Program Notes for January 22, 2017

Gioachino Rossini
Overture to *La gazza ladra* (*The Thieving Magpie*)

Gioachino Rossini was born in Pesaro, Italy in 1792 and died in Paris in 1868. He composed his opera La gazza ladra *in 1817 to a libretto by Giovanni Gherardini after* La pie voleuse *by JMT Badouin d'Aubigny and Louis-Charles Caigniez; it was first performed at La Scala in Milan the same year. The Overture is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings.*

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Rossini was 25 when he wrote this opera; he was at the height of his powers and had already achieved recognition for having "reformed" opera nearly single-handedly. Of his quick rise, Rossini quipped, "I woke up one morning and found myself famous." In the next few years he composed many more operas, over forty in all. Then, having become the most famous opera composer in the world—and making a fortune in the process—he abruptly laid down his pen and composed no more. He had said all he wanted to say.

Rossini is best known for his comic masterpieces, but while *La gazza ladra* has many comedic moments the focus of the opera is serious indeed. The plot has its basis in what appears to be a true story: a French maid was once accused of stealing a silver spoon, an offense at that time carrying the death penalty. Only after she was convicted and executed was it discovered that the spoon had been "stolen" by a magpie who had hid it in its nest. This tale was known all over Europe, and it led to a widespread reconsideration of theft as a capital crime. In Rossini's opera the magpie's guilt is discovered before the girl is executed—happy endings being more popular—but not before much harrowing drama (and dramatic music) takes the stage.

Rossini had a certain nonchalance about overtures, frequently composing them at the very last minute and not above "recycling" them from one opera to the next. But with *La gazza ladra* he unleashed a real corker, full of fire and (unusual for Rossini) music taken from the opera itself. Rossini gives us a quasi-sonata form with a drum roll and military march for an introduction. The first of the major themes—the scintillating minor key passage in the strings—will be heard later as the accompaniment figure to the servant girl's lament upon being imprisoned. The music continues with a succession of tunes from the opera, including a delightfully playful section for the woodwinds and some unusual—and splendid—writing for the trombones. Rossini caps it all off with a presto of high excitement and orchestral pizzazz. Simply brilliant.

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Robert Schumann
Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61

Robert Schumann was born in Zwickau, Germany in 1810 and died at Endenich, Germany in 1856. He completed this symphony in 1846, and it was first performed by the Gewandhaus Orchestra under the baton of Felix Mendelssohn the same year. The score calls for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings.

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By the time Schumann composed his Symphony No. 2 (it was actually the third one he wrote), he had suffered many of his nervous breakdowns, episodes full of memory lapses, phobias, and suicidal fantasies. He composed the work during his convalescence following the most recent of these. He sketched the work very quickly, but took quite a long time to finish it. He may have seen it as a way to pull himself out of his melancholia, a kind of musical struggle to regain himself. "I began to feel more myself when I wrote the last movement," he wrote, "and was certainly much better when I finished the whole work. All the same, it reminds me of dark days."

The dichotomy between Schumann's personal demons and the strong, lively, and vigorous music he composed in his Second Symphony is as great as can be imagined. The slow (and quite lengthy) introduction to the first movement begins with a quiet call to attention in the trumpets. Thereafter it ranges far and wide, never visiting a theme or tonal center long enough to call it home. The *Allegro* that follows is full of off-kilter rhythms—it is very Brahmsian in this way—and relentlessly vigorous. The exposition is surprisingly short, while the development is quite extended. The similarly expansive coda reprises the introduction's trumpet call.

The second movement is a *scherzo* with two trios, opening with a famously scurrying string figure. (Famous among violinists, at least, whose duty is to work through its difficulties.) Those with an ear for such things might notice in the second trio a cleverly embedded motto on Bach's initials (B-A-C-H, or B-flat, A, C, B-natural in German parlance). Schumann had been studying Bach, which accounts for both this and the increased level of polyphony in the symphony as a whole.

The third movement's song-like *Adagio* is calm, poignant, and melancholic. Schumann seems to begin a fugue, of all things, in the middle of the movement, but drops it before it takes hold. A true symphonic *adagio* was fairly rare for Schumann; this one swells with affecting beauty.

The Finale is an exuberant finish to the whole. Its shape is unusual; Schumann seldom wrote music to fit a form, he created a form to suit the music. A variation of the *Adagio*'s theme gets prominent treatment, and the fanfare that opened the first movement returns at the close. The energy and sense of "rightness" in this piece conceal a treasure-trove of compositional details that are far too numerous to mention but which contribute mightily to both.

After a disastrous first performance under the baton of Felix Mendelssohn (disastrous largely due to the excessive length of the program—the audience simply had no energy left for it), Schumann's Second was almost universally considered to be a great work in the nineteenth century. In modern times it has been neglected, sadly, for no reason that is apparent. It holds many beauties, and repays repeated listening. It also provokes a certain fascination in how a man who could slip so easily between madness and sanity could also have written something as lucid as this.

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Wolfgang Amadè Mozart
Symphony No. 6 in F major, K. 43

Wolfgang Amadè Mozart (he never used "Amadeus" except when making a joke) was born in Salzburg, Austria in 1756 and died in Vienna in 1791. He composed this work in 1767, and it was first performed the same year in Brno, Moravia by the Mozart family and local musicians. The score calls for 2 flutes, 2 oboes 2 horns, and strings.

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In the present day, when the terms "gifted" and "genius" are awarded so carelessly as to deprive them of their utility, it is refreshing to revitalize them by considering Mozart. He was the greatest pianist of his day; he had perfect pitch; his phenomenal memory allowed him to compose complete works in his head, committing them to paper only when finished. If he heard a piece or a cadenza in concert, he could go home and write it out note for note. These were some of the *gifts*—the *genius* that makes his music so consequential to this day is unexplainable.

Mozart was the prototypical child prodigy. He was picking out melodies at the keyboard at age three; by age five he was already an accomplished player. He began composing at six. His father, Leopold (a famous musician himself), knew what his son was; he taught him, developed him, and exploited him. Leopold took young Wolfgang and his sister Nannerl (also a fine musician) on grueling tours of Europe, performing everywhere Leopold might find a future post for his son or a generous donation. The children were required to perform all manner of musical tricks such as playing blindfolded or with a cloth covering the keys. Mozart's youth was spent, essentially, as a miniature adult; some say that in later years he lived out the childhood he never had.

Mozart was on the road again when he completed his Sixth Symphony, this time in Vienna, although he may have begun the piece in Salzburg. It is vigorous and sturdy, understandably a bit long on ideas and short on development. Yet there are plenty of hints of the Mozart-to-come. The opening theme of the first movement already has his characteristic two sides: the first martial and the second much gentler. And the deft minor-key development is a treat. Mozart arranged the serene *Andante* from a duet composed for his opera *Apollo et Hyacinthus*, K. 38. (Yes; he'd already written an opera, and yes, he already had enough material to be recycling it.) The third movement is a Minuet and Trio, possibly his first. The Finale is lighthearted, and you can hear Mozart having a great deal of fun with his endless extensions and closing melodies. It all seems fairly unremarkable for Mozart—until you come to find out that the composer was only eleven years old at the time.

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William Kraft

A Kennedy Portrait

William Kraft was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1923. He composed this work in 1988 on a commission from Benjamin Zander for the Boston Philharmonic, who premiered the work in Boston the same year. The score calls for narrator, 3 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, celeste, harp, and strings.

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William Kraft was born in Chicago to Ukrainian parents who insisted on music lessons for their children. Kraft began piano lessons at age five but, as he says, it was with "an alarm clock on the piano." At fifteen his sister had him listen to a live Benny Goodman broadcast: "It blew my mind," he said, "the first great epiphany." After hearing drummer Jo Jones with the Basie band he switched to the drums, and his new course was set.

Kraft would become an outstanding percussionist, spending 25 years with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the last 17 as principal timpanist. He had taken his degrees from Columbia University and studied composition there. In his maturity he became well known as a composer, teacher, conductor, and percussion soloist. His awards, commissions, and other honors would fill a small book.

Kraft writes the following about *A Kennedy Portrait*: "When Ben Zander contacted me about the possibility of my composing a musical portrait of John F. Kennedy, I was very excited by the idea, since Kennedy had such a profound effect on me, as he did on so many others. The quotations used in this piece fall into four loosely defined areas, each separated by an orchestral interlude:

I. Brief introductory quotes expressing Kennedy's vision of America—its position and relationship to humanity.

II. Kennedy's belief in the arts—their significance and relevance to the nation's well-being; also, the effect of the arts on America's place in history.

III. Social justice and Kennedy's view of liberty and democracy.

IV. Brief concluding remarks taken from the speech Kennedy was to deliver November 22, 1963.

"The words that introduce each area are my own, the opening stemming from something Ben Zander had said at our initial meeting.

"Musically, it was impossible for me to ignore Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, nor would I necessarily want to, for it is a wonderfully effective work that I have long loved and respected and one which has such a fine 'American' feel to it."

As it happens, two intervals that characterize Copland's "Americana" music—the major second and perfect fifth—were also characteristic of Kraft's. In some instances Kraft uses the major second to suggest "We Shall Overcome," while at others it is to invoke Mahler's Ninth Symphony—a work, Kraft says, "contemplates the evanescence of earthly life."

Kraft concludes: "To me, and of course to many others, the profoundly tragic trilogy of assassinations—John and Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—are tantamount to the assassination of the nation, for no one has more clearly epitomized the necessary concern for humanity with the courage and vision to implement that concern regardless of the potential consequences. If I have done anything to breathe new life into the words, thoughts, and image of John F. Kennedy, I am grateful."

—Mark Rohr
Questions or comments?
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