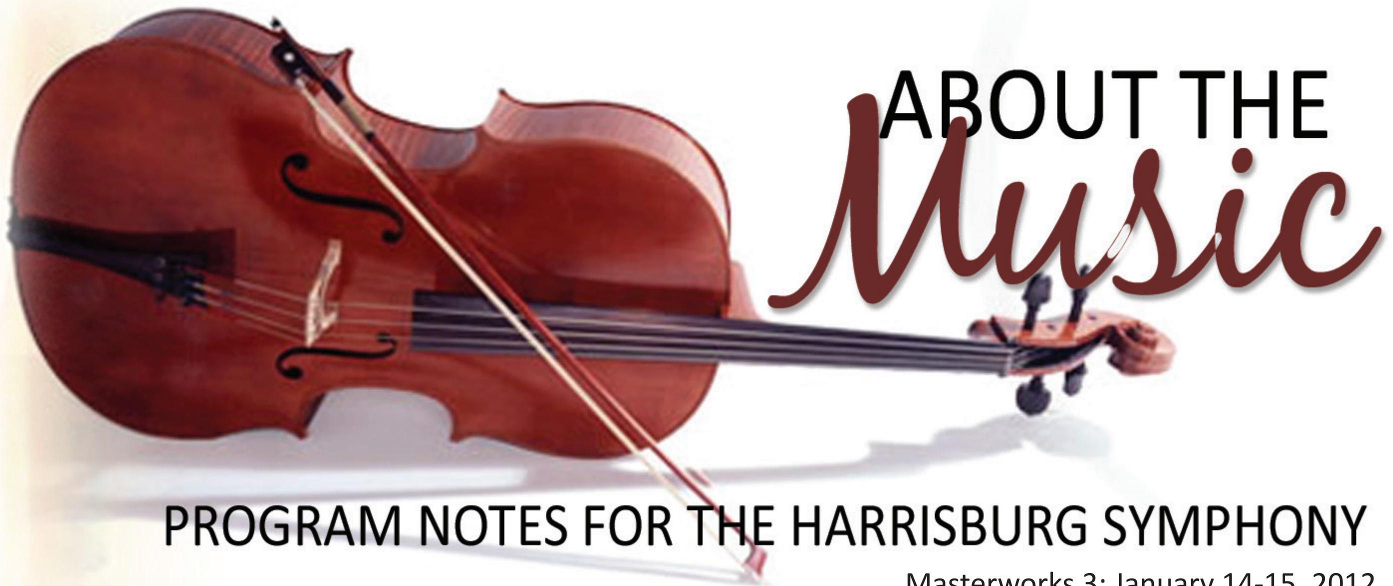


Masterworks 3: January 14-15, 2012

by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

En Saga, Op. 9, (1892-1893) — Jean Sibelius

Born December 8, 1865 in Hämeenlinna, Finland
Died September 20, 1957 in Järvenpää, Finland

Kaleva — "Land of Heroes" — is the Finns' ancient poetic name for their country, which was founded, according to legend, by Väinämöinen, the "eternal sage," who exerted order over chaos to establish a land centered in Karelia (historically the eastern region of Finland but since the Soviet-Finnish War of 1940, a part of Russia). Tales of Kaleva and Väinämöinen, of the primeval smith Ilmarinen and the reckless adventurer Lemminkainen, of Louhi, the female ruler of Pohjola, the threatening neighbor to the north, and of the tragic hero Kullervo, forced by fate to be a slave from childhood, had been part of the oral tradition for centuries before the physician and folklorist Elias Lönnrot began collecting and organizing them into a single epic poem in the 1830s; his original Kalevala was published in 1835 and appeared in a revised and expanded edition fourteen years later. After centuries of Swedish rule, Lönnrot's Kalevala became a pillar of Finnish culture, serving not only to reinvigorate the country's language and codify its communal myths, but also to provide a rallying point for the calls for Finland's political freedom. The Kalevala also worked a powerful influence on the country's art, literature, theater and music, and it served to inspire some of the most important compositions of Jean Sibelius, who became a national hero at age 27 with his Kullervo Symphony.

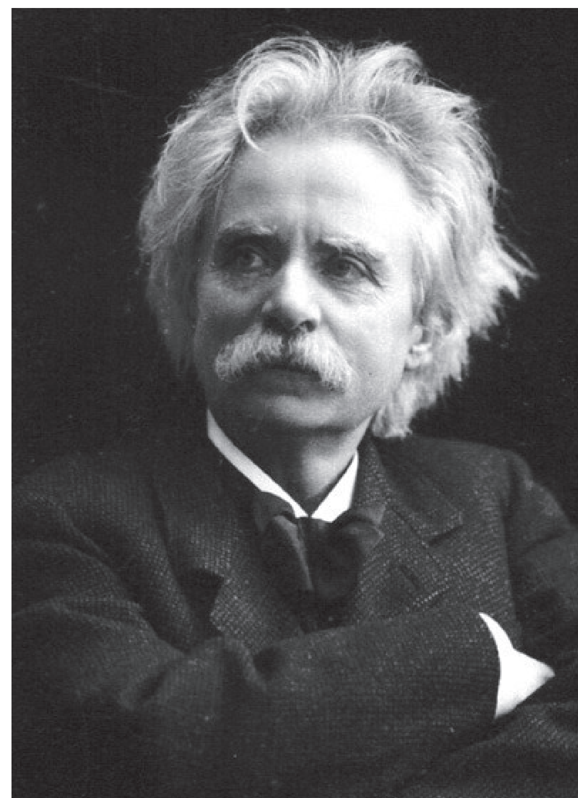
Following the success of the Kullervo Symphony at its premiere on April 28, 1892 in Helsinki, Robert Kajanus, the conductor of the performance, asked Sibelius for a new orchestral work for the following season, so that summer he composed En Saga, which means, simply, "A Legend" in Swedish (then and now an official language of Finland). Some commentators have found an association of the music with the tales or at least the atmosphere of the Kalevala (Elliott Arnold wrote in his 1941 study of the composer that it "sings mightily of deeds of chivalry and knightly strength"), but Sibelius never gave any specific program for the piece. Years later he said, "En Saga is one of my most profound works in psychological meaning. I could even say it contains all of my youth. It is the expression of a state of mind. I had undergone a number of painful experiences at the time and in no other work have I revealed myself so completely." The time of the creation of En Saga was a critical one for Sibelius. He married in June 1892 and had to grapple immediately with the problems of supporting a young family — he taught for a while, but unwillingly — and he had also been suffering a disturbing ringing in his ears that his doctors thought might be a precursor to deafness. (They were wrong.) He was also then trying to forge an idiom that would not only express his own creative individuality but would also distill the distinctive spirit, language, history and myth of his native land into music

that would win recognition both at home and abroad. Such a difficult task, according to Veijo Murtomäki, professor of music history at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, made "Sibelius identify with his ancient heroes." En Saga, his first tone poem and his earliest orchestral music to be published, reconciled all these concerns of the 27-year-old Jean Sibelius.

Sibelius conducted the premiere of En Saga in Helsinki on February 16, 1893. It was heard five more times later that year, but its reception was not as enthusiastic as he had hoped and he withdrew the score. Eight years later, after the Karelia Suite, Four Legends (which include the haunting Swan of Tuonela), Finlandia and the Symphony No. 1 had begun to establish his international reputation, he was invited to conduct a concert of his music with the Berlin Philharmonic. He thoroughly revised En Saga for that occasion, shortening it substantially, smoothing out its far-flung harmonic modulations, and sharpening its orchestration.

En Saga opens as if in the milky light of a northern dawn, with soft, rustling string arpeggios spread behind unformed thematic ideas in tiny steps chanted by the winds. From this premonitory soundscape arises an epic theme of primitive intervals sounded in stark octaves by the bassoons and low strings. After the music becomes more energized and the other instruments discuss the bassoon theme, the violas introduce a contrasting melody hinting at a folk dance. The last of the work's three principal themes, a heroic motive formed from four repeated notes capped by a flourish, is presented by the strings. The center of the work is dominated by a brilliant development of the viola theme and the heroic motive, after which the music quiets for a passage of almost motionless string chords. The oboe and then the other woodwinds renew the music's forward motion, a quick crescendo is mounted, the epic theme from the beginning is recapitulated sonorously by the unison horns, and the full orchestra is drawn into the blazing climax that follows. Quiet suddenly descends, and En Saga closes in the misty world from which it arose, with the clarinet giving a long, bardic reminiscence of the epic theme and the cellos echoing the dance melody of the violas.

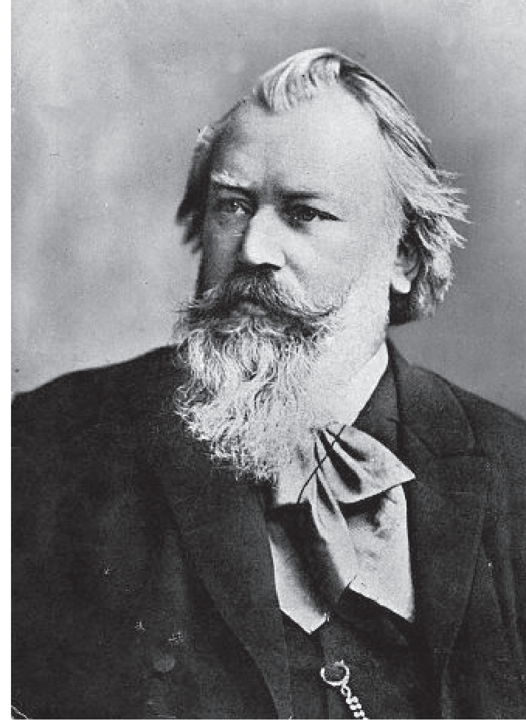
Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16 (1868) — Edvard Grieg



Born June 15, 1843 in Bergen, Norway
Died there on September 4, 1907

Grieg completed his studies at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1863. Rather than heading directly home to Norway, however, he settled in Copenhagen to study privately with Niels Gade, at that time Denmark's most prominent musician and generally regarded as the founder of the Scandinavian school of composition. Back in Norway, Grieg's creative work was concentrated on the large forms advocated by his Leipzig teachers and by Gade. By 1867, he had produced the Piano Sonata, the first two Violin and Piano Sonatas, a Symphony (long unpublished and made available only as recently as 1981) and the concert overture In Autumn. He also carried on his work to promote native music, and gave an unprecedented concert exclusively of Norwegian compositions in 1866. Grieg arranged to have the summer of 1868 free of duties, and he returned to Denmark for an extended vacation at a secluded retreat at Sölleröd, where he began his Piano Concerto. He thoroughly enjoyed that summer, sleeping late, taking long walks, eating well, and tipping a glass in the evenings with friends at the local inn. The sylvan setting spurred his creative energies, and the new Concerto was largely completed by the time he returned to Norway in the fall.

The Concerto's first movement opens with a bold summons by the soloist. The main theme is given by the woodwinds and taken over almost immediately by the piano. A flashing transition, filled with skipping rhythms, leads to the second theme, a tender cello melody wrapped in the warm harmonies of the trombones. An episodic development section, launched by the full orchestra playing the movement's opening motive, is largely based on the main theme in dialogue. The recapitulation returns the earlier themes, after which the piano displays a tightly woven cadenza. The stern introductory measures are recalled to close the movement. The Adagio begins with a song filled with sentiment and nostalgia played by the strings and rounded off by touching phrases in the solo horn. The soloist weaves elaborate musical filigree above the simple accompaniment before the lovely song returns in an enriched setting. The themes of the finale's outer sections are constructed in the rhythms of a popular Norwegian dance, the halling. The movement's central portion presents a wonderful melodic inspiration, introduced by the solo flute, that derives from the dreamy atmosphere of the preceding movement.



Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90 *(1882-1883)* — Johannes Brahms

Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg
Died April 3, 1897 in Vienna

They must have been a merry clan, that group of innovative young artists living in Paris at the turn of the 20th century who banded Brahms had reached the not inconsiderable age of 43 before he unveiled his First Symphony. The Second Symphony followed within eighteen months, and the musical world was prepared for a steady stream of similar masterworks from his pen. However, it was to be another six years before he undertook his Third Symphony, though he did produce the Academic Festival and Tragic Overtures, the Violin Concerto and the Second Piano Concerto during that time. When he got around to the new Symphony, he was nearly fifty, and had just recovered from a spell of feeling that he was "too old" for creative work, even informing his publisher, Simrock, that he would be sending him nothing more. It seems likely — though such matters always remained in the shadows where Brahms was concerned — that his creative juices were stirred anew by a sudden infatuation with "a pretty Rhineland girl." This was Hermine Spiess, a talented contralto who was 26 when Brahms first met her in January 1883 at the home of friends. (Brahms was fifty.) A cordial, admiring friendship sprang up between the two, but this affair, like every other one in Brahms' life in which a respectable woman was involved, never grew any deeper. He used to declare, perhaps only half in jest, that he lived his life by two principles, "and one of them is never to attempt either an opera or a marriage." Perhaps what he really needed was a muse rather than a wife. At any rate, Brahms spent the summer of 1883 not at his usual haunts in the Austrian hills and lakes, but at the German spa of Wiesbaden, which just happened to be the home of Hermine. Work went well on the new Symphony, and it was completed before he returned to Vienna in October.

No time is wasted in establishing the conflict that charges the Symphony's first movement with dynamic energy. The two bold opening chords juxtapose bright F major and a somber chromatic harmony in the opposing moods of light and shadow that course throughout the work. The main theme comes from the strings "like a bolt from Jove," according to Olin Downes, with the opening chords repeated by the woodwinds as its accompaniment; the pastoral second theme is sung softly by the clarinet. The development section is brief, but includes elaborations of most of the motives from the exposition. The tonic key of F is re-established, not harmonically but melodically (note how the bass leads the way), and the golden chords of the opening proclaim the recapitulation. A long coda based on the main theme reinforces the tonality and discharges much of the music's energy, allowing the movement to close quietly, as do, most unusually, all the movements of this Symphony. The second and third are the most intimate and personal movements in Brahms' orchestral music. A folk-like theme appears in the rich colors of the low woodwinds and low strings to open the second movement. The central section is a Slavic-sounding plaint intoned by clarinet and bassoon that eventually gives way to the flowing rhythms of the opening and the return of the folk theme supported by a new, rippling string accompaniment. The romantic third movement replaces the usual scherzo. It is ternary in form, like the preceding movement, and utilizes the warmest tone colors of the orchestra. The finale begins with a sinuous theme of brooding character. A brief, chant-like processional derived from the Slavic theme of the second movement provides contrast. Further thematic material is introduced (one theme is arch-shaped; the other, more rhythmically vigorous) and well examined. Brahms dispensed here with a true development section, but combined its function with that of the recapitulation as a way of tightening the structure. As the end of the movement nears, the tonality returns to F major, and there is a strong sense of struggle passed. The tension subsides, and the work ends with the ghost of the opening movement's main theme infused with a sunset glow.

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