movements. Some of these are for full chorus, one is for men alone, one for women alone, several are for baritone alone. Barber uses the *Prelude* to introduce two musical ideas that will return throughout. *The Lovers* opens with a seminal three-note figure, first announced gently by the solo flute (Barber based this figure on a bird-call he heard at his home in Mount Kisco, New York), and moments later the violins, set very high, sing a soft falling phrase that (despite its quiet dynamic) Barber marks *appassionato*. These two ideas will shape much of the music that follows.

The progression of the Neruda poems that Barber selected reflects the decay of a love affair. The first several movements are full of erotic pleasures, but gradually a feeling of separation and alienation creeps in, sharpened at moments by jealousy. Finally the lovers have separated, and the final movements trace the poet's feelings of loss as his memories proceed into the "cemetery of kisses." The movements do not need to be described individually—Barber's settings are exceptionally clear, and while he calls for a very large orchestra, he often employs just a handful of instruments (some of them exotic: bongos, alto flute). The writing for chorus is particularly beautiful, as the erotic energy of the opening movements gradually gives way to nostalgia and pain, and Barber can project these moods with a silken softness. The music—and the love affair—fade away in the last movement, and *The Lovers* slips into silence on the final word "forsaken" and the orchestra's eerie concluding chord.

Barber was very pleased with *The Lovers*, and one of the regrets of his last years was that it was not recorded (the only recording so far was made in 1991, ten years after his death). *The Lovers* remains almost unknown. The demands of the score—a first-rate baritone soloist, a large and capable chorus, and a big orchestra—have meant that few conductors have been willing to devote those resources to take a chance on a piece audiences don't know. Which is too bad. This is remarkable music, heartfelt and often stinging beautiful, and Barber's last major work deserves a much wider audience.