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DuPage Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

Alan Hovhaness
Symphony No. 2, Op. 132 (*Mysterious Mountain*)

This American composer, of Scottish and Armenian descent was born Alan Vaness Chakmakjian. His daughter has written that "my father's name at the time of my birth was 'Hovaness,' pronounced with accent on the first syllable. His original name was 'Chakmakjian,' but in the 1930s he wanted to get rid of the Armenian connection and so changed his name to an Americanized version of his middle name. Some years later, deciding to reestablish his Armenian ties, he changed the spelling to 'Hovhaness,' accent on the second syllable...."

This story symbolizes the composer's efforts to find his identity, his voice, as a musician. After compositional studies with Frank Converse at the New England Conservatory and Bohuslav Martinů at Tanglewood, he learned about Indian music from émigrés in Boston. He later developed interests in the Armenian music of his family background, and in the 1950s, he looked at music of the Far East, especially Japanese (Gagaku) and Korean (Ah-Ak) court music.

Hovhaness was a very prolific composer. His Second Symphony is one of 67 numbered symphonies (with manuscripts suggesting a real over 70). The work was premiered by Leopold Stokowski at his debut appearance with the Houston Symphony in 1955, and recorded in 1958 by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The title *Mysterious Mountain* was added later—the symphony does not depict a specific place, and listeners often found non-mountain images come to mind while hearing the music. Claudia Cassidy wrote in the Chicago *Tribune* that the work reminded her of the Alhambra because of its 'rich textures, its formalized designs, its serenity of scrolls and arabesques, its sudden sounds—harp sounds—of water spilling with a glint of the metallic into a hidden pool." Of this symphony, Hovhaness wrote, "Mountains are symbolic meeting places between the mundane and spiritual worlds. To some, the Mysterious Mountain may be the phantom peak, unmeasured, thought to be higher than Everest, as seen from great distances by filers in Tibet. To some, it may be the solitary mountain, the tower of strength over a countryside—Fujiyama, Ararat, Monadnock, Shasta, or Grand Teton."

Hovhaness has supplied the following guide to the music of his Second Symphony: "The first and least movements are hymn-like and lyrical, using irregular metrical forms. The first subject of the second movement, a double fugue, is developed in a slow vocal style. The rapid second subject is played by the strings, with its own counter-subject and with strict four-voice canonic episodes and triple counterpoint episode. In the last movement, a chant in 7/4 is played softly by muted horns and trombones. A giant wave in a 13-beat meter rises to a climax and recedes. A middle melody is sung by the oboes and clarinets in a quintuple beat. Muted violins return with the earlier chant, which is gradually given to the full orchestra."

P.I. Tchaikovsky
Concerto in D Major, Op. 35

Tchaikovsky did not have good luck with his best-known concerti. His First Piano Concerto (Op. 23) and the present work for violin have become not merely extremely popular and standard repertoire—one might state with confidence that virtually no pianist or violinist hoping for a solo career can avoid mastering them unless the performer plans to specialize in a particular time or composer. Yet this was not the situation when these works were new. That First Piano Concerto was shared by the composer with his friend and colleague Nicholas Rubinstein to gain the latter's insights into any technical issues the work might have had for a pianist (Tchaikovsky played the piano, but he wanted a professional pianist's opinion). What he got was an assault—yes, the piece was "unplayable" but moreover it had passages that were "commonplace and awkward" beyond repair, and as a whole, the work was "bad, trivial, vulgar."

Tchaikovsky was also accused of having lifted passages from other composers, and he was told that except for two or three pages, the work would be better off being destroyed. Tchaikovsky was avenged, however, because he removed Rubinstein as the dedicatee (replacing him with Hans von Bülow, who gave the world premiere (in Boston rather than in Moscow) and Rubinstein's name became infamously rather than famously associated with warhorse of the repertoire.

Something similar happened with the Violin Concerto. For some time, Tchaikovsky had been supported financially by a wealthy widow, one Nadezhda von Meck. He sent to her a copy of the final version of this work, and she who had been an unswerving supporter responded with a letter detailing its many faults. Tchaikovsky thanked her diplomatically for her thoughts and opined that he would not “give up the hope that in time the piece will give you greater pleasure.” He intended Leopold Auer to be the dedicatee and to offer the premiere, but Auer (who was no slouch—his pupils included Jascha Heifetz and Mischa Elman) pronounced the concerto “unplayable.” The premiere was given by Adolf Brodsky, after two years of practicing, in 1881 with the Vienna Philharmonic. The most important critic of the time in Central Europe was Vienna's Eduard Hanslick, who wrote of the premiere that

For a while, the Concerto moves soberly, musically, and not without spirit, but soon vulgarity gains the upper hand and it rules to the end of the first movement. The violin is no longer played, rather the violin is pulled, ripped, bruised [*gezaust, gerissen, gebläut*]. Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto brings us for the first time to the shocking idea if there cannot be music that stinks when heard.

The story is happier here than with the earlier Rubinstein situation. Though we are told that Tchaikovsky retained a copy of Hanslick's essay for some time and that it was a source of pain for the rest of his life, Auer at least came around. He learned the work, played it with success, and taught it to his students.

The first movement is not marked by the usual contrast between the two principal themes—both are lyric though the second has a somewhat plaintive quality from its sighing half-step gestures. The movement certainly contrasts these themes with fireworks for the soloist, including a wonderful but difficult cadenza.

Robert Schumann Symphony No. 1 in B-flat Major, Op. 38 (*Spring*)

Robert Schumann, the bicentennial of whose birth is noted this year, lived a life torn between his writing talents for words and for music. His father was a translator and bookseller, so young Robert grew up in love with literature—he was especially interested in the works of Jean Paul (the *nom de plume* of German author Johann Paul Friedrich Richter). But Robert also studied piano, flute, and cello in his childhood, and by 1822, he was composing music while simultaneously writing poems and essays.

His incipient life as a concert pianist was cut short by problems with the middle finger of his right hand, and he had to abandon a performing career in the early 1830s, but he continued to compose. Meanwhile, he had fallen in love with the daughter of his piano teacher, and only after more than a decade of great persuasive effort directed at her father was he able to marry her, the outstanding pianist Clara Wieck, in 1840. Their musical collaborations included a number of works written for her to use on her concert tours.

In 1834, Schumann combined his musical and literary interests by founding a journal for music criticism, *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, perhaps the most insightful and influential journal in music history. Schumann suffered from mental illness, which in part entailed his seeing himself as distinct personalities, whom he named; “Florestan,” “Eusebius,” and others contributed to the essays in the *Zeitschrift*. Through words attributed to these personalities, he gave generous blessing to a number of fellow composers, such as Schubert and Mendelssohn. For example, in the review of Chopin's Opus 2, Eusebius proclaimed to “Julius” and Florestan the famous assessment, “Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!” In 1844, he suffered an attack of depression, and thus began a long decline into madness. Shortly before his committal to an asylum, where he spent his final two years, he met and acclaimed the young Johannes Brahms.

Schumann's compositions tended to come in clusters as if once he got a genre or compositional format in his mind, he had to return to that repeatedly over a short time span. He emphasized choral works in 1843, for example, and 1842 was his "chamber music year."

For some time after his passing, his music suffered in various ways. Mahler and others re-orchestrated his symphonic works to "fix" them, for example. Even during life, he sometimes was dismissed as simply out of date. American pianist William Mason wrote, "Schumann's genius was so little appreciated that when he entered the store of Breitkopf and Härtel with a new manuscript under his arm, the clerks would nudge one another and laugh. One of them told me that they regarded him as a crank and a failure because his pieces remained on the shelf and were in the way."

As one would expect from a composer so steeped in literature and the written word, the inspiration for the *Spring* Symphony came from a poem on spring by Adolph Böttger, whose final couplet reads

*O wende, wende deinen Lauf,
—Im Tale blüht der Frühling auf!*

(O turn, o turn aside your path,
In valleys blooms the Spring aloft.)

The movements originally had titles that were discarded prior to publication but may be helpful nevertheless in understanding Schumann's vision:

- I. *Frühlingsbeginn* ("Beginning of Spring")
- II. *Abend* ("Evening")
- III. *Frohe Gespielen* ("Happy play")
- IV. *Voller Frühling* ("Spring Abundance")

The symphony seems to have come in a burst. The first draft of the symphony, in the form of a "continuity score" (melodies and bass lines), was done in four days in January 1841; the completed draft came in late February, and the work was premiered Leipzig, March 1841, conducted by Mendelssohn. The work was revised that summer and published later in 1841.

"Schumann's Symphony suffered not a little in the representation. The Symphony was new and strange in style, and extremely difficult. If parts were blurred and confused, if here and there passages were roughly rendered, if movements were unduly hurried or retarded, if flutes and oboes and violins sometimes returned a thin and feeble answer to the over-ponderous blasts of the trombones—still an imposing, although now and then obscured outline loomed before us of a grand, consistent, original, inspired whole." (*Dwight's Journal*, 22 January 1853, on the American premiere given by Boston's Musical Fund Society a week before.)