

San Juan Symphony
November 3-4, 2018
Program Notes
by Michael Allsen

Our November program opens with a joyful work by Leonard Bernstein, his *Chichester Psalms*—an exuberant setting of selections from the Hebrew Book of Psalms. Joining the San Juan Symphony are boy soprano Ben Hinckley and a combined choir of singers from Farmington and Durango. We then turn to a work that cost Johannes Brahms over 20 years of work, his glorious First Symphony.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)
Chichester Psalms

England's well-established singing-schools and cathedral choirs have produced a series of fine professional ensembles—the Cambridge Singers, the Hilliard Ensemble, the Tallis Scholars, the King Singers, and others—that dominate the field of choral singing. There is an active amateur tradition as well, heard most grandly at many annual choral festivals—some established in the early 18th century—where cathedral choirs join forces to perform sacred and secular music. One of the grandest of these festivals occurs every summer at Chichester Cathedral in Sussex, where the Chichester choir joins with the choirs of Winchester and Salisbury cathedrals. In 1964, the Very Reverend Walter Hussey, Dean of Chichester, gave Leonard Bernstein a commission for a large choral work to be performed at the 1965 festival. Bernstein was then in the midst of a year-long sabbatical from the podium of the New York Philharmonic, devoting his time to study and composition. *Chichester Psalms* was completed in May of 1965, near the end of his sabbatical—Bernstein later described the work as his “major sabbatical act.” Upon returning to his conductor's post in October of 1965, he summed up his sabbatical experience in a pair of essays in the *New York Times* titled “What I Thought” and “...And What I Did.” In the second essay, set in doggerel verse, Bernstein gives some pointed criticism of the then-current musical avant garde, and a tongue-in-cheek *apologia* for his *Chichester Psalms*:

“For then I had the luxury, truth to tell,
Of time to think as a pure musician,
And ponder the art of composition.
For hours on end, I brooded and mused
On *materiae musicae*, used and abused;
On aspects of unconventionality,
Over the death in our time of tonality,
Over the fads of Dada and Chance,
The serial strictures, the dearth of Romance,
Perspectives in Music, the new terminology,
Physicomathatomusicology;
Pieces called *Cycles* and *Sines* and *Parameters*;
Titles too beat for these homely tetrameters;
Pieces for nattering, clucking sopranos

With squadrons of vibraphones, fleets of pianos
Played with the forearms, the fists, and the palms—
—And then I came up with the *Chichester Psalms*.
These psalms are a simple and modest affair,
Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square,
Certain to sicken a stout John Cager
With its tonics and dominants in B-flat major.
But there it stands—the result of my pondering
Two long months of avant-garde wandering—
My youngest child, old-fashioned and sweet.
And he stands on his own two tonal feet.”

This “youngest child” was Bernstein’s first major work following his *Kaddish Symphony* of 1963, and in many ways it seems to be a response to this earlier composition. Both are large choral compositions in Hebrew, but their characters are utterly different: the rather desolate tone of *Kaddish* is counterbalanced by the more serene and often joyous character of *Chichester Psalms*. Underlying all of *Chichester Psalms* is an optimistic and sincere prayer for peace. The work was first composed for an all-male chorus, but Bernstein later reworked it for mixed chorus. At this concert it is heard in a reduced orchestration produced by Bernstein.

The first movement opens with a powerful chorale theme, using the second verse of Psalm 108 to set the musical stage for what is to follow. The remainder of the movement sets Psalm 100 in a rollicking 7/4 meter. The second movement’s form is dictated by the distinctly different characters of the two texts Bernstein sets. A boy soloist begins Psalm 23 above a simple harp accompaniment—a picture of youthful King David and his lyre. This peaceful solo melody, replete with blue notes, is picked up and expanded by women's chorus, until men's voices rudely interrupt with Psalm 2: “Why do the nations rage?” The chorus returns at the end with Psalm 23, but an instrumental version of the Psalm 2 music intrudes one last time. The final movement opens with an instrumental introduction, playing a tense and unsettled version of the opening chorale. This gives way to a much more tranquil setting of Psalm 131, flowing smoothly and quietly in 10/4 meter. At the close of the movement, Bernstein returns to the opening chorale once more, now setting the first verse of Psalm 133 for chorus alone. At the close, there is one more echo of the chorale above a hushed *Amen*.

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

“Writing a symphony is no laughing matter.”
- Johannes Brahms

When Brahms was only twenty, he met the composer and critic Robert Schumann for the first time. Schumann hailed Brahms’s appearance on the musical scene in an article in the journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, suggesting that Brahms was the long-awaited standard-bearer for one side in an ongoing aesthetic battle. Schumann saw the Classical lines of Brahms’s music as an antidote to the more radical ideas of the “New German School” headed by Franz Liszt. Brahms was held up as the successor to Beethoven, and Schumann suggested that “...if [Brahms] directs

his magic wand where the massed power in chorus and orchestra might lend him their strength, we can look forward to even more wondrous glimpses into the secret world of the spirits.” The young composer had, up until then, composed only smaller works, and this challenge to write symphonies and other large works weighed heavily on Brahms’s mind. He imposed a long musical apprenticeship upon himself before he would bring out a symphony—the first symphony was not completed until 1876, when Brahms was 43.

In listening to the large works he completed prior to 1876, there is a steadily-increasing skill and self-confidence in the way in which Brahms composed for orchestra. He abandoned his first attempt at symphonic writing, a D minor symphony sketched out in 1856 (although he did recycle some of its music in later works). For his first published orchestral works, the Op.11 and Op.16 Serenades (1857-59), Brahms chose a fairly simple form to practice orchestral writing, and he limited his performing forces to a relatively small chamber orchestra. The *German Requiem* of 1869 shows a much more confident control of orchestration, and the *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* of 1873 is an even more adventuresome work, featuring some striking orchestral effects.

Early in 1873, when he sent a few small works to his publisher Simrock, the publisher sent a cranky reply: “Aren’t you going to do anything more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in 1873 either?” Indeed, it seems like everyone who knew Brahms was impatient for him to complete a symphony. In reviewing the first Vienna performance of Brahms's *Symphony No. 1*, Hanslick wrote that: “...seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer’s first symphony with such tense anticipation.” By 1873, Brahms had, in fact, already been working on the first symphony for a long time. The earliest sketches for this work date from the 1850s, and he had completed a draft of the first movement by 1862.

He finally completed the *Symphony No. 1* in 1876, and it was first performed at Karlsruhe in November of that year. Those who had waited for so long for Brahms to continue the symphonic tradition of Beethoven were apparently well satisfied. The conductor Hans von Bülow declared that Schumann’s prophecy had been fulfilled, and dubbed Brahms’s symphony “The Tenth” (that is, the symphony Beethoven *would* have written after his Ninth). Clearly, Brahms had this image in mind in composing the *Symphony No. 1*—there are too many subtle and overt references to Beethoven to deny. However, the style, conception, and spirit are Brahms’s own: his first symphonic masterpiece.

The *Symphony No. 1* begins with a lengthy slow introduction marked *Un poco sostenuto*, which provides musical raw material for the entire work: from the stormy opening movement to the triumphant Finale. Tension builds towards the end of the introduction, and Brahms abruptly begins the exposition of this movement (*Allegro*), which is set in sonata form. The main theme, first heard in the violins, quickly gives way to a long transitional section, in which Brahms begins to explore the material outlined in his introduction. He reserves the second main theme—a powerful triplet melody—for the very end of the exposition. After a repeat of the exposition, there is another abrupt change of character, and the development begins with the first theme played above a hazy background. Gradually, the focus shifts to the triplet theme, which is combined and recombined with other material. A long pedal point in the timpani and a chromatic horn passage lead into the recapitulation. At the very end, just when it seems that the movement

is concluding, Brahms inserts a rather mysterious passage in B-flat minor. The texture quickly thickens again, however, and the movement comes to a close with bright C Major chords.

Between the large opening and closing movements of the symphony, Brahms places two relatively quiet inner movements. The second movement (*Andante sostenuto*) begins as a conversation among the strings and solo woodwinds, singing a succession of lyrical melodies and countermelodies. The calm of this movement is threatened by a minor key passage in the center of the movement, and eventually by a brief reference to the stormy main theme of the first movement. This character subsides, however, and Brahms returns to the placid mood of the opening. In closing, the main themes are overlaid by a lovely violin and horn duet. The brief third movement (*Un poco allegretto e grazioso*) is also in a three-section form. The opening alternates two flowing melodies, presenting them in both strings and woodwinds. The more agitated middle section is set in 6/8, and moves from a major key to a minor, and back again. At the end, Brahms presents decorated versions of his opening melodies.

The immense finale is Brahms's clearest homage to Beethoven in this symphony—its length, complexity, and even its musical form have precedents in Beethoven's longest symphonic movement, the finale of his Ninth Symphony. As in Beethoven's masterpiece, Brahms's finale begins with a vast introduction (*Adagio*) which gradually builds from tangled themes towards a climax, leading inevitably towards the main section of the movement. Here we have a succession of intertwined string and woodwind melodies, which suddenly give way to a stately melody played by solo horn. Brahms brings this theme to a climax and breaks the texture with a solemn trombone chorale (the trombones' first appearance in this score).

Then what follows is, for this writer, the most profoundly moving passage in the symphonic repertoire: the introduction of the Finale's main theme in the strings. This broad melody bears a clear family resemblance to the famous "Ode to Joy" in Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. (When one unfortunate concertgoer remarked on this resemblance to Brahms, the composer acidly remarked "Any ass could see that.") It is presented a second time by the woodwinds and is then developed in a turbulent transitional passage. The second main theme, a more playful offbeat melody in the strings is touched upon briefly before Brahms brings the exposition to a close in a Beethovenian storm. The development begins with a clear statement of the main theme, but this quickly spirals off into a minor key. The development section moves towards a contrapuntal climax, and the horn theme from the introduction appears to usher in the recapitulation. Here, Brahms focuses on the playful second theme, allowing it a much more extensive treatment than in the exposition. For the coda, there is a rhythmical shift that reaches its peak with a *fortissimo* reappearance of the chorale and a brilliant conclusion.