

Lyrical and Lovely

Friday, August 7, 2009 • 8 p.m.

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

(born February 3, 1809; died November 4, 1847)

The Fair Melusina Overture (Op. 32, 1833)

This year marks Felix Mendelssohn's 200th birthday, and in celebration, the Britt Orchestra will perform a number of his works, including this evening's opener.

Mendelssohn became famous for a number of reasons during his lifetime, including his wonderful compositions and extraordinary keyboard skills. Possibly his most important contribution to music was the revival of the music of J.S. Bach. In 1827, Mendelssohn went on an extended holiday from his studies at the University of Berlin. While away, he visited the estate of Wilhelm Friedrich Bach, J.S. Bach's only grandson. This estate contained numerous manuscripts by the elder Bach, which Mendelssohn had the chance to examine. By mid-1828, Mendelssohn was trying to put together a performance of J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, a task his friend and teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter said was insurmountable. But Mendelssohn persevered, and by October 1828, rehearsals had begun, and in 1829, a performance was conducted by Mendelssohn in Berlin. This was the first performance of Bach's piece since his death in 1750, and it was a huge success. Without this performance, Bach's music may never have reentered the performing repertoire (although it probably would have at some point, considering the sheer genius behind it all).

The Fair Melusina Overture was part of a three part commission from the Royal Philharmonic Society in London. This commission was for a symphony, an overture and a vocal work. Mendelssohn completed this overture in 1833, after hearing an opera by the Austrian composer Conradin Kreutzer entitled *Melusine*. He attended the premiere of the opera and while he enjoyed the subject matter, he thought the music was very poor. Convinced he could do better, he composed an overture based on the same story.

The legend of Melusina was extremely popular in Europe during the Middle Ages. It tells of a distraught nobleman, who happens upon a group of three beautiful women. One of these women introduces herself as Melusina, and the nobleman almost immediately falls in love with her. He quickly asks for her hand in marriage, and she agrees, on the condition that he never see her on Saturdays, under any circumstances. The nobleman agreed and they married. They lived happily until one Saturday, when the nobleman's curiosity got the best of him. He went to Melusina's chamber and heard the bath running. He opened the door just enough to see the beautiful Melusina's upper body, which of course was expected. What he didn't expect was that from the waist down, Melusina's body had been transformed into a giant serpent's tail. He tried to keep quiet about it, until one day, after his brother had died and Melusina was attempting to comfort him, he blurted out, "Away odious serpent, contaminator of an honorable race!" Melusina knew that he had broken his oath, and she left him forever. There are various versions of this fable, one in which Melusina's tail is more that of a fish, much like a mermaid.

Mendelssohn's overture isn't overtly programmatic, but some of the melodies seem to suggest aspects of the story. The opening theme has a folk-like quality, another theme hints at the imminent departure of Melusina, and a third melody sounds strikingly similar to the storm from *The Hebrides Overture*. The work is written in sonata allegro form, which is the same form that symphonies usually start with. Mendelssohn wrote numerous concert overtures such as this one, including the overture to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As with his previous two overtures *Hebrides* (performed by the Britt Orchestra on August 1) and *Calm Sea & Prosperous Voyage* (to be performed on August 7), Mendelssohn paints a wonderful seascape, and takes us on a journey through the legend of Melusina.

Sergey Prokofiev

(born April 23, 1891; died March 5, 1953)

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major (Op. 19, 1917)

I. Andantino

II. Scherzo: Vivacissimo

III. Moderato—Allegro moderato

Prokofiev, widely considered one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, epitomizes the late Romantic style of Russian music from the late 19th to early 20th century. A child prodigy along the lines of Mendelssohn and Mozart, he completed his first piano piece by age five and his first opera by age nine. He is probably best known for his ballet *Romeo & Juliet* and his symphonic suites *Lieutenant Kije* and *Peter and the Wolf*, but Prokofiev was seemingly a master of every genre he wrote for. He preferred composing for larger ensembles like orchestras, but also composed a great deal of amazing solo piano music.

The year 1917 in Russia wasn't a pleasant scene. The Soviet Revolution was in full swing, and the Provisional Government in place after overthrowing Tsar Nicholas II was about to be overthrown by the Marxists. This did not stop Prokofiev from having one of his most productive years of his career. During 1917, he completed his first symphony, his first violin concerto (tonight's work), two piano sonatas, another solo piano piece, as well as beginning work on a cantata and his Third Piano Concerto. He had begun his First Violin Concerto in 1915, but had to abandon it to work on his opera *The Gambler*. He returned to and finished composing the concerto in 1917, but the work would not be premiered until 1923 in Paris. This was due to the fact that Prokofiev left Russia in 1918 to go to the United States. While there, Prokofiev's success was limited to playing his own works at the piano to a lukewarm reception. After two moderately successful tours of America, Prokofiev made his way back to Europe in 1922. In Germany, he met Diaghilev, a Russian art critic and ballet impresario. Diaghilev expressed an interest in having Prokofiev's opera *The Love of Three Oranges* performed as a ballet, so Prokofiev had him and the composer Igor Stravinsky come listen to the piano reduction of the piece. A violent argument broke out between Stravinsky and Prokofiev over their aesthetic positions (Prokofiev was a Neo-classical composer, while Stravinsky was very much on the cutting edge of everything new), an argument that never really got settled.

In 1923, Prokofiev moved to Paris, and the premiere of his First Violin Concerto finally took place at the Paris Opera. The delay of the premiere certainly had an effect on the way the Paris public received the work. They had grown accustomed to new and daring works by the likes of Stravinsky, Rachmoninoff and even newer works by Prokofiev himself. The public found Prokofiev's violin concerto to be too conventional and conservative in comparison. Nonetheless, the work displays some of the techniques that earned Prokofiev an avant-garde reputation while he was studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory back in Russia.

The first movement of this concerto opens with the strings playing tremolo. The soloist enters on top of this with a hauntingly beautiful melody. The violin solo is echoed by other members of the orchestra as the piece progresses. The music then grows more animated, with the violin constantly leading the way. Forceful rhythms and stringent chords mark the climax of this movement, typical of early Prokofiev's somewhat experimental nature.

The second movement, a Scherzo, packs an astounding amount of music into just four minutes. Much of the melodic content in this movement is strikingly Russian, marked by an almost folk-like approach to the melodic writing. One can certainly hear some Gypsy influence permeating the solo line in this virtuosic movement.

The work closes with a slightly slower movement which combines the ideas of the first and second movement in a strikingly genius manner. The solo part seems to attempt to reestablish the lyricism of the opening movement, while the orchestra seems reticent to follow suit. The roles are then reversed until the first theme from the first movement returns in the violin section. In the end, the solo violin ascends ever upward, encouraging by the winds. The music then winds down to virtually nothing, a fitting end to a piece of such sweeping brilliance and beauty.

Carl Nielsen

(born June 9, 1865; died October 3, 1931)

Symphony No. 3 "Sinfonia Espansiva" (op. 27, 1911)

- I. Allegro espansivo
- II. Andante pastorale
- III. Allegretto un poco
- IV. Finale: Allegro

Carl August Nielsen was a Danish composer, conductor and violinist. Although his works have been known in Denmark since he wrote them, his music is only now beginning to find an international stage. He is best known for his six symphonies, as well as his concerti for flute, violin and clarinet and his woodwind quintet. In Denmark, he is also known for his role in redefining the Danish national song tradition with his numerous and popular strophic songs. As a brief side note, his picture appears on the Danish hundred-kroner note.

In Nielsen's six symphonies, we can see the growth he underwent both as a composer as and as a person to a degree unmatched by any other composer. Nielsen's music was always composed from a place of both curiosity and compassion for his fellow man. He had a fascination with the life-force of man, and this fascination is illustrated to its fullest in his *Sinfonia Espansiva*.

It would be easy to assume that a title such as the one this symphony bears would refer to the Romantic ideals of the ever-expanding orchestra (like in Mahler, Strauss, and Wagner). This is not the case when speaking of Carl Nielsen, as he was anything but a Romantic. He allied himself more with earlier composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. So the word "espansiva," literally translated to English as expansive, refers more to what author Robert Simpsons calls "the outward growth of the mind's scope and the expansion of life that comes from it," rather than the traditional Romantic ideal of expansion.

Sinfonia Espansiva begins quite aggressively, with the brass and strings sections playing rhythmic iterations of the pitch A. This movement is an excellent example of Nielsen's optimism and energy. The generally sunny disposition of his works (certainly not all them, but a vast majority to be sure) have always encouraged comparisons with his contemporary, Jean Sibelius of Finland. Sibelius's music tended to be more grim and depressing, while Nielsen's was happy and optimistic.

After this somewhat jarring introduction, a flowing, broad melody is heard in D minor. This sets into motion a long passage of music which leads us to a chord on E-flat major, which is about as unrelated a key to D minor as there is. This was one of Nielsen's signature techniques; his use of key areas as a structural element in his music has been studied in great detail, and is referred to by Robert Simpson as "progressive tonality." Listen for this technique throughout the movement; it can be difficult to hear sometimes, as Nielsen mastered the technique to make it all the more subtle.

The second movement is a beautiful song, which begins in a somewhat static manner in the horns and strings. Stasis is quickly abandoned, and another long passage moves the listener toward a rousing rumbling from the timpani and basses. Much of the movement continues in this manner, with calm, lovely melodies interjected by low rumblings that seem to be shifts in perspective for both the listener and the composer. Eventually, two wordless singers (soprano and baritone) join the texture, instructed in the score to be "far in the background." These vocal parts can also be played by a solo clarinet and trombone. The closing of the movement is in the flutes, and has a very French quality to it.

The third movement, something of a Scherzo, also starts in the horns. Nielsen makes other connections to other movements in the work as well; for instance, this movement begins in a similar manner to both the first and second movements, in that there are a series of introductory motions, like the first movement, while the instrumentation Nielsen chose is similar to the second movement. He enjoyed including these kinds of connections in his music. Overall, this movement keeps the listener guessing all the way through.

The final movement begins with another broad melody (like the first movement) in the strings and clarinets. The theme has a march-like quality to it, but to call it a march would be an overstatement. Again, Nielsen revisits other parts from the symphony, including some similar harmonic motions to those found throughout (more examples of "progressive tonality"). The piece winds up until we reach a highly satisfying climax and conclusion fit to be the last movement of a symphony.

Program notes by Mark Knippel

