Reno Chamber Orchestra
2025 Free Community Concert
Wednesday August 27, 2025
Program Notes by Chris Morrison

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*, K. 492
(1786, 4 minutes)

Set in Spain at the castle of Count Almaviva, *The Marriage of Figaro* tells the tangled story of the Count's valet and former barber, Figaro, who is to marry the Countess's maid, Susanna. But the Count also wishes to seduce Susanna, while the Countess is pursued by the page Cherubino. The original play by Beaumarchais, which King Louis XIV had denounced as "detestable" and Napoleon had seen as "the revolution already in action," had been banned in many places but nevertheless became quite popular, both among the aristocracy and the general public. Mozart loved it, and, in his first collaboration with his great librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, created the opera *Le nozze di Figaro* in just six weeks. As was not atypical for him, Mozart composed the opera's Overture just hours before its premiere. Its quiet bustling opening suddenly erupts in high spirits, the joyful momentum carrying through to the very end.

Malcolm Arnold: *Serenade for Small Orchestra*, Op. 26, third movement
(1950, 4 minutes)

In 1943, Arnold, a pacifist and conscientious objector, decided to volunteer for military service in World War II. But it was more than he was able to manage, and after less than two years he shot himself in the foot to get discharged. He then returned to his job as an orchestral trumpet player. But in 1948, he won the Royal Academy of Music's Mendelssohn Scholarship, which gave him the chance to study composition in Italy. This experience soon convinced Arnold to leave the trumpet behind and become a full-time composer. He wrote his Symphony No. 1 in 1949, and in 1951 the two sets of *English Dances* that won him international attention. In between, in 1950, he composed his *Serenade for Small Orchestra*. While one hears some hints of the music of Jean Sibelius, which Arnold greatly admired, in the first two movements, it is Dmitri Shostakovich rather than Sibelius that seems to be a major influence in the *Serenade*'s third and final movement, with its driving, swirling energy and dramatic punctuations from the brass.

Michael Abels: *Delights & Dances*, "Bluegrassy" section
(2007, 6 minutes)

Michael Abels is best known for his scores for the Jordan Peele films *Get Out*, *Us*, and *Nope*, and for the opera *Omar*, co-written with Rhiannon Giddens, which won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Music. *Delights & Dances* was commissioned by the Sphinx Organization to celebrate their tenth year of supporting diversity in concert music. Originally for orchestra with a large number of soloists, the work's instrumentation was subsequently revised for string quartet and string orchestra. That arrangement was made specially for the Harlem Quartet, an ensemble of first-place laureates of the Sphinx Competition for outstanding young black and Latino string players. The second section of *Delights & Dances*, "Bluegrassy," is a lively hoedown, with a couple of appearances by a more sinuous idea, and colorful solos for the quartet members.

Louise Farrenc: Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 35, first movement
(1845, 11 minutes)

Louise Farrenc toured as a pianist for years, and her reputation as a virtuoso was such that, in 1842, she

was appointed Professor of Piano at the Paris Conservatory – the only such appointment at that institution given to a woman in the nineteenth century. After her death, she was remembered for her piano playing but largely forgotten as a composer, until a revival of interest in her music in the last couple of decades.

In 1841, Farrenc composed the first of her three symphonies, with the second following four years later. That Symphony No. 2 was a particular success when it was given its premiere at the Paris Conservatoire in May of 1846, and at a subsequent performance in Belgium the following year. A powerful call-to-attention leads off the slow introduction to the work's first movement. Calmer, more pastoral music alternates with more portentous sounds until the tempo speeds to Allegro. Even as the music sparkles, it never quite seems to leave behind the minor key. The second main theme, introduced by the woodwinds, flows in an easier fashion, but even this idea builds dramatically. After a stormy development section, with tumultuous string passages and brass eruptions, the main melodies repeat, with a little further development, leading to another increase of tempo and a decisive coda.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Serenade No. 13 in G major, K. 525, *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, first movement
(1787, 6 minutes)

The serenade, a sequence of several short, tuneful movements often enlivened by dance rhythms, was a common musical form during the eighteenth century. Most composers of the day supplemented their incomes by writing these lighthearted works, which often accompanied civic functions, dinners, wedding and holiday parties, and other celebrations. Mozart wrote quite a few of these for the aristocracy and the court in his hometown of Salzburg. But he hadn't written a serenade in several years when he produced his last such composition, *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (A Little Serenade), in July and August of 1787. No one knows for certain why he wrote this work, which has gone on to become one of the most famous of classical compositions. Its opening gesture, known to music fans around the world, is just one of several memorable melodies that follow in close sequence in the lively and charming first movement.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92, fourth movement
(1812, 8 minutes)

The concert at which Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 was first heard, on December 8, 1813 at the auditorium of the University of Vienna, was perhaps the composer's greatest public success – but not because of the symphony. That concert, a benefit for wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers conducted by Beethoven himself, also featured the premiere of his *Wellington's Victory*, or *Battle Symphony*. This musico-patriotic spectacle, which depicted the triumph of Wellington's troops over the French in the Battle of Vitoria in 1813, was a rousing success. While *Wellington's Victory* is held in little esteem nowadays, the Symphony No. 7 premiered (and also very well-received) at that same 1813 concert is now one of Beethoven's best-loved works. As energetic as the Symphony's first and third movements are, Beethoven does them one better with the whirlwind that is the Finale, one of his most exciting creations. Its "wild and swirling motion," as one commentator described it, seldom flags and brings the symphony to a celebratory conclusion.