Orpheus Chamber Orchestra with Richard Goode
Program Notes

Rossini: Overture to *L'Italiana in Algeri*

Rossini's two-act opera *The Italian Girl in Algiers* was first performed in 1813 (when the composer was just 21 years old) in Venice; its sparkling overture premiered in the United States in 1824. Note that although this particular opera is indeed comic, so the light-hearted mood suits the story, all of Rossini's overtures are similarly joyful: The mood bespeaks the festivity of opera itself, not any particular plotline. Likewise the form is always the same: a slow introduction; then two themes, the second given to a solo woodwind; a big climax, and recapitulation--or wholesale repetition. What is remarkable, however, is the immense musical variety and drama Rossini manages to put inside this standard package.

The opening of *The Italian Girl in Algiers* is among the most memorable in all of Rossini's oeuvre: eight measures of pizzicato, plucked strings lead to the crashing entrance of the entire orchestra. An oboe solo runs into a second *fortissimo* surprise, and then eventually returns again to round off the three-part slow introduction. The winds present the main theme of the Allegro, the heart of the overture, with the second theme in the solo oboe, answered by the piccolo. This material returns, verbatim, at the end as a recapitulation. In between, much of the interest is rhythmic, with repeated rising and falling scales in the entire orchestra (with notable strikes of the tympani) and *fortissimo* repeated chords.

Schumann: Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54

In 1830, Robert Schumann made a final decision to pursue music instead of the law, as his mother would have preferred. A talented pianist, he nevertheless realized success would not come from his abilities as a performer, and so devoted himself to composition and music criticism. His major works from this first phase of his compositional career are sets of short pieces—musical miniatures that reflect his engagement in Romantic literature and philosophy, especially the writings of E.T.A. Hoffman, Jean Paul, and Novalis. Once the idea of becoming a virtuoso pianist-composer had fully faded, owing in part to a numb finger on his right hand, Schumann turned to genres other than piano works, starting to study Beethoven's symphonies, for example, in 1831. His "symphonic year," when he focused on writing for orchestra, came a decade later in 1841, when he produced the First Symphony as well as a draft for a *Phantasie* in A minor for piano and orchestra. Some four years later, this would become the concerto.

In the summer of 1845, Schumann revisited the one-movement *Phantasie*. At the urging of his publisher, Breitkopf & Haertel, he added a slow movement and a finale to produce a full-fledged concerto. His wife, the exceptional pianist Clara Wieck Schumann, gave the premiere performance on December 4 in Dresden at a private concert; a few weeks later, in January 1846, Clara again appeared as soloist in a performance conducted by Felix Mendelssohn in Leipzig.

The concerto reflects what the composer himself described as a "new manner." His shorter pieces had always been composed "in the heat of inspiration," but since 1845 he had "started to

work out everything in my head." The new manner produced works of greater contrapuntal interest, with multiple motives and intersecting musical ideas, as well as large-scale musical unities. This kind of compositional planning is easily heard in the transition between the second and third movements of the soncerto: The passage links the two movements together, while also recalling the main theme of the first movement. (A model here is Beethoven's *Emperor* concerto, which also features a transition between the slow movement and finale.)

The concerto begins with a combined orchestral and solo exposition, with the main theme announced by the oboe. Schumann embeds his musical moniker for Clara in this theme: Her nickname was Chiara, which is translated into pitches as C-B-A-A (CHiArinA, H being the German for B in the scale). Throughout, the dramatic contest between soloist and orchestra typical of the genre is replaced by a more democratic exchange, and the winds often take special prominence—as in a duet between piano and clarinet in the second theme of the first movement. Franz Liszt went so far as to call it a concerto without piano, which we can take less as a criticism than an insightful interpretation of the truly symphonic nature of the concerto and the special way that the piano is integrated into the orchestral texture.

The second movement, an easy-going Intermezzo, draws its musical material from the main theme of the first movement. The dance-like finale follows without pause, and moves swiftly through a thicket of themes—including a version of the opening theme, now in the major mode.

Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4 *Italian*

So long was the shadow cast by the nine symphonies of Beethoven that only in the 1840s did many composers of the next generation dare tackle the genre (Robert Schumann among them). Mendelssohn was likewise cautious, but managed to find fresh inspiration and composed his first symphonies in the 1830s, including the First Symphony (which actually draws on music first written in the 1820s, before Beethoven's death) and the "Reformation" Symphony, premiered in 1832. Thus by the time the "Italian" Symphony was premiered in 1833, Mendelssohn had not only established himself as a musical *wunderkind,* the greatest prodigy since Mozart, but also a serious composer in the most respected—and daunting—genres of the string quartet and symphony, precisely those genres most closely associated with Beethoven. Mendelssohn succeeded because he refused to engage Beethoven on his own terms, and instead exploited his own inherent gifts as a composer—especially a talent for composing song-like instrumental melodies and a brilliant understanding of counterpoint.

Mendelssohn began the symphony while on a grand tour of Italy in 1830–31, then was motivated to produce the piece when a commission from the London Philharmonic arrived in November 1832. The premiere was a critical and public success. But the composer was dissatisfied and set about revising the symphony. He never made peace with it—even leaving plans for further revisions at his untimely death in 1847; never conducted it after its premiere; and never saw it published.

No one else seems to hear the failings that he did; in fact, the "Italian" Symphony is easy to love and admire for its obvious charm and exuberance as well as its musical subtleties. The opening of the first movement is pure joy: tutti strings bound upward, above a percolating

accompaniment in the winds; the second theme is slower and more song-like. The composer's love of music by J.S. Bach is evident in the development of the first movement, which features a string fugue. (As a conductor, Mendelssohn is responsible for the revival of Bach's music, which had fallen into obscurity by the early 19th century.)

The slow second movement is attached to the image of a religious procession Mendelssohn observed in Naples: hence the "walking" bass line that gracefully marches forward. The third movement scherzo is more a minuet—graceful and delicate—whereas the finale has been likened to a saltarello, a vigorous dance native to Naples. Remarkably, the Symphony ends in the minor mode.