Program 3 Notes
January 29 & 31, 2012

by Jon Kochavi

Symphony No. 3, Op. 113 (2010)

Known as performer and conductor as well as a composer, Lowell Liebermann began his career in music early. At age 16, Liebermann played his own prize-winning Piano Sonata at Carnegie Hall, garnering immediate recognition for its combination of sometimes poignant, sometimes ferocious dissonance, its moments of stunning virtuosity, and its supreme attention to melodic line. Although Liebermann's style has evolved considerably since this time, these hallmarks have remained important in much of his music. He pursued all of his music interests at Juilliard and has maintained an active schedule as a pianist, conductor, and composer ever since. At age 50, Liebermann has an impressive array of music to his name. In addition to his three Symphonies, Liebermann has composed two full length operas (*Miss Lonelyhearts* premiered in 2006 in celebration of the centennial of Juilliard), numerous concertos (including a Clarinet Concerto premiered this past May in New York), and a wide array of piano music. He has come to be one of the most performed and recorded composer of his generation.

Lowell Liebermann
(b. 1961)

Liebermann's Symphony No. 3 was commissioned through Kathryn Gould's Magnus Opus project and premiered by JoAnne Falletta and the Virginia Symphony in November 2010. The composer provided the following notes for the premiere:

> *The greater part of the composition of the piece took place during the unfolding of two devastating and catastrophic events: the Nashville flooding and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The terrible effects of these two events and their continuing repercussions could not help but effect the emotional climate under which I was writing, and although the Symphony was not intended in any way to be programmatic of these events, I cannot help but feel that the music was colored by the conflicting emotions that each day's news would bring. The resulting Symphony is dark and ironic, but not without its moments of humor and hope.*
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> *The Symphony is in one movement of about 21 minutes duration. In terms of its structural and thematic conciseness, the more enigmatic symphonies of Sibelius, particularly the 4th and 7th, were perhaps an influence. The work can be seen as dividing into three continuous sections which share material that is developed progressively and juxtaposed in a mosaic-like fashion over the course of the three sections. The symphony contains several elements of dance music: because of this I toyed at one point with calling the work a 'Dance Symphony,' but decided that this would have been a distortion of the work's intent and, ultimately, a bewildering subtitle. The work's thematic material is presented in various guises: as a slow and morbid waltz [prominently featuring solo instruments], an intentionally banal blues [led by the winds], a sardonic octatonic stride complete with walking bass [developed as a fugato], and in the final section, an elegiac sarabande. One of the most prominent thematic groups heard throughout the symphony takes the form of a three-part choral in various incarnations, which in part suggested the use of the three violin sections [as opposed to the usual two] to match the six trios of woodwinds, trumpets and trombones. Harmonically, the symphony makes use of a wide range of materials, often simultaneously: tonal, atonal, bitonal, whole tone, modal, quartal and octatonic.*
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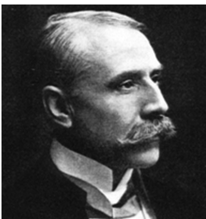
> *The opening of the work presents in succession the three motives which comprise most of the*

Symphony's thematic material: a step-wise ascending motive in the English Horn and strings heard against a descending whole tone motive, followed by a wide-arching disjoint chromatic melody in the violins and flutes, and a modally tinged three-part choral which is first heard in clarinets and violins. The central section is a jazz-inflected allegro which aspires to a kind of superficial jollity but never loses its undercurrent of darkness and hysteria. The final section, marked Larghissimo, is the emotional core of the work. A reflection on the passage of time, it further develops the choral theme, ending with an intrusive and unresolved recollection of the allegro.

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in E minor, Op. 85 (1918-19)

Adagio – Moderato
Lento – Allegro molto
Adagio
Allegro



Sir Edward Elgar
(1857-1934)

Elgar described his cello concerto as "a man's attitude towards life." Given that the concerto is one of his most melancholy works, with a sadness that is not just nostalgic, but immediate and palpable, we gain an insight into his mindset at the time of its composition. Elgar began work on his concerto a few months before the end of World War I, and the war had taken a toll on his psyche in a number of ways. First and foremost, he seemed to lose confidence in the logic and meaning of the new world around him, which dealt a profound blow to his faith. In the waning days of the war, his friend, poet Laurence Binyon, asked Elgar to set a poem about peace to celebrate the war's end, but Elgar declined, writing:

I do not feel drawn to write peace music somehow . . . the whole atmosphere is too full of complexities . . . . I regret the appeal to the Heavenly Spirit [in your poem] which is cruelly obtuse to the individual sorrow and sacrifice — a cruelty I resent bitterly and disappointedly.

On a professional level, the war depleted resources from music and the arts in England for four years, putting the Elgar family in a difficult financial position, eventually forcing them to sell their beloved home in London. Add to this serious health concerns of both Elgar and his wife, the deaths of a number of his aging friends, and a disconcerting house burglary, it is understandable how he found inside of him "a concerto of isolation, loneliness, and farewell, even," in the words of biographer Jerrold Moore.

Elgar's attitude began to turn around somewhat in the months after the war, and in putting the finishing touches on the concerto, he grew increasingly enthusiastic about the piece and its upcoming premiere in the first post-war concert by the London Symphony in October 1919. The program was to include pieces conducted by the orchestra's new director Albert Coates, followed by the concerto, which Elgar would conduct himself. Unfortunately, Coates went significantly over his allotted rehearsal time, significantly reducing the amount of time Elgar had with the orchestra. Elgar remained calm through this indignity, but the premiere suffered. In his review of the concert, Ernst Newman couldn't understand why the orchestra sounded so wonderful for Coates' half of the program, but "never, in all probability, has so great an orchestra made so lamentable a public exhibition of itself" in the performance of Elgar's concerto. Nevertheless, the concerto survived its difficult beginnings to become one of the staples of the literature.

Elgar eschews traditional sonata form in the first movement, casting it in simple ABA form, allowing him to concentrate on exploiting the cello's cantilena qualities. The unusual beginning uses multi-stops in a cello phrase, marked *nobilmente*, which will reappear at two key moments later in the concerto. The first theme proper is a soulful lament in 9/8 meter beginning in the violas. The middle section melody, which skips upwards in the clarinets and bassoons,

is still expressive, but lighter in mood. The return of the multi-stop figure at the end serves as a link directly into the second movement, a kind of scherzo. Beginning haltingly, the cello eventually establishes a rapid-note gesture that takes off into a brilliant race in perpetual motion. The momentum is only interrupted briefly by a broad, quintessentially Elgarian melody in the cello, answered by the orchestra.

The long, lyrical cello melody in the *adagio* flows so effortlessly, that it is easy not to notice the rather extreme chromaticism and harmonic meandering that it projects, circling around B-flat major, F major, A-flat major, G major, and A major. The movement is really a stirring aria for cello, swelling to a passionate climax just before a repeat of the opening, and ending on an unresolved half-cadence.

The raucous introduction to the last movement is interrupted by a solo cello recitative that is transformed into a mini-cadenza. The rondo theme is far from carefree, almost a *danse macabre*. Towards the end, the cello enters with a Wagnerian sustained line that builds in texture and leads seamlessly into a return of the third movement theme. The multi-stop motto from the very beginning of the piece returns as a frame before a quick reappearance of the rondo theme rushes the piece to a close.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, "From the New World" (1893)

Adagio – Allegro molto
Largo
Scherzo (Molto vivace)
Allegro con fuoco

In coming to America in 1892, Dvořák was hailed as a beacon to light the way to a new musical future for the United States. Successful American composers of art music certainly existed before this time, but their styles tended to be European–the country had yet to find its own musical voice. Dvořák was quick to realize the potential of certain music that others perhaps took for granted: Native American and especially African-American melodies. In 1893, he wrote,

> *[Negro melodies] can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition in the United States. When I first came here, I was impressed with this idea, and it has settled into a conviction. These beautiful and varied themes are a product of this soil . . . . They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them . . . In the Negro melodies of America, I discovered all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay, gracious or what you will.*

Of course, Dvořák's words were prescient, although he never could have imagined the tremendous development of the jazz idiom that can trace its roots back to these nineteenth-century sources. The introduction of jazz elements into classical scores helped America establish its own style (though the technique was not limited to American music), and the influence of Negro spirituals on classical music of this country is still felt today (for example, in George Crumb's 2003 *A Journey Beyond Time*, a song cycle inspired by these melodies).

Explanations of the musical content of the "New World" Symphony differ. Some believe that it is a musical reflection of the Native American and African-American melodies Dvořák came in contact with during his first few months in the U.S. Others point to the symphony as a musical setting of Longfellow's epic poem *Song of Hiawatha*, which Dvořák mentioned in connection with the work. Still others see the symphony as a deeply Czech work, expressing the homesickness Dvořák was known to have had for his homeland. Dvořák scholar Michael Beckerman has even identified specific musical quotations in the symphony drawn directly from an American birdsong

Antonin Dvořák
(1841-1904)

book given to Dvořák during his first weeks in the States. In all likelihood, the symphony was meant as an expression of a combination of all of these aspects of Dvořák's thinking. Regardless, the premiere of the work at Carnegie Hall in December 1893 was the greatest triumph of Dvořák's career, with a response that made him feel like a king. The symphony has remained an audience favorite ever since.

After a dramatic introduction, the horns begin the first theme of the symphony, a simple but bold rising and falling arpeggio that becomes a kind of motto for not only the movement, but the whole work. The Slavic second theme in the flutes and oboes uses a modal G minor scale and offbeat accents, evoking a folk melody. The flowing lyricism of the third theme in the solo flute masks its extremely clever origins: Dvořák freely inverts the horn motto theme and borrows from its rhythmic contour to form a melody that subtly references *Swing Lo, Sweet Chariot*. Not surprisingly, this theme and the original motto effortlessly mix and mingle in the development section, setting up a rousing coda.

Dvořák linked the *largo* to Longfellow's poem, but it is unclear which part of the poem it represents. Some have suggested that it depicts Hiawatha's wooing, or perhaps Minnehaha's funeral, but others have seen in it a more general reflection of the landscape of the poem. The brass chorale that opens the movement can certainly be seen to represent sunrise over the cornfields. The famous English horn melody is pentatonic, a scale associated with Native American melody (among many other folk idioms). The middle section flutters with birdsong as nature gradually wakes from its slumber, and the motto theme from the first movement makes a return appearance.

The *scherzo* has been said to depict Hiawatha's wedding feast, but it could just as easily represent a festive celebration in Bohemia. The opening gesture is a nod to the scherzo of Beethoven's Ninth, but the spirited Slavic dance that follows is pure Dvořák: its angular rhythms and fleeting modal references give it a more Bohemian feel than the like-minded Carnival. A transition section includes mysterious references to the motto theme in the cellos before a Viennese waltz appears. The coda includes further references to the first movement material.

Dvořák lets it all hang out in the finale. It is as direct and dramatic, bold and brash, and kinetic and thrilling as one can imagine. The furious opening and the powerful Slavic theme that follows, punctuated by exclamation points in full orchestra, threatens to burst at the seams before being pulled down to earth by the clarinet's soulful melody. In a *coup de grace*, Dvořák re-introduces not only the motto, but themes from all over the symphony in a complex amalgamation. Eventually, even the brass chorale reappears, but now in a much different context, leading to the culminating coda. The final chord is one of the most unusual in the literature, dying away slowly rather than ending with the expected "bang".

Guest Artist

Nathan Chan, cello

Seventeen-year-old cellist Nathan Chan demonstrated his talent for music at an early age. Before he was two, he could mimic the styles of conductors he saw on music videos. As a toddler, his imitations were so intuitively musical that he caught the attention of San Francisco Opera Assistant Conductor Sara Jobin. He made his debut as a conductor at age three, leading the San Jose Chamber Orchestra in a set of Mozart variations.

He made a Carnegie Hall debut at the age of 12, recorded with the legendary singer Roberta Flack at age 13, and at age 15, released a CD of a live World Premiere performance. He was featured in the Peabody Award winning HBO Television documentary, "Music In Me", the Grammy Award winning

radio show, “From The Top” and was one of the featured artists of the acclaimed 3-part British Television documentary, “The World’s Greatest Musical Prodigies”.

Nahan Chan has performed as a soloist with the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra, the UK Northern Sinfonia, and the Peninsula Symphony Orchestra; making his London debut with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Barbican. He has performed for the Vancouver Recital Society and Great Eastern International Kids Festival “Prodigies of the World” concert in Singapore

Besides the cello, Nathan Chan plays saxophone, piano, and electric cello. He enjoys ping-pong, badminton, and filmmaking. He is a student at Lick-Wilmerding High School, and is Co-Principal Cellist of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra. He is a student of Sieun Lin at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

In His Words . . .

This piece has so many grand moments, like there are these huge mountains you have to crest. You could take the easy route and ride a chairlift up and ski down, but it’s not so interesting that way. If you trek up that mountain, show every groove, climb every rock then it’s much more interesting for the audience. Then they see the entire process of getting up the mountain. The journey is deeper. They have more of an emotional connection to the music. I know there’s a connection when it’s deathly silent during this beautiful passage. When I finally lift my bow off the string and it’s still *silent, then wow, the audience really loved it. I make changes unconsciously based on the energy in the room. They don’t teach you that in music lessons. One of the Elgar movements about fifteen seconds before the end has one of these moments. What makes the moment special* is the audience.