

San Juan Symphony
October 6-7, 2018
Program Notes
by Michael Allsen

This San Juan Symphony program—titled “Rhapsodic and Exotic”—brings together four works with a touch of the exotic, beginning with Glinka’s energetic, Russian-flavored Overture. Then our principal bassoonist Denise Turner plays a virtuosic work by Weber that thrilled audiences in the early 19th century. Meanwhile Hungarian nationality was part of the appeal of great romantic virtuoso Franz Liszt, and he included exotic Gypsy elements in many of his works, including tonight’s popular *Hungarian Rhapsody No.2*. We close with the great second symphony of Jean Sibelius, based partly on the character and landscape of his beloved Finnish homeland.

Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857)
Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*

Glinka, widely viewed as the founding father of Russian musical nationalism, is largely known today for two operas. The first of these, *A Life for the Czar* (1836), was a success both for its incorporation of elements from Russian folk music, and its contemporary plot, which resonated with burgeoning Russian political nationalism. For his second opera, Glinka turned to an epic poem by Pushkin. Pushkin’s *Ruslan and Ludmilla* had secured his reputation when it was published in 1818, and it was widely known in Russian literary circles. The poem is a fairy-tale recreation of ancient Slavic epics: in this case, an extremely complex version of the “sleeping beauty” legend. Glinka had originally planned to work with the poet in creating a libretto, but Pushkin died in a duel before he could collaborate on the opera. Glinka brought in a team of no less than five librettists, who turned Pushkin’s already convoluted story line into an even more complex series of *tableaux*. The confusing plot probably contributed to a rather lukewarm response at the premiere performance. *Ruslan and Ludmilla* soon caught on, however, and became a recognized symbol of Russian music: the opera was performed over 300 times in St. Petersburg alone over the next half century. European and American audiences were a bit slower to accept the work (it was not performed in the US until 1942).

Though the opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla* is a rarity on today’s stages, its brilliant little overture has become a staple of the orchestral repertoire. The overture is set in Classical sonata form. The opening melodies, accompanied by some absolutely furious violin lines, are borrowed from the opera’s final victory scene. The contrasting theme, played by violas, cellos, and bassoons is borrowed from a battlefield aria sung by the hero Ruslan in the second act. Near the end, the trombones—as usual, relegated to the role of Bad Guy—play a descending whole-tone scale associated with the evil dwarf Chernomor, but this is soon drowned out in general rejoicing.

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)
Andante and Rondo Ongarese, Op.35

Weber, best known in his day as opera composer, was nevertheless *very* kind to the woodwind section, producing several fine solo works for clarinet, flute, and bassoon. In 1811, Weber was in Munich, overseeing the production of his opera *Abu Hassan*, and found the time to write a bassoon concerto for a bassoonist in the Munich court orchestra, Georg Friedrich Brandt. The concerto was a great success, and Brandt quickly asked Weber to write a new work for bassoon and orchestra. The *Andante e Rondo Ongarese*, completed in 1813, was in fact a reworking of a piece for solo viola he had composed in 1807.

In the opening *Andante*, the bassoon lays out a rather tragic theme above a simple string accompaniment. Weber follows this with three variations: the first a string version of the theme supported by a bassoon countermelody, and the second moving to a major key. In the more densely-textured third variation, the bassoon plays a virtuoso decoration of the theme. There is then a brief but dramatic transition to the second section, *Rondo Ongarese*. Hungarian music—with its exotic melodies and dramatic rhythm—was wildly popular in 19th-century Germany, and the main recurring theme is a boldly-accented theme in Hungarian style. Weber has several contrasting episodes that provide the solo bassoon with moments of technical and expressive display, culminating in a blazing virtuoso ending.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Hungarian Rhapsody No.2 in D minor (orchestrated by Franz Doppler)

Franz Liszt was the preeminent piano virtuoso of the 19th century, and the model for many pianists to follow—but he was also an imaginative and ground-breaking composer. The popularity of Liszt's concert tours in the 1830s and 1840s was unprecedented: by the 1840s all of Europe was in the throes of what came to be known as "Lisztomania." (The parallels to the equally frantic "Beatlemania" 120 years later are clear.) He played hundreds of concerts to packed houses throughout Europe, and produced for the most part compositions that focused on his own phenomenal technique and showmanship. Liszt's reputation rested not only on his amazing technical skills, but also on his background: his Hungarian heritage made him just a bit exotic in western Europe, and he often played this up by incorporating Hungarian and Gypsy styles into his performances. The most familiar of these pieces were the 19 *Hungarian Rhapsodies* he composed beginning in 1846. The second of these, in C-sharp minor, proved to be the most popular of all. Liszt published it in 1851, and though few amateur pianists could have played the demanding piece well, it proved to be popular enough that Liszt's publisher Bartholf Senff asked him to create alternative versions. Liszt later created versions for two pianos and two pianos eight hands, and with the help of Franz Doppler, he also created an orchestral version—transposed to the more "orchestra-friendly" key of D minor.

If the *Hungarian Rhapsody No.2* was a great piano showpiece in the 19th century, it became an enduring piece of pop culture in the 20th. It was worked into movies by the Marx Brothers and many others—often for comic or ironic effect. But its most prominent role was in animated cartoons, where lowbrow slapstick was often combined with the highbrow classical work by Liszt. The piece made dozens of appearances in cartoons, but the two best versions—featuring Bugs Bunny and Tom the Cat of Tom and Jerry as piano soloists—appeared within a few weeks of one another in 1946.

The work has a two-part form, beginning with slow Hungarian lament called a *Lassen*—dramatic chords leading to a dark melody played by strings in their low register. After a brief interruption—an expressive clarinet cadenza in Doppler’s version—Liszt introduces a slightly brighter woodwind melody. A second clarinet solo leads to a varied restatement of the opening music. The second section is dominated by a lively, ever-accelerating dance tune, a *Friska*, and a series of equally brilliant themes. There is a brief moment of pathos near the end before a dazzling coda that translates Liszt’s pianistic fireworks into orchestral form.

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)
Symphony No.2 in D Major, Op. 43

In the opening years of the 20th century the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius was enjoying ever-increasing international renown. He had already found his distinctive musical voice and was recognized in his homeland and throughout Europe as Finland’s leading composer. With success came the opportunity to travel, allowing Sibelius to meet other musicians, hear new works, and conduct his own music. He spent the first half of 1901 in Italy, where he took time off from his travels to compose. Most of the *Symphony No.2* was written during that spring, in a small rented villa in the hills near Genoa. He returned to Finland later that year and added the finishing touches to the work.

Sibelius is often heard as a Finnish nationalist—an impression strengthened by popular symphonic poems on Finnish themes such as the *Lemminkäinen* cycle or his well-known *Finlandia*. However, Sibelius was after something different in his symphonies. In a 1934 interview, he noted that: “My symphonies are music conceived and worked out solely in terms of music, with no literary basis. I am not a literary musician—for me, music begins where words cease. A scene can be expressed in painting, and a drama in words, but a symphony should be music first and last. Of course, it has happened that, quite unbidden, some mental image has established itself in my head in connection with a movement I have been writing, but the germ and fertilization have been solely musical.”

The *Symphony No. 2* is no exception. There is a lasting controversy about a hidden program for the symphony, supposedly confided by Sibelius to his friend, the conductor Georg Schéévoigt. The “program” was a vaguely defined set of impressions of Finnish culture and politics, but the composer himself never commented on it in public. If we are to take any “mental image” away from the *Symphony No. 2* it might be just this sort of vague impression of a Finnish landscape. However, the symphony’s movements do not need any literary support: they are worked out with a logic and simplicity that makes this one of the most appealing of Sibelius’s symphonies.

In the opening movement (*Allegretto*), Sibelius turns conventional first-movement form on its head. In place of the usual exposition that presents a few long melodies for later dissection and development, this movement begins with a series of several little melodic jewels, which are laid out quite simply, and in rapid succession. As the movement continues, he gradually interweaves these ideas into ever-longer phrases, particularly during a lengthy development section. There is a rather subdued high point that closes the development. At the end, all of this grand music dissolves back into its constituent parts, and the movement ends as quietly as it began.

The lengthy second movement (*Andante, ma rubato*) is set in an only slightly more conventional sonata form. The opening group of themes begins with bassoons playing a lugubrious melody above pizzicato triplets in the basses. This bassoon melody is gradually joined by the remaining woodwinds, strings and brass. After a clearly-defined break, the strings begin a contrasting second group with a long, flowing melody. The development concentrates on material from the first group, and ends with another sharp break. In the recapitulation, Sibelius begins with material from the second main theme, but merges themes from both groups into new combinations. Once again, the movement ends on a quiet note.

Beginning with the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, third movements were traditionally set in a three-part form. Sibelius's scherzo (*Vivacissimo*) stays within this tradition, but he still manages to put his own stamp on the music. The opening section combines perpetual motion in the strings with a brief minor-key motive passed through the woodwinds. The middle section is a quiet folk-like melody presented by the solo oboe. This pastoral interlude is rudely interrupted by a return of the opening music, but Sibelius works in another statement of the oboe melody before ending the movement with a lively coda. This leads without pause into the Finale (*Allegro moderato*).

The Finale's opening theme is a broad melody carried by strings and brass. After an agitated transition, the lower strings have a repeated figure that serves as the background for the second main theme, begun by the solo oboe. A brief fanfare from the brass closes the exposition and the development begins quietly, with the first theme heard in the upper woodwinds. Much of the development is concerned with motives from the first theme, which build gradually towards an immense climax and a return of the opening music. Sibelius's restatement of the second theme is extended and grows inexorably towards triumphant conclusion. A return of the brass fanfare signals the conclusion, and Sibelius begins the coda with a final grand statement. Trumpets lead the entire brass section in one final, grand melody to close the symphony.