

## **Overture to William Tell**

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Born February 29, 1792, Pesaro

Died November 13, 1868, Paris

*William Tell*, based on Schiller's play *Wilhelm Tell* (1804) about Swiss resistance to Austrian oppression, was Rossini's final opera. It was premiered on August 3, 1829, in Paris (and was originally sung in French, so its first title was *Guillaume Tell*). The curious thing is that its composer—then only 37 years old—would live for nearly forty more years and would never return to opera. *William Tell*, however, was a huge success, and just before his death Rossini attended its 500<sup>th</sup> performance in Paris.

His overture to the opera, which has enjoyed a very successful life in the concert hall, has an unusual structure. Rather than casting it in sonata form, Rossini chose to write it in four separate parts, very much like an instrumental suite; some (but not all) of its themes will reappear in the opera itself. The instrumentation for the opening section is striking: Rossini scores it for five cellos with some discreet accompaniment by timpani and pizzicato strings, and this quintet sings a noble opening song. The second section, marked simply *Allegro*, is a portrait of a violent storm: murmuring strings suggest distant thunder, and woodwinds echo the strike of big drops of rain before the storm bursts upon us. In its aftermath, solo English horn and solo flute sing a song of thanksgiving based on the old Swiss shepherd's song *ranz des vaches*; this melody will reappear in many forms in the opera itself.

The concluding section of the overture, marked *Allegro vivace*, has become famous for reasons Rossini could never have foreseen. He had originally written this music seven years earlier as a march for a military band in Venice, and now he incorporated that march to represent the call-to-arms of the Swiss soldiers. Rossini briefly used this march in the final act of the opera but decided to drop it, so it appears only in the overture. But this brilliant music became famous over a century later as the theme music to the radio and television program *The Lone Ranger*, and in the United States a generation of Baby Boomers grew up thinking of this as the “Lone Ranger music,” without any knowledge of its role in an opera. Heard in its original context, it offers some dazzling writing for orchestra, particularly for the first violins, who are given music of perpetual-motion difficulty before the overture hurtles to a knock-out conclusion.

## **Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major**

FLORENCE PRICE

Born April 9, 1887, Little Rock

Died June 3, 1953, Chicago

The life and career of Florence Price form one of the most interesting chapters in American music, but for years she was virtually unknown, and her achievement is becoming clear only now, nearly seventy years after her death. Born Florence Beatrice Smith in Little Rock, she was the daughter of a dentist and music teacher who encouraged her remarkable musical talent. At age 15 she entered the New England Conservatory, where she studied piano and organ and took composition lessons from George Whitefield Chadwick and Frederick Converse. Returning to Little Rock, she married George Price, an attorney, and in 1927 the couple and their children moved to Chicago, where Florence studied composition with Leo Sowerby. During these years Price helped support her family by writing musical jingles for radio commercials. Her *Symphony No. 1 in E Minor*, composed in 1931-32, won the Wanamaker Competition and was performed in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Chicago World's Fair—it was the first work by an African-American woman to be performed by a major American symphony orchestra.

Price wrote over 300 works, including four symphonies, two violin concertos, a piano concerto, piano music, and a large number of songs and choral compositions. Price's songs were championed by Marian Anderson, and there were occasional performances of her music, but in the years following her death in 1953 her music drifted into obscurity. Some of the reasons for this were stylistic. Price had been trained in the late-nineteenth century style of her teachers Chadwick and Converse, she remained faithful to that idiom throughout her career, and her music seemed old-fashioned during the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps in a new century, one that has been willing to re-embrace tonality and traditional forms, her music will find the audience it deserves.

Last season the La Jolla Symphony and co-concertmaster David Buckley performed Price's *Violin Concerto No. 2*, and this season opens with performances of her *Violin Concerto No. 1* by our other co-concertmaster, Peter Clarke. Price composed her *First Violin Concerto* in 1939, when she was 52, but there is no record of a performance during that era, and the manuscript to the concerto disappeared. Then—almost miraculously—the manuscripts of both her

violin concertos (and many other works) were discovered in 2009 in a ramshackle house in St. Anne's, Illinois, that was about to be remodeled. It turned out that that house had been Price's summer home many decades earlier, and the house had been abandoned in the years after her death. Fortunately, the new owners recognized that they had stumbled upon something of value, and all of those manuscripts were eventually deposited in the collection of Price's works that is being maintained by the University of Arkansas.

Price's *Violin Concerto No. 1* is in the traditional three movements, and it is in "the violinist's key" of D major. It was composed in the same year that William Walton and Benjamin Britten wrote their violin concertos, and in comparison to those concertos, Price's *First Violin Concerto* will sound very conservative indeed. In fact, at certain moments one hears distinct echoes of the Brahms and Tchaikovsky violin concertos—Price was clearly aware of the great tradition in which she was composing. But there is also a disarming freshness about her *First Violin Concerto*—it emphasizes the lyric rather than the dramatic side of the violin, and it is beautifully written for both soloist and orchestra. The concerto opens with a substantial *Tempo moderato* in sonata form (this movement is longer than the final two movements combined). A long orchestral exposition leads to the entrance of the soloist, whose part sings throughout (Price did play the violin, but she writes beautifully for the instrument). The development turns more virtuosic, with some complex chording for the soloist, who eventually has a florid cadenza. A spirited coda drives to movement to its stirring close. Orchestral winds introduce the *Andante* and are soon joined by the soloist. Price's teachers at the New England Conservatory had encouraged her to make use of African-American material in her own music, and while this movement does not quote specific songs, the idiom here is often reminiscent of folk music. The concluding *Allegro* is the shortest in the concerto. The orchestra's dancing introduction in 6/8 sets the mood, the soloist quickly joins in the fun, and this brief movement—full of energy and good spirits—brings the concerto to a very satisfying conclusion.

### **Concerto for Orchestra**

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklos, Hungary

Died September 26, 1945, New York City

Bartók and his wife fled to the United States in October 1940 to escape World War II and

the Nazi domination of Hungary, but their hopes for a new life in America were quickly dashed. Wartime America had little interest in Bartók or his music, the couple soon found themselves living in near-poverty, and then came the catastrophe: in the spring of 1942 Bartók's health failed. By the following spring his weight had dropped to 87 pounds (a ghastly photo from these months shows an emaciated figure, his bones pressed through his skin), and he had to be hospitalized. Bartók fell into a deep depression, convinced that he would neither recover nor compose again. To his publisher he wrote, "Artistic creative work generally is the result of an outflow of strength, highspiritedness, joy of life, etc.—All these conditions are sadly missing with me at present."

At this point, Bartók's friends rallied around him—and very discreetly too, since the fiercely-proud composer would never accept anything that savored of charity. Fritz Reiner and Joseph Szigeti convinced Serge Koussevitzky to ask for a new work from the ailing composer, and the conductor visited Bartók's hospital room in New York City to tell him that the Koussevitzky Foundation had commissioned an orchestral work for which it would pay \$1000. Bartók refused. He believed that he could never complete such a work, but Koussevitzky gave Bartók a check for \$500 and insisted that the money was his whether he finished it or not. The visit had a transforming effect: soon Bartók was well enough to travel to Saranac Lake in upstate New York, where he spent the summer. First he rested (using the time to read an English translation of *Don Quixote*), and then he began work. He worked fast: beginning August 15, 1943, he completed the score eight weeks later on October 8.

The *Concerto for Orchestra*, as Bartók called the piece, had its first performance on December 1, 1944, in Boston. It was an instant success, and Bartók reported that Koussevitzky called it "the best orchestra piece of the last 25 years." For that premiere, Bartók prepared a detailed program note, and—unusually for this composer—that note talked not just about the title and structure, but about the content of the music:

The title of this symphony-like orchestral work is explained by its tendency to treat the single orchestral instruments in a concertant or soloistic manner. The 'virtuoso' treatment appears, for instance, in the fugato section of the development of the first movement (brass instruments), or in the perpetuum-mobile-like passage of the principal theme of the last movement (strings), and especially in the second movement, in which

pairs of instruments consecutively appear with brilliant passages.

This is music of strength, humanity, beauty, and (not least) humor, and Bartók's own description may touch the secret of its emotional appeal: "The general mood of the work represents, apart from the jesting second movement, a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death-song of the third, to the life-assertion of the last one."

The five movements of the *Concerto for Orchestra* are in the beautifully-symmetric arch form that Bartók sometimes employed. The outer movements, both in modified sonata form, are the anchors of this arch. They frame the two even-numbered movements, both of which have the character of scherzos (each is marked *Allegretto*). The central slow movement, which itself is in a symmetric ternary form, becomes the capstone to the arch.

*Introduzione*: The music comes to life with a brooding introduction, and flutes and trumpets hint at theme-shapes that will return later. The movement takes wing at the *Allegro vivace* with a leaping subject (immediately inverted) for both violin sections, and further themes quickly follow: a second subject for solo trombone and a more intimate figure for solo oboe. As part of the development comes a resounding fugato for the *Concerto's* eleven brass players, and the movement drives to a resplendent close on its second subject, stamped out by the brass.

*Giuoco delle Coppie (Game of Couples)*: This charming movement should be understood as a scherzo in the literal meaning of that term: a "joke"—music for fun. A side drum sets the rhythm, and then pairs of woodwinds enter in turn to play a variation on the good-natured opening tune, first heard in the bassoons. Bartók varies the sound by having each "couple" play in different intervals: the bassoons are a sixth apart, the oboes a third, the clarinets a seventh, the flutes a fifth, and finally the trumpets a second apart. A noble brass chorale interrupts the fun, and then the woodwinds pick up the opening theme and resume their game, but now with a difference: a third bassoon gets to tag along, and Bartók combines some of the pairs of woodwinds on their return. The side drum returns to tap this music into silence.

*Elegia*: At the center of the *Concerto* lies this dark *Andante*, which Bartók called a "lugubrious death-song" and which is based in part on material first heard during the introduction to the first movement. It opens with an inversion of the *Concerto's* very beginning, and this gives way to one of the finest examples of Bartók's "night-music," with a keening oboe accompanied by spooky swirls of sound. A great outburst from the violins, also derived from

the very beginning, leads to the violas' *parlando* declarations. The music winds its way back to the eerie night-sounds of the opening before vanishing with only two instruments playing: piccolo and timpani.

*Intermezzo Interrotto (Interrupted Intermezzo)*: A sharper sense of humor emerges here. Bartók begins with a woodwind tune whose shape and asymmetric meters suggest an Eastern European origin and continues with a glowing viola melody that must have had specific appeal for him: it is derived from an operetta tune by Zsigmond Vincze that originally set the words "You are lovely, you are beautiful, Hungary." At the center of the movement comes the interruption. During the war Bartók had been dismayed by the attention paid to Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony*, and he objected particularly to the obsessive ostinato theme Shostakovich associated with the Nazi invaders (and which in turn he had taken from Lehár's *The Merry Widow*). Bartók quotes that tune in the solo clarinet, then savages it: he makes the orchestra "laugh" at the theme, which he treats to a series of sneering variations and finally lampoons with rude smears of sound. This has long been considered Bartók's attack on Shostakovich, but is it possible that Lehár's tune functions in exactly the same way for both Shostakovich and Bartók? For each, it is a symbol of the hated Nazis, it invades their own music, and it is thrown aside in an act of defiant nationalism. Once it is gone, Bartók returns—in one of the most beautiful moments in the *Concerto*—to his "Hungarian" tune, now sung hauntingly by muted violins.

The *Finale* begins with a fanfare for horns, and then the strings take off and fly: this is the perpetual motion Bartók mentioned in his note for the premiere, and—beginning very quietly with the inside second violins—he soon invests this rush of energy with a slashing strength. This movement is of a type Bartók had developed over the previous decade, the dance-finale, music of celebration driven by a wild energy. Yet it is a most disciplined energy, as much of the development is built on a series of fugues. The fugue subject, derived from the opening horn fanfare and first announced by a pair of trumpets, evolves through a remarkable sequence of permutations: when the strings have their turn with it, that fugue is announced by the outside second violins (Bartók is scrupulous in this score about giving every single section and player a moment of glory). Matters subside into a mysterious quiet, and from this misty murk the fugue theme suddenly blazes out in the brass and the *Concerto for Orchestra* ends with one of the most dazzling conclusions to *any* piece of piece of music: the entire orchestra rips straight upward in a

dizzying three-octave rush of sound.

It is hard to imagine that music of so much strength, so much optimism, so much—to use Bartók’s own term—“life-assertion” could have come from the frail man who had to be helped onto the stage to receive the cheers in Boston at the premiere. For the Bartók who wrote this powerful score was a man unhappily exiled from his native land, a man tormented by the war, a man so physically weak that his doctors barely let him attend the premiere, a man wracked by the leukemia that would kill him ten months later. The appeal of this music lies not just in its virtuosity but in something much deeper: in the midst of worldwide conflagration and his own terminal illness, Bartók did recover his “strength, highspiritedness, [and] joy of life,” and he turned them into great music.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger