

Orchestra Toronto Concert Programme Notes

Symphony Pathétique

2022 October 23

Landmarks of Note

by Trevor Rines

Listening Landmarks are in boldface

Mirror Image

Composed by **Elizabeth Raum** (born 1945)

Orchestra Toronto's Composer in Residence www.elizabethraum.com

Commissioned by South Saskatchewan Youth Orchestra and Regina Symphony Orchestra

Premiere - 1988 in Regina, Saskatchewan

Original Title - *Fantasy for Double Orchestra*

Running Time - about 14 minutes

At last season's final concert, we were treated to the World Premiere of Raum's rousing Fanfare, *Spirit of Canada*. Opening this Season, we now hear a brand new arrangement of a piece originally called *Fantasy for Double Orchestra*, which premiered 34 years ago.

Where's the second orchestra? Music Director Michael Newnham recently approached Raum about the possibility of reworking this piece, so that it could be performed by a single orchestra. Today's premiere of this version is renamed *Mirror Image*, referring to the original staging of two orchestras mirroring each other onstage.

It **opens with a gentle ebb and flow**, rather like waves lapping on the shore, followed by a **dramatic rising harp glissando**, drawing attention to that instrument. Today's version has a single harp; however, at the premiere, two harps were positioned between the two orchestras, facing one another. One harp was played by a student in the South Saskatchewan Youth Orchestra (SSYO) and the other by that student's teacher in the Regina Symphony Orchestra (RSO) (with whom Raum was then Principal Oboist). The majority of the SSYO's musicians studied with RSO musicians, so Raum wrote the piece with this in mind. It's a reflection upon the relationship between teacher and pupil – at times harmonious, at times tempestuous, but always a dialogue.

Nearly three minutes in, the orchestra falls back, as a conversation between a trumpet and trombone takes centre stage. (Back in 1988, SSYO's Principal Trumpet was Karen Donnelly (now Principal Trumpet with the National Arts Centre Orchestra) and RSO's Principal Trombone was Raum's husband, Richard.) This dialogue between two solo instruments establishes *Mirror Image's* overarching theme of "Youth and Maturity," here represented by trumpet and trombone, respectively.

With this in mind, you'll hear how Raum has cleverly preserved the impression of a **dialogue between instruments and sections of the orchestra, with some statements seeming more impetuous (Youth) and some more seasoned with wisdom (Maturity).**

Be sure to **listen for several piccolo solos, popping up throughout the piece.** This piccolo part didn't exist in the original double orchestra version. Raum made many additions, while reorchestrating for a single orchestra, and here she makes extensive use of the **piccolo's lower register**, because it "has a rather haunting sound."

Be sure to return on April 16, when we'll next be hearing from Raum. At this season's fourth concert, we'll finally hear the World Premiere of her much anticipated one act comic opera, commissioned by Orchestra Toronto, *Romance of the Gods*.

Piano Concerto in A Minor, Opus 16

Composed by **Edvard Grieg** (Bergen, Norway, 1843-1907) in 1868 in Søllerød, Denmark (and repeatedly revised until 1907)

Premiere - 1869 in Copenhagen, Denmark

Running Time - about 30 minutes (times below are also approximate)

Movement 1 (13m) - Allegro molto moderato (9m) - Cadenza (3m) - Poco più Allegro (1m)

Movement 2 (7m) - Adagio

Movement 3 (10m) - Allegro moderato molto e marcato (8m) - Quasi presto (1m) - Andante maestoso (1m)

Unlike some Classical pieces, this Concerto has not earned itself a descriptive name – yet. So, just for fun, **while you're listening to the performance, imagine what name you might give this piece. What images come to mind, and what descriptor would convey to others its mood and character?** As soon as it ends, compare your name idea with those around you. You may be surprised.

At 25 years old, and with much to prove, Grieg was determined to impress with this, his very first work for full orchestra. He brilliantly succeeds in grabbing, and holding, our attention, in the very first minute.

It's believed that Grieg himself was originally intending to perform the solo piano part, but was unable to attend the Copenhagen Premiere due to previous commitments in Oslo, 600 km away.

After its 1869 premiere, which was an enormous success, Grieg kept tinkering with this piece. Over the next 28 years, at least seven different versions (with over 300 changes) were performed. It was only a few weeks before his death that he completed his final round of changes. It's this 1907 version which is usually performed, and which we're hearing today, but one is left wondering what further revisions he might have made.

Despite its immediate popularity, this is Grieg's only Piano Concerto. He began writing another one, as well as a Violin Concerto, but unfortunately didn't complete either.

It begins suddenly. A timpani roll quickly crescendos to a thundering dramatic chord from both piano and orchestra, then the piano is off to the races. **Powerful chords and showy arpeggios up and down the keyboard firmly establish A minor as the key – only to unexpectedly shift to C major.**

It's these surprises which make this, the longest movement, seem rather short. Its twists and turns leave us never quite sure when another piano solo will jump in, or which instruments will next be quoting the main theme.

This dramatic opening may be part of the reason why it was the first Concerto ever recorded. Mind you, the recording was only about 6 minutes long, because of the limitations of 1909's recording technology.

Around 9 minutes in, the full orchestra loudly states the main theme twice, followed by a long cadence which leaves the listener feeling unresolved, with a sense of expectation. This perfectly introduces the magnificent Cadenza. **The Cadenza's flashy and virtuosic piano solo ends when the pianist passes the torch back to the orchestra with a long trill** (the traditional way to end a Cadenza).

Together, orchestra and piano **accelerate to end the movement, quoting a snippet of the piano arpeggios and chords from the very beginning.**

Much as Raum had the piccolo (the orchestra's highest instrument) playing in its lower register, Grieg **opens the gentle and lyrical second movement with the low strings playing in their upper register.** This subtly changes the timbre, which is quite different from higher string instruments simply playing the same notes. In this case, it creates a sense of longing, which is drawn out for a full 2 minutes.

When the **piano finally returns**, hesitantly at first, this shortest movement finishes as a **calm conversation between piano and orchestra.**

The **third movement** deceptively begins with a **short and quiet statement in the woodwinds**, until the piano seems to decide that it will have none of that. The **piano jumps right in and drives robustly ahead**, much like it did in the 1st movement.

Three minutes in, the headlong **forward motion stops and the flutes and oboes reassert their sense of calm, stating a tender theme, which the piano serenely embellishes and explores with the orchestra.** After a pause, orchestra and piano slowly **build and accelerate, in waves.**

And yet, just over a minute from the very end, everything **slows down, broadening and crescendoing to bring the Concerto to an emphatic and dramatic conclusion.**

Rather than ending the piece in brooding A minor (as it began), Grieg makes another delightfully **unexpected shift, and ends in a sparkling and optimistic sounding A major.** Switching from minor to the parallel major was an innovative move, for the time. The device caught the attention of other composers, including Tchaikovsky, who later imitated this dramatic key shift in his own music.

It was in 1888, in Leipzig, Germany (where Grieg had attended a music conservatory as a young man) that he and Tchaikovsky met and became close friends, considering themselves kindred spirits and often praising one another's compositions.

Tchaikovsky said, about Grieg's music, "*What warmth and passion in his melodic phrases, what teeming vitality in his harmony, what originality and beauty in the turn of his piquant and ingenious modulations and rhythms, and in all the rest what interest, novelty, and independence!*" All of which Tchaikovsky strove to embrace in his own compositions, as we clearly see in the next grand work on today's programme.

Symphony Pathétique (Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Opus 74)

Composed by **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (Votkinsk, Russia, 1840-1893)

Premiere - 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Running Time - about 44 minutes (times below are also approximate)

Movement 1 - Adagio (9m) - Allegro non troppo (9m)

Movement 2 - Allegro con grazia (8m)

Movement 3 - Allegro molto vivace (8m)

Movement 4 - Adagio lamentoso (10m)

Tchaikovsky said, of this work, "*I love it as I have never loved any one of my musical offspring before.*" And yet, this beloved Symphony's premiere performance was not a success. Both the public and the musicians performing it were unimpressed. Its second performance, though, a mere 21 days later, was a resounding triumph.

Why the dramatic change, in just 3 weeks? Only nine days after conducting the premiere himself, Tchaikovsky died, at the age of 53. The cause of his death is still the subject of much controversy, although the official cause was said to be cholera, from drinking a glass of unboiled water.

The second performance was at one of many memorial concerts. This Symphony seemed to express the tragedy and grief felt at the composer's passing. Spreading on the wings of that sorrow, Tchaikovsky's final Symphony quickly gained international renown.

The Symphony's program (the story envisioned by the composer) is still the subject of much debate. "Let them guess at it!" was Tchaikovsky's response to such speculation, in a letter to Vladimir Davidov, the nephew to whom he dedicated the piece.

It's due to a mistranslation, that this work is known as *Symphony Pathétique*. *The Passionate Symphony* was Tchaikovsky's own name for it, although that name didn't appear at the premiere. The Russian word *Патетическая* (*Patetitčeskaja*) has associations of emotional or passionate. Modest, the composer's brother, suggested using the French word, meaning something closer to melancholy and pity. And so, *Pathétique* is the name which stuck.

The 1st movement is the longest. **Its slow and somber opening has the bassoon introducing the main theme, which is then picked up and sped up, as it's embellished by the rest of the orchestra.**

Around the 10-minute mark, you'll hear a clarinet, then bassoon, sleepily meandering towards silence. This lulls us into a false sense of security, as the Adagio ends. **An emphatic blast from the entire orchestra** wakes us from our reverie, marking the transition into the Allegro non troppo's **increasing intensity, where themes are torn apart and tempest tossed,** in an outpouring of passion.

When you hear **pizzicato** (plucked strings), **beneath a slowly moving melody being passed back and forth between brass and woodwinds,** we're nearing the 1st movement's end.

I rather like the description of the graceful and gentle **second movement** as a waltz with a limp, because of its **5/4 time signature**. (You've heard 5/4 before, in the jazz classic *Take Five* and the *Mission Impossible* theme.) **You'll hear this as 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, repeating.** Why did this odd time signature infuriate some audience members, at the time? Usually, either the second or third movement of a Symphony is in triple time (like 3/4 or 6/8), so 5/4 was a decisive break with a longstanding tradition. Keep in mind that Tchaikovsky referred to this movement a Scherzo, which is a musical joke, so I suspect that he fully intended to tweak the nose of the establishment.

The **third movement** is sometimes mistaken by audiences as the Symphony's end. It begins as the **strings and woodwinds alternate, in a rapid and merry conversation,** much like the twittering of two flocks of birds. They begin to overlap and build in excitement, **swelling then fading in volume,** almost as though the flocks keep swooping overhead. This is **joined, then taken over, by a bold and spritely march which builds in power and energy, towards a bombastic finish** resembling a rousing conclusion intended to elicit applause.

Indeed, one might expect Tchaikovsky to end his Symphony with an energetic fourth movement, something like this spirited third movement. That would certainly have been more in keeping with the traditional way of building a Symphony, at the time. In the composer's own words, the

final movement which he actually gives us is “*an Adagio of considerable dimensions.*” Adagio lamentoso (the fourth movement’s tempo marking) means slowly and sorrowfully.

It begins with **a swelling cry of distress and heartbreak, initially from the strings**, as only Tchaikovsky can wring from an orchestra. This continues, right up to the very end, with **wave after wave of profound, yet exquisite, anguish**. One can almost hear **the strings sobbing, while the brass cry out and rail** against an injustice. The Symphony draws to a close with an almost resigned sigh, **fading gradually into nothingness**.

Gorgeous and heartwrenching, yet controversial and hotly debated, this magnificent and passionate masterpiece is one of the most performed of all Symphonies. Describing what would prove to be his final composition, Tchaikovsky explains what its creation cost him: “*Without exaggeration, I have put my whole soul into this work.*”