

Program Notes



Saturday, February 20, 2009, 8 pm

Sunday, February 21, 2009, 3 pm

Venue: Ohio Theatre

ROMANCE OF THE CELLO

Adams - The Chairman Dances: Foxtrot for Orchestra

Lalo - Cello Concerto

Prokofiev - Symphony No. 5

Edwin Outwater, conductor

Amit Peled, cello

The Chairman Dances

Foxtrot for Orchestra

by John Adams (b. 1947)

John Adams was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on February 15, 1947, and currently lives in Berkeley, California. He composed The Chairman Dances in 1985 on a joint commission from the American Composers Orchestra and the Milwaukee Symphony. The first performance was given on January 31, 1986, by the Milwaukee Symphony conducted by Lukas Foss.

This work runs about 12 minutes in performance. The Columbus Symphony last performed it on February 18, 1998.

John Adams and his collaborators shocked a lot of people when they put contemporary figures such as Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger and Mao Zedong on the operatic stage in *Nixon in China* (1985-87). Opera was not supposed to be so close to everyday life. Yet Adams found a larger, symbolic meaning behind the famous encounter between American president Nixon and the Chinese Communist Party chief Mao. He saw these characters almost as mythical figures, not unlike the gods and legendary heroes that populated so much classical opera.

The Chairman Dances is not part of the opera, though it is related to it. In 1985, Adams received an independent orchestral commission while working on *Nixon*. He initially planned to write a work that would fit into the opera as well, as at one point in Act III Chairman Mao dances with his wife, Chiang Ch'ing as the Nixons and the Maos reminisce about their youths. In the end, Adams wrote different music for this scene, although the main theme of the foxtrot occurs in both.

The imaginary stage situation of *The Chairman Dances* is described by Adams in a prefatory note to the score:

Chiang Ch'ing, a.k.a. Madame Mao, has gatecrashed the Presidential Banquet. She is first seen standing where she is most in the way of the waiters. After a few minutes, she brings out a box of paper lanterns and hangs them around the hall, then strips down to a skin-tight dress from neck to ankle and slit up to the hip. She signals the orchestra to play and begins dancing herself. Mao is becoming excited. He steps down from his portrait on the wall and they begin to foxtrot together. They are back in Yenan, dancing to the gramophone...

Program Notes



The Chairman Dances is a good example of Adams' style, indebted to the so-called "minimalist" school but transcending some of its limitations. The minimalists of the 1960s and 1970s (Terry Riley, the early Steve Reich and Philip Glass) developed a style based on multiple repetitions of simple rhythms and tending to avoid clashes in the harmony. Minimalism brought a certain much-needed freshness into new music, but Adams felt it had gone too far in simplification. "I demand more from musical experience," he declared. Accordingly, his music is richer in changes and contrasts than the works of most minimalists, and requires much more virtuosity on the part of the players. Note the variety of instrumental colors in *The Chairman Dances*, where, despite the persistent repeat of a hammering rhythmic motif, the sound of the music is frequently modified.

The foxtrot theme appears about one-third of the way into the piece, and the persistent rhythmic figure now becomes an accompaniment. After a section where the entire orchestra is playing, the texture gradually thins out until only a piano and drums are left. In the end, the piano drops out, too, and the piece is ended by the percussion alone. The (intentionally) trivial foxtrot theme is enlivened by many irregular, asymmetrical rhythmic figures. Is this a real foxtrot or the parody of one? The music can be heard either way, or both ways at once.

Program Notes



Cello Concerto in D Minor by Edouard Lalo (1823-1892)

Edouard Lalo was born in Lille, France, on January 27, 1823, and died in Paris on April 22, 1892. He wrote his Cello Concerto in 1876. The first performance took place on December 9, 1877 at the Cirque d'hiver in Paris, with Adolphe Fischer as the soloist.

This concerto runs about 25 minutes in performance. The Columbus Symphony last performed it on April 30, 2008.

The Romantic composers really knew how to make the cello sing. The instrument's unusually wide range and rich sound inspired many composers of the 19th century, from Schumann and Brahms to Tchaikovsky and Dvorák, to write works in which melodic lyricism were combined with great dramatic power. In France, Camille Saint-Saëns produced his popular First Cello Concerto in 1872, followed four years later by the D-minor concerto of his fellow countryman Edouard Lalo. Both works quickly became staples of the international cello repertoire.

For many years, Lalo was active in Paris as a string player; he was violist and later second violinist in the Armingaud Quartet, which did a great deal to make the Austro-German quartet literature, from Haydn to Schumann, better known in France. His own compositional efforts met with little success until 1874, when the 51-year-old composer had his break with *Symphonie espagnole*, a still-popular composition that, in spite of its name, is not a symphony but a violin concerto.

The Cello Concerto came three years later, in 1877. Its three movements radiate the confidence of a composer whose obvious gifts had finally been recognized by an ever-widening audience. An energetic orchestral introduction of a few measures prepares the first entrance of the soloist in a mini-cadenza, which itself serves only as a prelude to the actual main theme. The latter—a robust, rhythmical idea—is played by the soloist, as is the more tender second theme a little later. In general, the soloist does not have much time to rest throughout the movement, except for a few measures about halfway through when the orchestral introduction is repeated. But even here, the soloist re-enters soon with a varied repeat of the initial mini-cadenza. A slower, intensely Romantic intermezzo follows, before a full recapitulation of all the earlier themes, with a final recall of the introduction at the very end.

The melody of the second-movement “Intermezzo” is played first by the muted strings in the orchestra, but the cello soon takes over. As a total surprise, this slow, dreamlike theme is suddenly interrupted by a fast dance with a strong Spanish flavor. (The author of *Symphonie espagnole* loved all things Spanish; he was well aware that his ancestors had come from Spain in the 16th century.) This enchanting dance, accompanied by a pair of flutes and plucked strings imitating guitars, is followed by a return of the opening intermezzo melody, but it comes back a second time to end the movement.

The finale opens with a fantasy-like introduction, in which the solo cello seems to be lost in meditation for a few seconds, before another Spanish-flavored dance gets underway. The soloist gets ample opportunity to display his or her virtuosity, and the first clarinet gets an extra chance to share the limelight, when it accompanies the cello melody a third lower. Gentle and impassioned moments alternate right up to the grandiose ending.

Program Notes



Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major, Op. 100 by Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Sergei Sergeievitch Prokofiev was born of Russian parents in Sontsovka, Ukraine, on April 23, 1891, and died in Nikolina Gora near Moscow on March 5, 1953. He completed his Fifth Symphony in 1944 and conducted the Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra in the work's premiere on January 13, 1945, in Moscow. The United States premiere took place later the same year, with Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

This symphony runs about 45 minutes in performance. It was last performed by the Columbus Symphony on April 18, 2004.

In the 19th century, symphony as an art form acquired certain attributes it had not had earlier. Externally, symphonies became longer and employed ever vaster orchestral resources. Beneath that surface, the emotional range of the works expanded dramatically, and the symphony often came to represent a struggle between opposing forces. To an increasing extent, symphonies were both conceived and perceived as a form of instrumental drama, with forces of “darkness,” “light,” “fate,” “longing” etc., either explicitly or implicitly present in the music.

Very few 20th century composers have been able to address this characteristic of the Romantic symphony without losing their originality. Many were turned off by the intense emotionality of the Romantic symphony. One of the first composers to turn their backs on this approach was the young Prokofiev, who in his Classical Symphony (1917) had adopted an 18th-century formal framework and proceeded to poke gentle fun at an entire classical tradition.

Much water had passed under the bridge since that youthful *tour de force*. After years of revolution, emigration and homecoming, the 50-year-old Prokofiev found himself in a Soviet Union that was very different from what he had bargained for; a Soviet Union, moreover, that was being ravaged by World War II, forcing the composer to be evacuated from Moscow. In addition, Prokofiev's marriage had recently ended and the composer was now living with a woman many years his junior. It was under these circumstances that Prokofiev returned to symphonic form for the first time in 14 years. (His Symphonies Nos. 2-4 had been written in emigration between 1924 and 1930.)

It may have been, at least in part, the war experience that enabled Prokofiev to connect with the symphonic tradition of the 19th century and to embrace its dramaturgy. The Fifth claims Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius as its spiritual ancestors, and even the influence of Shostakovich—Prokofiev's younger Russian contemporary and rival—may be felt occasionally. In Prokofiev's Fifth, the traditional symphonic struggle ends with a complete victory, consistent with Soviet expectations, which for once coincided with Prokofiev's own personal feelings.

Prokofiev himself felt that he had produced his finest work with the Fifth Symphony. He called it, in characteristic Soviet propagandistic language, “a symphony about the human spirit,” and declared: “I wanted to sing the praises of the free and happy human being—of such a person's strength, generosity and purity of soul. I cannot say I chose this theme; it was born in me and had to express itself.”

Prokofiev spent the historic summer of 1944 in Ivanovo, outside Moscow, at a vacation estate run by the Soviet Composers' Association. All the prominent Soviet composers, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Kabalevsky, were there. It was in that nurturing environment—under conditions significantly better than those

Program Notes



prevailing in the city—that the symphony was written, at the exact time when the Red Army was liberating Russia from the Nazi invaders.

Prokofiev's Fifth is an eminently melodic piece. Each of its four movements is full of singing themes and expansive lyrical phrases. Traditional schemes such as sonata form or scherzo are respected, but these formal outlines are filled out with material that is not always consistent with tradition. The first movement, for example, is an almost academically rigorous sonata form, but its tempo is a leisurely Andante instead of the faster Allegro that might have been expected -- a circumstance that confers a greater dramatic weight on the movement. Two of the themes are lyrical and introspective, the faster-moving third subject is closer to a scherzo character. The elaboration of all three ideas is frequently contrapuntal, with several different melodic lines superimposed on one another.

The second movement is a scherzo in all but name. Its main melody, in the droll vein that is so typical of Prokofiev, is first played by the solo clarinet to a violin accompaniment that keeps repeating a single two-note pattern. The orchestration of this theme becomes richer and more varied as the movement progresses. The middle section is a fast dance in 3/4 time, framed by a haunting woodwind melody in a slower tempo. The scherzo music then returns, shriller and more energetic than the first time; the movement ends abruptly after a powerful orchestral crescendo.

The third-movement Adagio is the emotional centerpiece of the symphony. It begins with an expressive melody played by the clarinets that develops towards a climax of great intensity. In the middle section, there appears a figure in dotted rhythm (with longer and shorter notes alternating) that gives the section a firm and resolute character. The slightly modified recapitulation ends abruptly after a powerful crescendo.

The finale opens with a short introduction based on reminiscences of the first movement. The main theme is, once more, presented by the clarinet to a march-like *ostinato* (rhythmically unchanging) accompaniment. The entire movement exudes the "free and happy" spirit Prokofiev spoke about. Its initially relaxed and easy-going mood becomes more exuberant towards the end. The growing role of the percussion instruments is to a large part responsible for the increase in excitement that culminates in the last measures of the symphony.

The premiere of the Fifth Symphony, on January 13, 1945, was Prokofiev's last appearance as a conductor. Three weeks later he had a heart attack that caused him to fall down the stairs at his house and suffer a brain concussion. He never fully recovered from these events, and although he continued to compose almost to the end of his life, his health remained precarious. The party resolution of 1948, which denounced Prokofiev, Shostakovich and others as "formalist" composers (the ultimate condemnation at the time), was a further blow. The Fifth Symphony, eagerly anticipated by the Soviet musical world and greeted with enthusiasm by critics and audiences alike, remained Prokofiev's last great success. The symphony, whose performance was preceded by the announcement of the Red Army's latest victory at the Vistula river, mirrored not only the feelings of the composer, but also those of a "free and happy" audience.

Program notes by Peter Laki