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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

True Classics

What makes a piece of music a *true classic*? Is there an identifying trait hidden to all but music scholars? Is a piece's simplicity or complexity a revealing factor? The century it was written in? The country, the style, the medium – do these have anything to contribute?

More than anything, I believe it has to do with the music's endurance. Over a hundred years after Dvořák and Brahms composed the pieces played on tonight's program – and two hundred years after Beethoven composed his – we are still listening to them, and can still find value and enjoyment in them. These pieces have inspired generations of music lovers, and that is what makes them *true classics*.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Coriolan Overture, Op. 62

Those acquainted with the plays of William Shakespeare must already recognize the name Coriolanus even if they are not familiar with the story behind the famous tragedy. Yet, Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* was not written to accompany the famous drama by Shakespeare. Although Beethoven knew and admired the plays of Shakespeare in their German translations by Johann Joachim Eschenburg, it was the lesser-known drama by the Austrian playwright Heinrich Joseph von Collin that inspired Beethoven to write his overture on the subject of Coriolanus. Collin and Beethoven were friends, and, for a short few years between 1802 and 1805, Collin's *Coriolan* was quite popular in Vienna – Beethoven's locale since 1792. Of course, by the time Beethoven had written his overture in 1807, *Coriolan* was already a thing of the past, although the Imperial Theater did revive the play for a single performance with Beethoven's music. For previous showings, musical selections had been drawn from Mozart's opera *Idomeneo*. Even Beethoven's new music, however, did not help to revive Collin's drama for more than one performance.

The *Coriolan Overture* quickly took on a life of its own though. By March 1807, Beethoven's patron Prince Franz Joseph Maximilian Lobkowitz had already underwritten two performances of the new overture at subscription concerts at his own home. There is also evidence of a third private performance that month at the urging of another patron – Prince Lichnowsky. The *Journal of Luxury and Fashion* praised the new overture for its "richness of ideas, bold originality, and fullness of power." Today, the *Coriolan Overture* is a well-accepted part of the standard repertoire and it often features on orchestral concerts – usually as a rousing opener as it does tonight.

According to legend, Coriolanus was a Roman general who – despite his victories abroad – did not care for the poor of his own city, and was accordingly banished from Rome. He then recruited Rome's enemies the Volscians to help him plot revenge. Fearing the worst for Rome, Coriolanus's mother and wife pled with him to cease the attack. Finally, Coriolanus relented. In Collin's version, Coriolanus determines to take his own life as the only way to regain his honor.

Right from the start, Beethoven's overture captures the rage and bitterness of Coriolanus as well as his strength. The softer second theme seems to represent the pleading of his mother and wife to spare Rome and – mirroring the drama – this forgiving second theme eventually subdues the belligerent first theme. In the overture's final moments, one can hear the final sacrifice of Coriolanus as life departs his body and leaves in its wake nothing but silence.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)
Cello Concerto in B minor, Op. 104

Antonín Dvořák – the composer who had transformed Bohemian music into an internationally-respected art form – arrived in New York City on September 26, 1892. He had been brought to America to do the same for American music which he had done for the music of his own nation. Although America already possessed several great orchestras – as Dvořák himself recognized – America lacked native composers of any great standing and those composers that had begun to emerge lacked direction. Therefore, American orchestras played almost nothing but European music and American composers wrote very little that could escape that tradition – two issues that many American music lovers saw as a problem.

Jeannette Thurber was one such music lover. After helping to establish the National Conservatory of Music in New York in 1885, she finally recruited Dvořák to America to become its director, offering him a salary twenty times greater than what he was making in Prague. Soon after his arrival in New York, Dvořák wrote to friends back home, "The Americans expect great things of me and the main thing is, so they say, to show them to the promised land and kingdom of a new and independent art, in short, to create a national music… It is certainly both a great and a splendid task for me and…

there is more than enough material here and plenty of talent." Dvořák was transfixed by the melodies of African Americans as well as the very idea of Native Americans – the latter especially as romanticized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha*. Soon he had composed his famous *New World Symphony* – a composition which perfectly melds African and Native American resources into the European conception of an orchestral symphony as if designed as a model for American composers.

Not all were pleased with Dvořák's developments though. The foremost American composer of the day Edward MacDowell directly attacked Dvořák's approach when he remarked that "masquerading in the so-called nationalism of Negro clothes cut in Bohemia will not help us." Before long, Dvořák was becoming weary of his New York surroundings, although summer trips to the Bohemian community of the rural Spillville, Iowa, helped relieve his homesickness for a while. In April 1895, Dvořák finally returned to his beloved homeland.

Before Dvořák ever left for Bohemia, however, he had already begun work on a new Concerto for Cello and Orchestra. Dvořák had in fact composed most of the B minor Concerto during the winter of 1894-95 while still in America, and the first movement's second theme – introduced by a solo horn – actually provides evidence of this as it takes up the character of an African American spiritual. The concerto was commissioned by cellist Hanuš Wihan – a friend and colleague of Dvořák back in Prague. When Dvořák returned to Bohemia and Wihan began proposing some flashy revisions to the score including a last-movement cadenza that he himself wished to write, Dvořák found another cellist to be the interpreter at its premiere – namely the great English cellist Leo Stern. Dvořák journeyed to London to conduct the premiere with Stern and the London Philharmonic at Queen's Hall on March 19, 1896. Dvořák and Wihan soon reconciled, however, and Wihan would give his first public performance of the concerto three years later.

Dvořák set his Cello Concerto in three movements. The opening *Allegro* is particularly dramatic with its two themes of contrasting character, and the interplay of soloist and orchestra. The slower second movement marked *Adagio, ma non troppo* actually integrates the melody from a song Dvořák wrote in 1887 called "Leave me alone." This song was a favorite of his sister-in-law Josefina Kaunitzova who became ill while Dvořák was at work on the concerto and died soon after his return to Bohemia. In response to her passing, Dvořák also incorporated this song melody into the end of the final movement *Allegro moderato* where he similarly quotes the first movement's opening. The finale is otherwise full of tremendous joy and excitement – so much so that Dvořák biographer Paul Stefan attributes it to his long-awaited homecoming.

The Cello Concerto in B minor – the final product of Dvořák's American sojourn – has retained a solid position in the orchestral repertoire since its introduction over a hundred years ago. Johannes Brahms – who was a friend and advocate of Dvořák – apparently remarked upon first reading the score, "Why on earth didn't I know that one could write a cello concerto like this? Had I known, I would have written one long ago." High praise from another composer revered among music lovers.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68

By the 1870s, the new aesthetic of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt – composers who stressed dramatic, narrative-driven music played by gigantic orchestral forces at the expense of Classical form and balance – had reshaped and come to dominate the European musical scene. Yet, just as Wagner was proving his claim that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony had been the last symphony and that further symphonies would have to depend upon the same sort of drama found in opera, Johannes Brahms unveiled his Symphony No. 1 – an abstract work employing Classical form which some admirers immediately hailed as "Beethoven's Tenth." This title, of course, suggests the continuity they heard between Beethoven and Brahms – in fact, in opposition to Wagner and his "Music of the Future" – and certainly there are many traits in this new composition which invoke Beethoven's corpus of nine symphonies.

Brahms would complete four symphonies in his career – all four are set in four movements which follow the Classical pattern fast-slow-rhythmic-fast as do the majority of Beethoven's symphonies. Additionally, all are moderate in length and employ an orchestra of moderate size. The first movements of all four follow the sonata form – a tool frequently used by Beethoven. And, none of Brahms's symphonies are programmatic as Wagner seemed to think necessary for the survival of the genre. Exceptions to these traits immediately come to mind in Beethoven's set of nine, but nonetheless these were the dominant factors in those works which Brahms then extrapolated and brought to his own set of four.

Brahms held Beethoven in the highest regard. When Brahms first travelled to Vienna in 1862, he apparently told a friend he had come to "drink [his] wine where Beethoven drank his." Brahms also once remarked, "You have no conception of how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like Beethoven behind

us." His admiration for Beethoven was so powerful that he delayed the composition of a symphony until he felt he had the compositional maturity to create a symphony worthy of Beethoven's cycle. Therefore, Brahms was already 43 years old when he completed his First Symphony in 1876. Although he had begun sketches for a symphony in 1855 and the beginnings of the First Symphony itself have been traced to 1859, the work had a gestation period of roughly twenty years, and Brahms was still making revisions to its second and third movements at the very last minute.

Yet, to be relegated as a mere imitator of Beethoven was a disgusting thought to Brahms. A self-confident minister hoping to offer an invaluable insight once remarked to Brahms, "It is strange how the C major theme in your finale resembles the theme of Joy in Beethoven's Ninth." Brahms appropriately responded, "Indeed, and it is even stranger that every jackass hears it at once." Certainly, Brahms did not wish to recreate Beethoven's compositions, but they were important and essential models for him when writing his own.

The First Symphony premiered on November 4, 1876 in Karlsruhe under the direction of Otto Dessoff; three days later, Brahms himself conducted another performance in Mannheim. Its final completion in 1876 after twenty years of labor was perhaps propelled by that year's other big premiere – the first staging of Wagner's complete *Ring Cycle* in the opera house built specifically for that purpose in Bayreuth. From the very beginning, the reception of Brahms's long-awaited First Symphony was warm.

The symphony opens with the fearsome pounding of tympani and chromatic lines played by strings and woodwinds. After several minutes this ominous introduction marked *Un poco sostenuto* gives way to the thrust of the first theme which initiates the *Allegro* section; soon this first theme is developed alongside the harsh second theme. The portentous motif of the opening remains a force in this first movement, with tympani pounds often underlining the actions of the other instruments.

Likewise, in the second movement marked *Andante sostenuto* – no matter how lush or lavish the E major melody might be – the strings that guide the early part of the movement cannot steer themselves away from the ominous motif of the first movement nor can the other instruments who soon join as soloists like the oboe or finally the violin. Before the movement has ended, the tympani has even returned to pounding, although it does so more gently than before.

In the intermezzo-like third movement – which is marked *Un poco allegretto e Grazioso* – the emotional state seems to fluctuate between moments of overflowing joy and darker turns. Towards the movement's end, there is even a brief mention of the fourth movement's primary theme – that which has reminded so many listeners of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*.

With the opening of the fourth movement, the tympani returns full force and is soon echoed by plucked strings. Before long, however, the horn sounds forth a transcendent melody – one which Brahms had years earlier sent to his friend Clara Schumann as a birthday gift – and this theme finally banishes the tragic mood that has inhabited the symphony from its very beginning. One commentator has called this moment "one of the most poetic episodes in all Brahms… amid hushes, tremulous harmonies in the strings, the horn and afterward the flute pour forth an utterly original melody, the character of which ranges from passionate pleading to a sort of wild exultation." Soon, this melody reveals the main theme of the entire movement – that hopeful melody which, in reminding so many of Beethoven, seems to suggest that, *yes*, the genre of the symphony still lives.