

MUSC 391 World of Music Concert Report

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On Friday 17 April 2009, I attended the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's (BSO) performance of Copland's "Symphony No. 3" at the Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall. This was the third work that was performed on this evening. The first was "Variations on a Theme by Haydn, opus 56a," composed by Johannes Brahms, and the second work was "Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, opus 26," by Max Bruch. I don't know whether the trio of works was supposed to have a common theme, but if so, I did not hear it. They were all very different from one another. I enjoyed Copland's symphony the most, while the other two left me feeling tired. Overall it was a very enjoyable evening.

Johannes Brahms was born 7 May 1833, in Hamburg, Germany. Although he was a composer of the romantic period, he drew on the ideas of the composers of the Classical, Baroque, and Renaissance periods; he enjoyed their compositions and learned from the successes of the past masters.¹ He was trained by his musician father, from a young age, and found the piano to be the instrument he took to most readily.² As a young man, the great violinist Joseph Joachim arranged for Brahms to meet and then study under Robert and Clara Schumann.³ He became one of the greatest composers of his time and developed a lifelong close friendship with Clara Schumann. His life work consists of about 200 lieder and nearly the same number of two, three, or four voice works. He also composed four symphonies, a number of concertos, several works of "themes and variations" of other composers' works, and a choral piece, "A German

¹ Janet E. Bedell, *Overture: A Magazine for the Patrons of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra* (Baltimore, MD, Alter Custom Publishing, 2009), 35.

² <http://www.8notes.com/biographies/brahms.asp>

³ Kristine Forney, *The Enjoyment of Music* (New York, W.W. Norton and Co. Inc, 2007), 282.

Requiem”.⁴ He died in Vienna, Austria, on 3 April 1897 at the age of sixty-four.⁵ Brahms is widely considered to be one of the great composers of classical European music.

The “Variations on a Theme by Haydn,” also known as the “Chorale St. Anthony,” is arranged in 10 parts. It is believed that this work was actually written by Haydn’s student, Ignaz Pleyel, who had likely borrowed from an earlier work.⁶ Whatever the case may be, Brahms found something he liked in it and set about reworking the piece. The opening of the work is marked *andante*. Oboes and bassoons introduced the piece. Moving into the first variation, the strings joined the woodwinds and then the brass. The second variation moved back and forth between *forte* and *piano*, maybe even *pianissimo*, and also between *staccato* and *legato*. The third variation felt mellower. Variation four gave the oboe and French horn solos. It was darker than the first part of the work but the strings prevented it from being completely somber. Variation five changed the atmosphere by bringing in a light upbeat sound, carried by the woodwinds and strings. This variation bordered on being out of control, but not in a frenetic way. The sixth variation used horns to pace the continued rapid feeling, though this felt more controlled. Seven moved back to soft and smooth, graceful style. Horns and strings, I believe violas, were used predominantly here. The eighth, and final, variation was highly varied. It was hard to tell what was going on between the strings and the woodwinds.⁷ The *Finale* was also *andante*, and in what is called *passacaglia* form. This is a Baroque form, in moderately slow triple meter, with a short, repeated base line that serves as the home for continued variation amongst other instruments.⁸

⁴ <http://www.8notes.com/biographies/brahms.asp>

⁵ Forney, *Music*, 282-283.

⁶ Bedell, *Overture*, 36.

⁷ Bedell, *Overture*, 36.

⁸ Forney, *Music*, Glossary A17

This piece was a Romantic Era work, even though the original was produced in the Classical period. The work is an orchestral work and the genre is under the heading themes and variations. Although I am not 100% certain, I believe this would be an example of rondo form, as the first section seems to be repeated in different ways throughout the eight variations. As for the number of movements, again, I am uncertain as to whether one would consider this work to be one movement, as it is continuous, or if it is nine different movements that flow from one to the next with no true break. The dynamics and articulations ran the gamut from piano/pianissimo to forte and from legato to staccato. Special techniques included muting of the strings. I can't imagine what Brahms was attempting to express by this work. It is so diverse, in all of its variations, that maybe he was just trying to show how he could turn something simple into an extremely complex piece of music.

The next work was by Max Bruch. He was born in Cologne, Germany, on 6 January 1838.⁹ He started working as a composer when he was a young man.¹⁰ Between the ages of nine and fourteen he composed more than 70 pieces of music.¹¹ Before he died, 2 October 1920, in Friedenau, Germany, he had composed 45 choral works, three operas, and three symphonies, as well as 15 additional works for solo instruments and orchestra.¹² He accomplished a great deal in his 82 years on earth. According to his biography in the BSO guide, *Overture*, he was one of the most prolific and respected German composers of the second half of the 19th century.

The BSO performed his most famous work, "Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, opus 26". This piece was written to highlight the violin, and specifically for the violinist Joseph

⁹ Bedell, *Overture*, 36.

¹⁰ Bedell, *Overture*, 36.

¹¹ <http://www.music.vt.edu/musicdictionary/appendix/Composers/B/MaxBruch.html>

¹² <http://www.music.vt.edu/musicdictionary/appendix/Composers/B/MaxBruch.html>

Joachim.¹³ This work was also a Romantic period piece, but it was very different from Brahms' *Variations*. The form of this concerto is through composed, I think. It had three movements, the *Prelude: Allegro moderato*, *Adagio*, and the *Finale: Allegro energico*. Each movement was completely unique. The first movement focused the majority of its attention, as expected, on the solo violinist, Concertmaster Jonathan Carney. Timpani drums were used to usher in the dramatic event of the violin solo. The rest of the orchestra acted as an "audience" to the violinist, by "applauding" after each solo, as if asking for more, and the violinist delivered each time. This first movement was on the darker side, not mournful but more like the Wicked Witch of the North.

The second movement was more balanced between the violin soloist and the orchestra, even though the violinist continued to be showcased. To me it seemed that the violin, along with the other strings, had melded into the orchestra, and did not stand out quite as much. The full orchestra prepared the stage while the violinist introduced the third movement. This is the fastest tempo incorporated into the work, and the violin solo really stood out. However, there were a couple of moderato areas within the allegro tempo. In addition to the differing tempos, the strings employed a special technique. The soloist, and the entire string section, used the *pizzicato* technique in the third movement. Once more I did not find anything that I believe the music related to, other than energy. Sometimes it was a dark energy, sometimes lighter, but energy and only energy. Overall, the piece was much livelier than the Brahms work but it did not compare to the final work by Copland.

Aaron Copland was born on 14 November 1900, in Brooklyn, New York.¹⁴ He was not born into a musical family, but that did not stop him from wanting to study music. In his early

¹³ Bedell, *Overture*, 36.

¹⁴ Bedell, *Overture*, 37.

twenties he went to Paris and became the first American student to study under Nadia Boulanger, a composer, conductor, and prominent teacher of many future great musicians and composers.¹⁵ Copland returned from France ready to write and went to work immediately. It was at this time that the audience for music was changing. The radio had turned everyday folks into music lovers. Additionally, the turntable and Hollywood were creating even greater opportunities for music to be heard by ever-growing audiences.¹⁶ Copland decided to write for the masses but refused to write anything that would be construed as simple, so as not to be accused of writing down to the general public.¹⁷ He was greatly inspired by the American musical form, Jazz, and used it as inspiration for two of his earliest works, “Music for the Theatre,” and “Piano Concerto”.¹⁸ Copland composed two operas, four ballets, eight film scores, and 15 orchestral works. He also wrote chamber music, piano pieces, choral works, and arranged a number of “Old American Songs”, and wrote music for the “12 Poems of Emily Dickinson”.¹⁹ Aaron Copland died on 2 December 1990, at age 90.²⁰ He is remembered as one of the greatest composers in American history.

Copland’s *Symphony No. 3* starts out light and airy. Woodwinds and strings gave the impression of floating but the light brass kept the opening grounded. There was a brief climax and then it was back to the lighter sound with strings and woodwinds. Again, a building sound led to a climax and then the trombones entered forcefully. The following section, we were told ahead of time by the conductor, was a forerunner to *Fanfare for the Common Man*. From there, the movement climaxed with a great percussion and brass duet before coming back down to a

¹⁵ <http://www.nadiaboulanger.org/>, Bedell, *Overture*, 38.

¹⁶ Forney, *Music*, 367.

¹⁷ Bedell, *Overture*, 38.

¹⁸ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/aaron-copland/about-the-composer/475/>

¹⁹ <http://www.answers.com/topic/aaron-copland>

²⁰ Bedell, *Overture*, 37.

lighter feeling. The second movement was where I felt more of the post-war feel of the music. Copland said that he composed this as “an end-of-war piece – intended to reflect the euphoric spirit of the country at the time”.²¹ However, the movement was not entirely euphoric. Somewhere in between the roaring of the brass and rhythmic string chorus was a woodwind, oboe I believe, that sounded sad, as if it were mourning the dead soldiers. After this the piano joined in and then the full orchestra came together to bring the second movement to a close. It was very reminiscent of a military parade after the fighting had ended.

The third movement started with the violins making a joyous sound. This reminded me of morning on the prairie, big wide-open spaces, and big sky. As the music gained strength, it painted the scene of a cattle drive, heading north through the Panhandle of Texas. (For some reason, a lot of his music reminds me of the old west.) Next either a piccolo or flute entered, solo, and introduced a new idea. The rest of the orchestra elaborated on this idea. In the Finale, *Fanfare for the Common Man* was highlighted. The brass and percussion took control of the stage and brought an intense energy into the hall. Various sections of strings and woodwinds wound their way into and out of *Fanfare* until it all came to a sudden halt. What stopped everything was a very dissonant sounding brass section. After the chaos subsided, the woodwinds brought back the *Fanfare*. As the work closed, the entire orchestra was involved but the percussion was definitely the focus. I think every percussion instrument available was put to use in the finale. It was a fireworks show without the multi-colored hot flashes of light.

Overall the concert was good. I enjoyed Copland the most and Brahms the least. The difference between the energy for each of the three works may have been due to the composition, the orchestra, the audience, or a combination of the three. Whatever the case may be, I would certainly enjoy hearing more of Copland’s works in the future. As for the other two, maybe if I

²¹ Bedell, *Overture*, 38.

wasn't so tired and run down it would have been easier to enjoy them, as I could have put more of my energy into enjoying the performance. Maybe I just like more modern works. Something about Copland's music made me feel like I was in another place, but not necessarily in another time. It was a good experience and I will return to the symphony.