

Reno Chamber Orchestra
Program Notes
Dreaming Big
May 19, 2024

By Chris Morrison

Victor Herbert

Born: February 1, 1859, Guernsey, Channel Islands

Died: May 26, 1924, New York City, New York

Victor Herbert became famous for his forty-three operettas, including such notable works as *Babes in Toyland* (1903) and *Naughty Marietta* (1910), that dominated Broadway from the 1890s through World War I. He initially became known in Germany as a composer and cello virtuoso. In 1886, he moved to the United States with his wife, Therese Förster, who became a singer with the Metropolitan Opera, with Herbert serving as principal cello in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. From 1898 to 1904, he was music director and conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. By then he was famous enough that he left that post and formed his own concert orchestra, the Victor Herbert Orchestra. He fought for copyright protection for composers, and helped to found the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) in 1914. Among his compositions in a variety of genres, he wrote perhaps the first orchestral score for a feature film, *The Fall of a Nation* (1916), and produced a considerable amount of music for revues like the Ziegfeld Follies.

Serenade, Op.12

Composed: 1884

Duration: 28 minutes

Instrumentation: strings

While Victor Herbert is largely remembered nowadays for his many successful Broadway operettas, he also wrote music in a variety of other genres, including over thirty works for orchestra, two operas, incidental music for many stage productions, songs and choral pieces, and chamber and piano works. Among Herbert's orchestral compositions, his Cello Concerto No. 2 of 1894 so impressed Antonín Dvořák that he was moved to write his own, now quite famous, concerto for the instrument. The Serenade for Strings was composed in Germany but given its very well-received premiere, conducted by Herbert himself, in New York City on December 1, 1888.

Marked *Aufzug* – literally “pulling up,” in the sense of a curtain rising, but also a reference to the kind of march one might hear at a parade – the first movement begins with a rhythmic theme that has a bit of a swagger. A contrasting theme, flowing and genial, is heard next. The opening theme returns, even more assertively, to round out the movement. The second movement *Polonaise* is graceful and light in texture. A repeating rhythm from the basses

introduces the flowing, rather more darkly-colored second theme, after which the opening theme makes a return.

The Serenade's longest movement is the third, a *Liebes-Szene* or *Love Scene*. It begins placidly, but the extended theme that follows has more than a hint of passion and longing in it. This twilight music becomes more impassioned, then quiets again in the movement's final moments. In an early review, the *New York Times* called this movement "a particularly good piece of writing, being warm in theme and forceful in expression, and showing the results of careful study of Wagner's wonderful treatment of strings."

The playful swing of the brief fourth movement *Canzonetta* – which also exists in an arrangement by Herbert for violin and piano – provides a nice contrast to what came before. *Pizzicati* introduce the main theme of the *Finale*. A warm second theme has an almost valedictory flavor. Some of the rhythmic quality of the first movement is heard again here, as the music marches its way to a jovial conclusion.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria

No reminder is really needed of the unique stature of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the history of Western music. His vast catalog of compositions – over 600 of them, including some 15 operas, 17 masses, 50 symphonies, 20 piano concertos, 23 string quartets, and much more – epitomizes the German-Austrian Classical style. His music is recognized and loved all over the world for its melodic, harmonic, and textural richness and beauty. The son of a well-known violinist and pedagogue, Mozart was one of the greatest prodigies ever, playing his first public concert at age five and composing his first music at seven. Before reaching the age of ten he had already played recitals in front of the likes of King George III of England. He traveled throughout Europe during his teens. After failing to find a secure post elsewhere, and having grown dissatisfied with his career in Salzburg, Mozart moved to Vienna, where he spent the last decade of his life. While he enjoyed some successes with his new operas and piano concertos, life there grew more and more precarious, leading to his early death at age thirty-five.

Violin Concerto No. 3 in G Major, K. 216 (first movement)

Composed: 1775

Duration: 10 minutes

Instrumentation: solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 horns, strings

Known as a formidable piano virtuoso, Mozart was also a fine violinist and violist. At age six he was given his first half-size violin by his father Leopold. Over the next few years Mozart largely taught himself the instrument, with guidance from Leopold, one of the foremost violin teachers of his day. While the viola was ultimately his preferred string instrument, Mozart became a good enough violinist to serve as concertmaster of the court orchestra in Salzburg

from 1769 to 1772. He wrote the only five violin concertos of his career in close succession between April and December of 1775, for either himself or his successor as Salzburg concertmaster, Antonio Brunetti, to perform as soloist. Interestingly, once he left Salzburg for good in 1781, Mozart never again performed in public as a violin soloist, and on his death didn't even own a violin.

There is some evidence that Mozart's first two violin concertos may have been written a year or two before 1775, which would make the more advanced Concerto No. 3 – dated September 12, 1775 – less of a surprise. As Mozart expert Alfred Einstein put it, "Suddenly there is a new depth and richness in Mozart's whole language." The first movement's bright main theme (similar to the aria "Aer tranquillo" from Mozart's contemporaneous opera *Il re pastore*) takes the form of a conversation between the soloist and the orchestra. This extroverted movement provides the violinist many opportunities to shine. One memorable moment comes at the end of the development section, when the violin turns from meditative to heroic and launches the recapitulation.

Max Bruch

Born: January 6, 1838, Cologne, Germany

Died: October 20, 1920, Friedenau, Germany

Max Bruch's musical skills developed early: he started composing at age eleven, and wrote his first symphony and string quartet at twelve. By the time he was twenty he had several students of his own, and for the next two decades he held a number of posts throughout Germany – in his home town in Cologne as well as places like Mannheim, Koblenz, Berlin, and Bonn – as composer, teacher, and conductor. After a three-year stint as conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic in England, he eventually settled in Berlin where, in 1891, he was appointed professor of composition at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, a post he retained until his retirement in 1910. Among his students were Ottorino Respighi and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Bruch's best-known composition is certainly his Violin Concerto No. 1. But he composed widely, with a catalog of over 200 works including three symphonies, concertos and chamber works, and a number of pieces based on melodies of Swedish, Celtic, Hebrew, Russian, and Scottish origin.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 26 (first and third movements)

Composed: 1864-67

Duration: 16 minutes

Instrumentation: solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings

Bruch started work on the Violin Concerto No. 1 in his early twenties. He later wrote, "In my youth I studied the violin for four or five years, and, although I did not become an adept performer, I learned to know and love the instrument. The violin seemed to me even at that time the queen of instruments, and it was quite natural that I early had the inclination to write for it." The concerto was slow to develop, and it was only completed in 1866. Even then,

however, Bruch wasn't satisfied with the results. After the work's premiere on April 24, 1866 – with Bruch conducting, and Otto von Königslöw the violinist – Bruch withdrew it, and sent copies of the score to several people, including the renowned violinist Joseph Joachim, for comments. Once revised, the Concerto was dedicated to Joachim, who became one of its great interpreters.

The initial mood of the Concerto's first movement is melancholic and meditative. The music subsequently grows more impassioned, with florid, decorative writing for the violin. Subtle murmurs introduce the third movement, leading into the brilliant gypsy-flavored theme and more expansive second idea that become the material for this combination of sonata and rondo forms. As Jonathan D. Kramer has written, "The concerto is a mesmerizing display of violin virtuosity. Bruch utilizes open strings, high registers, four-note chords, rapid double and triple stops, etc., with great understanding. The resulting work is a virtuoso's dream. When well played it shows off the instrument to great advantage. The piece is also dramatic, fiery, and melodic, and thus it has remained popular with soloists and audiences alike."

Camille Saint-Saëns

Born: October 9, 1835, Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, Algiers, Algeria

Regarded by Hans von Bülow as "the greatest musical mind" of his time, Camille Saint-Saëns composed over 300 works, among the best-known of which are the "Organ" Symphony No. 3, the opera *Samson et Dalila*, and, perhaps most famous of all, *The Carnival of The Animals*. Saint-Saëns was also one of the most renowned pianists and organists of his day – Hector Berlioz called him "an absolutely shattering master pianist." A great musical prodigy, Saint-Saëns started piano lessons at age two, composed his first music a year later, played his first full-length concert as a pianist at ten (where he offered as an encore to play any of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas from memory), and entered the Paris Conservatoire at thirteen. From 1853 to 1876 he held a number of church organist posts, and taught for four years at the École Niedermeyer. As he continued his busy musical career, composing and touring as a famous piano virtuoso, he was also able to pursue a variety of non-musical interests: he spoke several languages, was an amateur astronomer and archaeologist, and wrote poetry, plays, and popular travel books.

Symphony No. 2 in A minor, Op. 55

Composed: 1859

Duration: 24 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings

Most classical music lovers are familiar with Saint-Saëns's Symphony No. 3 in C minor, the "Organ" Symphony, which has become a popular part of the standard repertoire. What is less known is that Saint-Saëns wrote four symphonies before that masterpiece. His first, the Symphony in A major (1850), was written by the fifteen-year-old composer as a class

assignment for the Paris Conservatoire. He thought little of it, and the work lay unperformed for over a century in the Conservatoire's library before it was rediscovered in the 1970s. The same fate met the Symphony in F major (1856), titled "Urbs Roma," even though it won first prize in a composition competition sponsored by the Société Sainte-Cécile of Bordeaux. The official Symphony No. 1 in E-flat major (1853) won Saint-Saëns great praise when it was premiered by the Société des jeunes artistes, an orchestra of recent graduates from the Paris Conservatoire. Five years later Saint-Saëns began work on the Symphony No. 2, which was completed in 1859 and given its first performance in Paris in 1862.

Two imperious chords announce the beginning of the first movement, most of which is based on the subsequent theme, made up of a series of thirds, first descending, then ascending. Heard first in the strings, this theme, after a number of short solos and a short hymn-like idea in the woodwinds, becomes the basis of a dramatic fugue. After some further development of the fugue theme, a gentler tune takes over, still with an anxious underpinning. Furious energy erupts again with the return of the fugue melody, and the momentum barely flags to the end of the movement. A stately theme in the strings opens the short second movement, which in its melodies and orchestration might remind some listeners of Saint-Saëns's well-known Cello Concerto No. 1. The tone is lyrical and a bit melancholy. Winds repeat the theme, then the strings continue their elaboration of that same idea.

The third movement Scherzo has much of the storminess of the first movement. After the movement's dramatic opening, the woodwinds take up a lighter, more playful variant on the main theme. The music seems to dissolve, as quiet *pizzicato* notes from the strings mix with fragments of the main theme before a loud, abrupt ending. Dominating the finale is a lively, scurrying main theme that calls to mind the Italian *tarantella*. A rambunctious second theme and a few short, playful ideas in the woodwinds take over briefly before the scurrying theme returns. That tune is broken into fragments before a quiet, halting variation on it emerges. Gradually the momentum builds again for the forceful coda.

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