

Program Notes



Friday, October 2, 8 pm, 2009
Ohio Theatre

ALONDRA DE LA PARRA CONDUCTS BEETHOVEN

Marquez - Danzón No. 2

Schnyder - subZERO, Bass Trombone Concerto

Beethoven - Symphony No. 7

Alondra de la Parra, conductor

Stefan Schulz, bass trombone

Supported by Johnstone Fund for New Music

Danzón No. 2

by Arturo Márquez (b. 1950)

Arturo Márquez was born in Álamos, Sonora, Mexico in 1950. He composed his Danzón No. 2 in 1994, on commission from the Department of Musical Activities at the National Autonomous University of Mexico; the work was premiered in Mexico City in March 1994 under the direction of Francisco Savin.

This work runs 10 minutes in performance. It is scored for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (claves, snare drum, suspended cymbal, guiro, 3 tom-toms, bass drum), piano, and strings.

In the fifteen years since its premiere, Arturo Márquez's *Danzón* No. 2 has enjoyed immense success, not only in Mexico, where some have even called it a "second national anthem" for the country, but internationally as well. That is hardly surprising, since Márquez's piece presents some irresistible Mexican dances, of the kind one would normally hear at a dance hall, played by an *orquesta típica* or a *charanga* band, in the full colors of a large symphony orchestra. The effect is quite spectacular!

The *Danzón*, of Cuban origin, is in the Latin world what the waltz is in Europe: a stately couple dance that is considered the main event at any ball; it starts slowly and allows for some close bodily contact between the performers, but eventually speeds up and can get quite fiery towards the end. Aaron Copland had earlier been inspired by the *danzón* in his *Danzón Cubano* (1942). Márquez has now made it into one of his signature genres; to date, he has completed no fewer than eight *danzones* (the others are all scored for smaller ensembles).

Danzón No. 2 was written in early 1994 during the Zapatista uprising, which fought for the rights of the impoverished indigenous populations in Mexico. This circumstance, pointed out by the composer himself, gives the work a special urgency, from the haunting opening clarinet solo all the way to the passionate ending.

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subZERO: Concerto for Bass Trombone and Orchestra by Daniel Schnyder (b. 1961)

Daniel Schnyder was born in Zurich, Switzerland in 1961 and currently resides in New York City. He composed subZERO in 1999 for bass trombonist David Taylor, who gave the first performance with the Absolute Ensemble under the direction of Kristjan Järvi in the Miller Theater (Columbia University, New York) on September 16, 1999.

This work runs approximately 17 minutes in performance. Schnyder scored it for solo bass trombone, plus an orchestra of flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, percussion (crash cymbal, 2 suspended cymbals [large and small], wood block, 2 tom-toms [medium, low], flexatone, cowbell, metal plate, side drum, tam-tam, hi-hat, crotale, tambourine, low Arab drum, hand cymbal, conga, marimba), piano, and strings.

Critics like to talk about the “fusion” of classical music, world music and jazz; but in the case of Daniel Schnyder, what we have is no longer “fusion” of different styles but rather an unquestionable unity of style elements that may be different in origin but can no longer be separated. A composer and virtuoso saxophonist, Schnyder recognizes no inner boundaries whatsoever in the realm of music, and writes his music for colleagues and friends who feel the same way he does.

Schnyder, a native of Zurich, Switzerland, is a long-time resident the United States, and American traditions play a crucial role in his music. He is extremely prolific in all genres, but has been especially successful with his works written for brass instruments. His Grammy-nominated concerto for bass trombone, *subZERO*, was written for David Taylor, an artist who is also at home in every style. Many of the fundamental gestures of this music derive from jazz, but the harmonic language is that of a composer who is thoroughly versed both in European high modernism and American minimalism; the overall form, full of interruptions, contrasts and other surprises, is also “classical.”

The concerto is in the traditional three-movement form (fast-slow-fast), and the orchestra is an equal partner of the soloist in every respect. Individual players or instrumental groups frequently join the solo trombone in virtuoso “licks” and the piano and percussion parts are especially important.

The second movement, titled “Sama’i Thaqil,” is named after an Arab instrumental form based on a metric pattern of ten beats. After an introduction where the oboe and the English horn play a duet of a distinctly Middle Eastern flavor, the *sama’i* proper begins: the very low notes of the bass trombone are set against the extremely high pitches of the solo violin, over the accompaniment of a set of drums played with bare hands. As in Arab music, the underlying rhythmic pattern is embellished by more and more melodic activity by both soloist and orchestra, until they all come together in a resolute unison melody at the end of the movement.

The brief last movement is a wild romp that contains some extremely fast runs for the trombone, but the entire orchestra gets a workout as well.

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Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92 by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn on December 16 or 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed his Seventh Symphony in 1812. He conducted the first performance on December 8, 1813 at a special concert at the University of Vienna.

The symphony runs about 35 minutes in performance. Beethoven scored it for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.

I can distinctly remember the day I heard Beethoven's Seventh Symphony for the first time. I was about five or six years old, and a recording with Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony was being played on the radio. I was completely mesmerized by the performance, and when the fourth movement began, I jumped to my feet and started to dance.

About a dozen years later, I learned about Richard Wagner's description of the symphony as the "apotheosis of the dance," and although I wasn't sure what an apotheosis was, I could certainly agree that dance was at the center of what this symphony was all about. Even later, I became acquainted with other attempts by 19th-century writers to capture the work's essence, invoking political revolutions, military parades, masquerade balls, Bacchic orgies, and more. Finally, about 25 years after my first encounter with the symphony, I read Maynard Solomon's excellent book on Beethoven, in which the author shows how all these fanciful interpretations were really variations on a single theme, that of the "carnival or festival, which, from time immemorial, has temporarily lifted the burden of perpetual subjugation to the prevailing social and natural order by periodically suspending all customary privileges, norms and imperatives."

In other words, generations of listeners have felt that Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is a wild celebration of life and freedom. While the Ninth Symphony is a fierce struggle with fate that is won only when the "Ode to Joy" is intoned, from the start the Seventh radiates joy and happiness that not even the second movement (to some, a funeral march) can seriously compromise.

The dance feelings associated with the work find their explanation in the fact that each of the four movements is based on a single rhythmic figure that is present almost without interruption. (Only the third movement has two such figures, one for the Scherzo proper and one for the central Trio section.) In the first movement, we may see how the predominant rhythm gradually comes to life during the transition from the lengthy slow introduction to the fast tempo.

Everyone who has heard rock music knows how intoxicating the constant repetition of simple rhythmic patterns can be. That's part of what Beethoven did here, but he did much more: against a backdrop of continually repeated dance rhythms, he created an endless diversity of melodic and harmonic events. There is a strong sense of cohesion as the melodies flow from one another with inimitable spontaneity. At the same time, harmony, melody, dynamics and orchestration are all full of the most delightful surprises. It is somewhat like riding in a car at a constant (and rather high) speed while watching an ever-changing, beautiful landscape pass by.

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The first movement starts with the most extended slow introduction Beethoven ever wrote for a symphony. It presents and develops its own thematic material, linked to the main theme of the “Allegro” section in a passage consisting of multiple repeats of a single note — E — in the flute, oboe, and violins. Among the many unforgettable moments of this movement, I would single out two: the oboe solo at the beginning of the recapitulation (which has no counterpart in the exposition) and the irresistible, gradual crescendo at the end that culminates in a fortissimo statement of the movement’s main rhythmic figure.

The second-movement “Allegretto” in A minor was the section in the symphony that became the most popular from the day of the premiere. (It had to be repeated already at the first performance.) The main rhythmic pattern of this movement was used in Austro-German church litanies of the 18th and 19th centuries. The same pattern is so frequent in the music of Franz Schubert that it is sometimes referred to as the “Schubert rhythm.” The “Allegretto” of Beethoven’s Seventh combines this rhythm with a melody of a rare expressive power. The rhythm persists in the bass even during the contrasting middle section in A major.

We know this movement has a secret because of a passage in one of Beethoven’s conversation books, which contain remarks addressed to the deaf composer. The composer’s secretary, Anton Schindler, wrote: “We have to show all this in the complete edition, because nobody would be looking for these things.” The secret may have to do with the mysterious wind chord that opens and closes the movement (it is a so-called 6-4 chord, which normally is not allowed to stand by itself because it is so startling without chords that follow). Since the conversation books did not record Beethoven’s replies, we may never know exactly what the secret was or even if it was in any way connected with that chord.

The third-movement “Scherzo” is the only one of the symphony’s movements where the basic rhythmic patterns are grouped in an unpredictable, asymmetrical way. The joke (which is what the word Scherzo means) lies in the fact that the listener may never know what will happen in the next moment. Only the Trio returns to regular-length periods. In another innovative move, Beethoven expands the traditional Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo structure by repeating the Trio a second time, followed by a third appearance of the Scherzo. At the end, Beethoven leads us to believe that he is going to start the Trio over yet another time. But we are about to be doubly surprised: first when the by-now familiar Trio melody is suddenly transformed from major to minor; and second when, with five quick tutti strokes, the movement abruptly ends, as if cut off in the middle.

In the fourth-movement “Allegro con brio,” the exuberant feelings reach their peak as one glorious theme follows another over an unchanging rhythmic pulsation. The dance reaches an almost superhuman intensity (and that, incidentally, is the meaning of the Greek word “apotheosis,” literally, “becoming God-like”). This is a movement of which even Sir Donald Francis Tovey, the most celebrated British musical essayist of the first half of the 20th century, had to admit: “I can attempt nothing here by way of description.” Fortunately, the music speaks for itself.

—Peter Laki