

## **PROGRAM NOTES by Eric Bromberger**

### **Five Pieces for Orchestra, Opus 16**

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

Born September 13, 1894, Vienna

Died July 13, 1951, Los Angeles

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Schoenberg moved away from traditional tonality and toward a new harmonic language based on what he called “the emancipation of dissonance,” in which no single note (or key) would be granted more importance than another. His *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, composed in the summer of 1909, is his first atonal work for orchestra: the five movements have no key signatures, nor any implied “home” keys. These five brief movements may be thought of as “mood” pieces—each generates a particular atmosphere, which Schoenberg suggests with slightly coy titles for the movements. Throughout, the emphasis is on instrumental color; melodies tend to be fragmentary, with the line leaping from section to section and acquiring different colors as it proceeds. Taking note of the fragmented melodic line, the importance of individual voices, and the changing colors of this music, one critic has suggested that they require “an orchestra of soloists.”

The evocative (but somewhat cryptic) titles for the movements may be taken as suggestions only—Schoenberg did not intend this as program music. The violent *Premonitions* contrasts two brief motifs: a quick figure for lower strings heard immediately and a swirling clarinet figure. These two theme-fragments are manipulated in many different ways over a powerful ostinato from the strings. By contrast, *Yesteryears* seems gentle, even nostalgic. It is based on the solo cello’s opening figure, which is then transformed as it passes through the orchestra. Schoenberg called the third movement *Summer Morning by a Lake* but later made a parenthetical addition—(*Colors*). He told his students that this almost static music depicts the concentric rings made by tossing stones into a still lake. The music consists of one chord that repeats constantly, changing colors and taking on a continually-evolving character as it proceeds. In the score, Schoenberg directs the conductor: “The change of chords in this piece has to be executed with the greatest subtlety, avoiding accentuation of entering instruments, so that only the difference in color becomes noticeable.” This movement is one of the earliest examples of *Klangfarbenmelodie* (“tone color melody”), in which shifting instrumental color becomes as important as shifting pitch; it is a concept that Schoenberg’s student Anton Webern would explore much more fully in his music. Schoenberg marked the fourth movement *Peripetia*, a term from Greek drama suggesting a sudden reversal of fortune, and this movement, the briefest of the five, is based on sharp contrasts. Schoenberg called the last movement *The Obligatory*

Recitative, but no one has the slightest idea what that means. It is in a three-beat meter that seems to evoke the rhythms of Viennese dances, but the music—and its manipulation of thematic fragments—swirls violently around that waltz-rhythm.

The Five Pieces for Orchestra exists in several versions: Schoenberg's original version of 1909 for huge orchestra, his re-scoring for chamber orchestra made in 1919 for a performance at his Society for Private Performances in Vienna, and a revision of the original version for normal-sized symphony orchestra, made in 1949 while he was living in Los Angeles. At these concerts, Schoenberg's original version of 1909 is performed.

### **Un sourire**

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

December 10, 1908, Avignon

Died April 28, 1992, Paris

In the fall of 1989 conductor Marek Janowski asked Olivier Messiaen to compose a short work that would be performed on the two-hundredth anniversary of Mozart's death, still two years in the future. Messiaen was attracted to the idea and set to work immediately. He first came up with the title *Un sourire* ("A Smile"), then had the entire work in draft by the end of October 1989. Janowski led the premiere of *Un sourire* on the bicentennial of Mozart's death, December 5, 1991.

Shortly after that premiere, Messiaen outlined his intentions in *Un sourire*: "I love and admire Mozart. I didn't try, in my homage to him, to imitate his style, which would have been idiotic. I said to myself: Mozart always had many enemies. He was hungry, cold, almost all his children died, his wife was ill, he knew only tragedy . . . And he always smiled. In his music and in his life. So I too tried to smile, and I composed *Un sourire*, a little piece lasting nine minutes, without pretentiousness, which I hope . . . smiles!"

Messiaen may overstate the bleakness of Mozart's life, but he was quite correct to sense that Mozart's music was not a reflection of his emotional life. Mozart would have agreed completely with T.S. Eliot's observation that "[Art] is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." Messiaen understood this as well, and his tribute to Mozart is not dramatic, nor is it brooding and dark. Instead, *Un sourire* does in fact "smile"—this gentle music honors Mozart by reflecting that aspect of his music.

*Un sourire* alternates two different kinds of music: the luminous beginning, scored for muted strings (often with a solo wind instrument), and a more raucous, energetic music that

reflects Messiaen's lifelong love of birdsong (Messiaen would have been delighted to know that Mozart loved birds and often kept them as pets). The birdsong sections of *Un sourire* are full of glittering sounds accentuated by the four percussion instruments: tubular bells, suspended cymbal, xylophone, and xylorimba (a xylophone with an extended range). *Un sourire* moves smoothly between these quite different modes of expression and finally fades peacefully away.

### **Eating Flowers**

HANNAH LASH

Born November 22, 1981, Alfred, New York

Born in upstate New York, Hannah Lash studied music as a child (she is a harpist) and then went on to distinguished academic training: she received her bachelor's degree from the Eastman School of Music, a degree in performance from the Cleveland Institute of Music, a doctorate from Harvard, and an artist's diploma from the Yale School of Music. Lash currently teaches composition at the Yale University School of Music. She has received commissions from the Boston Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra, Carnegie Hall, Chamber Music Northwest, and many others. She has composed for orchestra, chamber groups, voice and vocal ensembles, and for keyboard, and she has developed a reputation for her subtle instrumental colors and textures. Her chamber opera *Beowulf* was premiered in Boston in 2016, and Lash herself was soloist in her *Concerto for Harp and Chamber Orchestra* when it was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2015.

In that same year the Pacific Harmony Foundation, acting on a recommendation from John Adams, commissioned a work from Lash for the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music. The result was *Eating Flowers*, scored for large orchestra and premiered on August 15, 2015, by the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra under the direction of Marin Alsop. The composer has prepared a program note for this work:

When I sat down to write *Eating Flowers* I felt in many ways that I was responding to the energies of orchestral music whose colors I find irresistible: music of Ravel, Rimsky-Korsakov, Debussy, and Messiaen particularly. My piece does not quote or even explicitly refer to this older music, but the energy and the color was certainly an influence. I titled my piece *Eating Flowers* to capture the sense of having tasted the delicious and delicate colors of my favorite orchestral music, which nourished my own creative spirit after having been digested.

## **A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden**

TORU TAKEMITSU

Born October 8, 1930, Tokyo

Died February 20, 1996, Tokyo

In 1977 Toru Takemitsu received a commission from the San Francisco Symphony for a new work. At age 47, Takemitsu had not written for orchestra since his *Green* of 1967, and the piece he composed for San Francisco reflects the growing complexity of his music over the intervening ten years. *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden* grew—as did so many of Takemitsu’s works—out of his dreams, in this case two quite different dreams.

Both dreams were visual. In the first, Takemitsu had a vision of a flock of white birds, led by a single black bird, descending and alighting in a five-sided garden. The second dream was inspired by the composer’s having seen a photo of Marcel Duchamp’s, taken by Man Ray in 1919, that showed a star-shaped patch shaved out of the back of the artist’s head. From these two very different dreams, both shaped by the number five, *A Flock* began to emerge.

There were a number of further influences. One of them was Takemitsu’s deep response to Japanese gardens: “I love gardens. They do not reject people. There one can walk freely, pause to view the entire garden, or gaze at a single tree, plant, rock, and sand snow: changes, constant changes.” Beyond this, the number five is felt in many ways in *A Flock*: a five-sided garden was part of the original inspiration for this music, it is constructed in five brief sections, and it is built on five-note themes based on the pentatonic scale. One more influence was John Cage, whose indeterminate music—in which passages are left to chance or to the freedom of the performers—exerted a strong appeal for Takemitsu.

An important distinction has been made between the formal English garden and the ornamental Japanese garden. The English garden is designed precisely on straight lines: one enters and follows a designated path. But the Japanese garden is not so rigorous: there is not a set path, and one is free—in Takemitsu’s words—to “walk freely” and to choose an individual path. It is not too much to say that this distinction might also differentiate Western from Asian music. Western music is often “goal-oriented”: sonata form drives toward a resolution of its harmonic and thematic tensions—it is always in motion toward something. Much Japanese music, however, is free of the need to progress and resolve, and its conception of time and motion can be completely different. It is no surprise that many Asian composers have felt more drawn to Debussy than to Beethoven.

It may be most useful to begin with two of Takemitsu's own statements about *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden*. He described it first as a "shifting panorama of scenes in which the main motif—introduced by the oboe and representing the so-called 'Flock'—descends into the harmonious tone-field called the 'Pentagonal Garden,' created mainly on the strings." And he said of its structure: "You view a Japanese garden this way, circulating through it. It's not a linear experience at all. It is circular . . . one always comes back. I write music by placing objects in my musical garden, just the way objects are placed in a Japanese garden . . . from gardens I've learnt the Japanese sense of timing and color."

Takemitsu scores *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden* for a very large orchestra and then uses that orchestra with great economy. At moments, only a few instruments are playing, while at others he employs all his forces in music that can rise to a surprising level of dissonance, given the "topic" of the piece. Throughout, the tempo is quite slow, as if one is wandering through a Japanese garden and sometimes stopping to explore—there are silences here that can go on for some moments, and at one point Takemitsu writes "Senza tempo": this music exists outside set meter and time. At several places, individual musicians within sections are given the freedom to repeat certain passages on their own and at their own tempos. This music does not go anywhere, and musical "progress" in the Western sense was not Takemitsu's intention. *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden* wanders, it explores, it pauses, it contemplates, and finally it dissolves into silence.

### **Symphony in Three Movements**

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum

Died April 6, 1971, New York City

We expect a symphony written near the end of a major war to make a statement about the time from which it springs, and there were a large number of symphonies composed around the end of World War II that registered some reaction to that tumultuous time. Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony and Copland's Third were hailed because they captured the spirit of that moment so successfully (at least for the victors); Shostakovich's Ninth got into trouble precisely because it did not. The relation of Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* to World War II is more complicated. He began work on the first music that would become part of the symphony in 1942, shortly after America's entry into the war, and composed music that would eventually find its way into the symphony across the span of the war. He finished the *Symphony in Three Movements* as the war came shuddering to its conclusion (Stravinsky actually completed the

score on August 7, 1945, between the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and led the premiere with the New York Philharmonic on January 24, 1946.

Stravinsky was normally adamant that there was no connection between his music and extra-musical events, but in his program note for the premiere he was willing to soften this usually severe stance: “This Symphony has no program, nor is it a specific expression of any given occasion; it would be futile to seek these in my work. But during the process of creation in this, our arduous time of sharp and shifting events, of despair and hope, of continual torments, of tension and, at last, cessation and relief, it may be that all those repercussions have left traces in this Symphony. It is not I to judge.”

Yet eighteen years later, in 1963, Stravinsky was quite ready to judge. Now he drew direct connections between moments in the symphony and events from the war, particularly as they had appeared in newsreel footage. The opening of the first movement, he said, was composed in reaction to a newsreel about “scorched-earth tactics in China,” while its second theme-group was inspired by scenes of “the Chinese people scratching and digging in their fields.” The fugue in the third movement had an even sharper topical reference, said Stravinsky: “The immobility at the beginning of this fugue is comic, I think—and so, to me, was the overturned arrogance of the Germans when their [war] machine failed. The exposition of the fugue and the end of the Symphony are associated in my plot with the rise of the Allies, and the final, rather too commercial, D-flat sixth chord—instead of the expected C—in some way tokens my extra exuberance in the Allied triumph.” This discussion of the inspiration of specific moments—and of an underlying “plot”—would seem to make the Symphony in Three Movements program music, but at this point Stravinsky drew back, saying coolly that this music “does and does not ‘express my feelings’ [about the war]” and finally insisting: “the Symphony is not programmatic. Composers combine notes. That is all.”

Certainly the symphony did not take shape in one unified arc, and—in retrospect—its composition seems somewhat haphazard. The earliest section to be composed had been at first planned as an orchestral movement with an important concertante part for piano; Stravinsky set this aside, but it would later reappear in the first movement of the symphony. The following year, novelist Franz Werfel invited Stravinsky to compose music for a movie based on that writer’s *Song of Bernadette*. Stravinsky abandoned that project as well, but music he sketched for the “Apparition of the Virgin” sequence in the movie—music with an important solo part for harp—would reappear in the second movement of the symphony. Stravinsky returned to these movements in the spring of 1945—as the Allies triumphed in Europe—and composed the finale of

what had now become a symphony, trying in the process to fuse the solo parts for piano and harp in the finale. Some have questioned whether the resulting work is a symphony at all, suggesting that it lacks the organic relation of parts and the harmonic evolution that characterize true symphonic writing. Stravinsky himself was aware of this, conceding that “perhaps Three Symphonic Movements would be a more exact title.”

A brief survey of that symphonic landscape: the Symphony in Three Movements comes to life with a violent rip up the scale of an augmented octave, and this slashing opening introduces the swaggering march that constitutes the first theme. This music is very fast—though Stravinsky gives the movement no Italian tempo marking, this opening is set at quarter-note=160. The second theme-group (at half the opening speed) arrives in strings and solo piano above murmuring horns, and the active development reaches its climax on great wrenching chords. The furious scales from the very beginning return at the coda, but now that opening fury feels spent—the music collapses, and finally the bass clarinet murmurs its way to the movement’s subdued close on a quiet string chord.

The Andante is in ternary form, and the concertante role given to the piano in the opening movement is here assumed by the harp. The poised opening, announced by second violins and violas, gives way to a slightly-faster central episode of more somber character as solo flute dances gravely above harp accompaniment. An abbreviated return of the opening leads to a seven-measure Interlude that takes us directly into the concluding movement.

Marked simply *Con moto*, the finale opens with another march, the one Stravinsky felt had been inspired by newsreels of strutting Nazis (such marching automatons seemed to be a feature of the symphonic imagination at this moment: another symphony composed at precisely this same time, Arthur Honegger’s Third, also has a finale that begins with the ominous march of dehumanized robots). Soon comes a buoyant, dancing figure in the high winds that Stravinsky linked with the motion of “war machines,” and at the center of the movement is the fugue—laid out at first only by trombone, piano, and harp—that the composer associated with the defeat of the Nazis. The symphony then powers its way to the close on great blocks of rhythm and sound. Shortly before writing this movement, Stravinsky had revised the Sacrificial Dance of The Rite of Spring, and some have heard the savage sounds of that music in this symphony’s closing moments. At the end, the Nazis have been crushed, the Allies are triumphant, and the symphony pounds its way to the “extra exuberance” of that final chord.

In this sense, Stravinsky’s Symphony in Three Movements is driven by some of the same shining spirit that blazes through two other exuberant symphonies written as World War II swept

to its close: the Fourth Symphonies of Bohuslav Martinu and David Diamond. The Symphony in Three Movements may not—as some have charged—be a true symphony, and it may not—as its composer believed—be program music, but it is a worthy participant in the distinguished symphonic discourse that registered the monumental events of 1945.