

## ***Manfred* Overture, Op.115**

**Robert Schumann (1810-56)**

Robert Schumann tended to be a very single-minded composer, concentrating almost exclusively on one form of composition over a relatively short period of time before moving on to another.

By 1847 Schumann's attention had turned to large-scale vocal works. He had been thinking of writing an opera for at least four years, and had attempted – unsuccessfully – an operatic setting of Goethe's *Faust*. His only opera, *Genoveva*, had occupied him since 1844, and immediately upon finishing it in the summer of 1848 Schumann turned to Byron's poem *Manfred*, spending four months reducing the poem by about one third and writing the music.

The overture and fifteen separate numbers that Schumann produced for *Manfred* serve more as incidental music to a drama than anything else; indeed, most of the vocal settings are melodramas, with the libretto spoken over the music. Schumann commented to Liszt that the work should be promoted not as an opera – nor even as a melodrama - but as “a dramatic work with music”, albeit with some scenes fully staged.

Great dramatic poems do not necessarily translate into great stage works, of course, and while Byron was apparently always fully in favour of a musical aspect for *Manfred*, he freely admitted that the work was “*quite impossible* for the stage.”

With Schumann's *Manfred* music, the dichotomy between the stage and the concert hall was never really resolved. Writing in Grove's Dictionary of Music, Spitta noted that the music “hardly ever serves to intensify the dramatic effects, and yet this is all that is necessary in a drama. It appears rather to be the outcome of the impression produced on Schumann by Byron's poem.”

Moreover, neither the music nor the poem seems to benefit from the union – in fact, Spitta felt that both suffered from it. “On the stage”, he wrote, “(the music) loses a great part of its effect, just as, in my opinion, the poem loses half its...magic by being dressed in the clumsy and palpable illusions of a scenic representation.”

The overture is the only part of the *Manfred* music that has been regularly performed. A dark, passionate and wildly chromatic piece that captures well the despair of Byron's tormented hero, it was – perhaps appropriately – premiered on its own in March 1852, with the composer conducting, three months before Liszt conducted the first staged performance of the complete music at Weimar.

## **Concerto for Double Bass and Orchestra**

**Johann Baptist Vanhal (1739-1813)**

For a composer like Johann Baptist Vanhal, reaching your peak in the Europe of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was something of a “good news – bad news” situation: the good news was that you were an exact contemporary of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven; unfortunately, that was also the bad news.

Vanhal may well have been a much more significant composer in another period and place, but he is now often best remembered as the cellist in a famous 1784 string quartet dinner party, when Haydn and Dittersdorf were the violinists and Mozart the viola player.

Born in Bohemia, Vanhal moved to Vienna when he was 20, and soon established himself in the city's intensely busy and wide-ranging musical life. He enjoyed great popularity, but even so there are hardly any reliable contemporary accounts of his life, and there is no comprehensive listing of his many hundreds of compositions, the vast majority of which remain unpublished.

Although he turned more to music publishing and to composing sacred music in the second half of his life, Vanhal was an important figure in the development of the Viennese Style during the 1760s, a period which was also of great importance in the history of the double bass.

Haydn had written what is generally regarded as the first bass concerto – actually for the violone – in 1763, and the next 40 years saw the establishment of a specific Viennese double bass school that produced significant developments in the construction, tuning and set-up of the instrument. This presented great possibilities for an instrument that had never been seriously considered as a solo vehicle before, and the period saw the creation of some thirty bass concertos by composers such as Dittersdorf, Hoffmeister and Zimmermann.

The date of Vanhal's concerto is not known, but the best guess puts it in the early Viennese period, possibly 1762-64. It is in the standard form for the time, and although written for the Viennese tuning (5 strings, mostly in 3rds, with one interval of a 4<sup>th</sup> in the middle) works well for the modern bass tuning (4 strings, in 4ths). It is available in many different editions, the majority of which have the solo part fingered in D major but use *scordatura* (re-tuning of the strings) to have it sound in E major.

### **Contours for Double Bass, Harpsichord & Strings      Michael Conway Baker (b.1937)**

Michael Conway Baker was born in West Palm Beach, Florida, and has lived in Canada since 1958.

His music is essentially tonal, incorporating traditional elements of the past with 21<sup>st</sup> century techniques and approaches. Due to the constantly shifting tonal centres in his music, however, he rarely uses key signatures.

Baker has produced over 150 concert works, including symphonies, concertos and full-length ballets, and well over 200 scores for film, television and video productions. He has won a JUNO for Best Classical Composition with his Concerto for Piano, an ACTRA award for Best Score for a Television Series (for David Suzuki's *A Planet for the Taking*) and three Genies, including one for *The Grey Fox*.

Other work includes theme music for *The Vicki Gabereau Show* on CBC Radio and *Double Exposure* and David Suzuki's *The Nature of Things* on television, and a full-length *Cinderella* score for Dorothy Hamill's Ice Capades.

*Contours* is built on a ten-note tone row, but is still tonal in nature. There is a good deal of counterpoint, with major themes often juxtaposed. Baker has said that it is “really a double bass concerto, and, as such, exploits the double bass to its limits.” He admits to being somewhat surprised

by the number of performances it receives, given what he calls “the rather daunting virtuosity” of the solo part.

*Contours* was commissioned by Malcolm Arnold, and was written for bassist Gary Karr and harpsichordist Harmon Lewis. They gave the first performance in Vancouver on 18 August 1973, with the Shawnigan Lake Summer School Orchestra under Mihaly Virizlay.

### **Symphony No.7 in D minor, Op.70**

**Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904)**

For many years Dvorak kept his compositional activities a secret even from his closest friends, and until his early thirties he made his living as an instrumentalist and teacher. An accomplished violinist and violist, he was playing in the Czech National Theatre Orchestra in Prague under Bedrich Smetana, the founder of Czech music, when the success of his cantata *The Heirs of the White Mountain* in 1873 persuaded him to resign from the orchestra and concentrate on composition and teaching.

Smetana’s influence was substantial, and Dvorak was determined to continue his contemporary’s efforts to move Czech music towards self-determination, and to establish the Czech national music school as second to none.

In doing so, he became one of the first composers to write large-scale works where material of a nationalist nature was seamlessly combined with classical forms and structures. He used Czech songs and dances to great effect, and his symphonies show a mastery of orchestration and form combined with great harmonic and contrapuntal skill. The last of his nine symphonies, the *New World*, is easily the most famous and popular, but the preceding three have all been described as having “a remarkable perfection of language.”

Dvorak’s Slavonic Dances made him famous throughout Europe, and in 1884 he made the first of his nine visits to England, the country that was one of the first to appreciate his music, and which always gave him such a warm welcome. It was with the profits from these visits that Dvorak was able to buy the country lodge in the forests of Vysoka, in southern Bohemia, that was to serve as his beloved summer home in his later years.

The 1884 visit had been at the request of the Royal Philharmonic Society, with a specific invitation for him to conduct concerts in London. They marked Dvorak’s first appearances as a conductor outside his homeland, and his Symphony No.6 (numbered No.1 at the time) was such a tremendous success that he was invited to write a new symphony for performance the following year.

Dvorak began work on the Symphony No.7 on 13 December 1884, and finished the scoring on 17 March 1885. “A new symphony occupies me”, he wrote to a friend on December 22, “and wherever I go I think of nothing but my work, which must be capable of stirring the world, and God grant me that it will!” He conducted the first performance himself at a Royal Philharmonic Society concert on 22 April 1885 at the St. James’s Hall in London.