

Saturday, March 18, 2023

## IRVINE AUDITORIUM 3401 SPRUCE STREET University of Pennsylvania

The Department of Music and the Student Activities Council present

## **PENN CHAMBER ORCHESTRA**

Thomas Hong, conductor & director

With thanks to the University of Pennsylvania Music Department

Dr. Michael Ketner, Director of Performance
Sophie Shalit, Performance Operations Coordinator
Eugene Lew, Director of Sound and Music Technology
Matt Hewitt, Communications Coordinator
Dr. Timothy Rommen, Department Chair
Dr. Glenda Goodman, Graduate Chair
Dr. Anna Weesner, Undergraduate Chair



# **Penn Chamber Orchestra: Spring Concert**

MARCH 18, 2023

Johannes Brahms: Tragic Overture, Op. 81

Allegro ma non troppo Molto più moderato

Tempo primo ma tranquillo

## Johannes Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Haydn, Op. 56a

Theme. Chorale St. Antoni. Andante

Variation I. Poco più animato (Andante con moto)

Variation II. Più vivace (Vivace)

Variation III. Con moto

Variation IV. Andante con moto (Andante)

Variation V. Vivace (Poco presto)

Variation VI. Vivace

Variation VII. Grazioso

Variation VIII. Presto non troppo (Poco presto)

Finale. Andante

#### INTERMISSION

## Felix Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4 in A Major, op. 90 ("Italian")

I. Allegro vivace

II. Andante con moto

III. Con moto moderato

IV. Presto and Finale: Saltarello

#### 1st Violin

Hannah Lee, Concertmaster / Daniel Hwang Ethan Yu / Amy Hong Jonah Baer / Daphnie Nie Alan Hong / William Qi Jessica Liang / Adah Kaplan Richard Xiong / Kevin Zhou Gracie Zhang / Brinson Moore

#### 2nd Violin

Talia Coopersmith, Principal / Joy Onawola Hertha Torre Gallego / Cissy Wang Kevin Xu / Eric Liu Jennifer Li / Leslie Kinnas Capalbo Nathaniel Lu / Eva Gonzalez-Whitehouse Benjamin Amidon / Luis O. Tierradentro

### Viola

Autumn Cortright, Principal / Greg Kraynak Rayan Jawa / Sahana Sundar Gavin Lee / Emily Monfort Isaac King / Rachel Ku\*

#### Cello

Reina Marcela, Principal / Sophia Liu Melanie Hilman / Avaniko Asokkumar Evan Jiang / Maxfield Brody Deborah Zhang, Co-principal

#### Bass

Berk Soykan, Principal / Sarah Ramadan Alex Kalbach / Olivia Steinmetz\*

#### **Flute**

Elle Kirsch / Annabella Tian / Hyerin Kim (piccolo)\*

#### Oboe

Luna Sato / Catherine Lachance-Duffy\*

#### Clarinet

Xandro Xu / Amy Christmas\*

#### Bassoon

Rick Barrantes\* / Kaitlin Blam

#### Horn

Harold Litt / Evan Bretz / Aidan Lewis / Martina Adams\*

### **Trumpet**

Adrian Wang / Graciela Torres

## Timpani

Victor Sorace

#### **Percussion**

Bill Priebe\*

Spring Concert 5

<sup>\*</sup> Guest Musician

# **Penn Chamber Orchestra: Spring Concert**

### **PROGRAM NOTES**

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897): Tragic Overture

In the summer of 1880, Brahms composed a pair of concert overtures while vacationing in Bad Ischl, a small resort town in Austria. The first of the two overtures to be completed, the Academic Festival Overture, was originally composed as a thank-you to the University of Breslau for conferring upon Brahms an honorary doctorate and has a celebratory character befitting the occasion for which it was written. The Tragic Overture, on the other hand, is the emotional antithesis to its older twin and embodies the turbulent, tormented character that its epithet suggests. Although the emotional character of the piece is self-evident, Brahms was actually unsure of the title to the piece prior to its publication. Initially entitling it the Dramatic despite disliking that epithet, Brahms ultimately settled on the Tragic because he was enticed by the idea of composing an overture to a tragedy. Although overtures traditionally serve as the opening musical material to an opera, the Tragic Overture does not have a specific dramatic program associated with it. It has been suggested that the Tragic Overture was planned as a prelude to Goethe's Faust, but such speculation remains unfounded and the inspiration for the overture remains without any story or extra-musical element. If nothing else, the Tragic Overture was composed in juxtaposition to the Academic Festival Overture with Brahms himself commenting that "One weeps, the other laughs."

The overture opens with two thunderous exclamations from the full orchestra followed by an ominous timpani roll that introduces the solemn first theme. The austere atmosphere gives way to a march that builds into a grand restatement of the first theme before transitioning into a comforting, melodic second theme. The thunderous exclamations return at the end of this opening section, mirroring the beginning of the overture before Brahms returns and expands upon the march that he first introduced earlier in the overture. This middle section contrasts with the energy of the preceding section and flows seamlessly into the final section of the piece which features an unexpected reversal by reintroducing the second theme before the first theme. Although the Tragic Overture isn't always weeping, a dark and mysterious mood pervades the entire composition and drives it towards a powerfully affecting conclusion.

© 2023 Evan Jiang

## Johannes Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Haydn

For composers, a theme and variations is the ultimate test of their imagination. Even though the genre is one of the simplest musical forms, the skill and creative expression ceiling is high because composers must take a theme and transform into something new while also keeping it fundamentally the same. Themes are often original material but every so often, composers become inspired by an existing melody and decide to use it as the basis for a new composition. Such was the case when Brahms's friend, the musicologist Carl Ferdinand Pohl, shared with the composer a wind octet attributed to the great eighteenth century composer Joseph Haydn. The second movement of the octet, labelled "Chorale St. Anthoni", became the basis for the theme and variations entitled Variations on a Theme by Haydn. Interestingly, later music scholars have shown that the melody that Brahms adopted was not actually written by Haydn. Although some have suggested that Haydn's pupil Ignaz Pleyel was the true composer of the original theme, the question of authorship has never been definitively settled. Furthermore, the label "Chorale St. Anthoni" would also seem to imply that the melody was taken from some preexisting chorale, however, such a chorale has never been discovered either. Regardless of the precise origin of the theme, the heart of piece is in Brahms's transformation of the theme. The Haydn Variations were initially conceived of as a theme and variations for two pianos, but Brahms composed an orchestral version immediately after completing the two-piano version, subsequently giving the orchestral repertoire one of its most beloved pieces.

The piece begins with the theme and features eight variations followed by a finale. The theme itself is played almost exclusively by the woodwinds, an obvious nod to the woodwind octet origins of the theme. Despite the aural simplicity of the theme, it is an odd melody consisting of a pair of five-bar (rather than the usual four) phrases. This quirky and irregular phrase length is perhaps the reason why it initially caught Brahms's eye. Each of the following eight variations is defined by a unique character, rhythm, and/or texture, combining forms and techniques of earlier eras with Brahms's compositional style. For the finale, Brahms utilizes the structure of a passacaglia, a variation form from the Baroque era where a bass line is repeated over and over while the upper parts are freely varied. Thus, by choosing a passacaglia, Brahms cleverly managed to embed a variation form within a variation form. The finale begins with a five-measure bass line derived from the original theme and culminates in a grand restatement of the original theme, this time played by the whole orchestra. The music then seems to slow down and fade away before a final burst of sixteenths notes and a triangle tremolo propel it towards the end.

© 2023 Evan Jiang

Spring Concert

Felix Mendelssohn (1833 – 1897): Symphony No. 4 ("Italian")

Mendelssohn was a prodigy, born into a distinguished family of Jewish bankers and philosophers. He and his sister Fanny--also a talented composer, conductor, and pianist—were raised in a warm, intellectual, highly supportive artistic family. They matured early, and a stream of musical compositions flowed from them both. Mendelssohn was clearly one of the most important German composers of his time, and infused the expressiveness of early romantic music with the clarity and intellectuality of Mozart and Haydn's classicism. This exquisite balance found expression in a wide variety of musical genres; Mendelssohn was as at home writing Protestant oratorios such as Elijah and St. Paul as he was composing chamber music and symphonies. He created a significant body of work in his relatively short life, including major works for orchestra that constitute an important part of today's repertoire. These works (from his maturity) include six concert overtures, six concertos, and five major symphonies.

His musical style reflects, to a large degree, his upbringing and his personality—it speaks of discipline, balance, and an overall cheerful, largely untroubled mien. While his compositions reflect solicitude for clear, balanced musical structures, and an obvious avoidance of excess of romantic emotion and empty virtuosity, there is nevertheless a sentimental and emotive quality to them. And this is certainly true of his symphonies. Symphony No. 4, like No. 3, "Scottish," was composed in direct response of the sights and sounds of his well-known travels. As a superbly talented, and highly intellectual scion of a distinguished and wealthy family, Mendelssohn was encouraged by Goethe (and funded by his doting father) to take an extended tour of various European countries in the years 1829-31. Early in the tour he visited Scotland, the experience of which resulted in the afore-mentioned "Scottish" symphony, and the overture, The Hebrides (Fingal's Cave).

Moving on to Italy in May of 1830, he toured the major cities, including Rome, Naples, Venice, and Florence, by the time of his return to Germany in late 1831, was effusive about his experience and stimulation in Italy. In a letter to his sister, Fanny, he spoke enthusiastically of his "Italian" symphony, and characterized it as the "happiest piece I have ever written." Few would argue with that description, but it took a little while for its full realization. Upon his return to his native Germany, other affairs took precedence, but a commission from the Philharmonic Society in London for several works—the princely sum of 100 guineas surely played a part, as well—ensured the symphony's rapid completion by early 1833. The première was a great success, and a major contributor to the composer's popularity in Great Britain thenceforth. Apparently, Mendelssohn felt that what almost everyone subsequently deemed as a practically perfect piece, nevertheless needed some substantial revision and tweaking. He apparently wrestled with the project for

some years, and complained about the trouble and "bitter moments" that it had caused him. It came to nothing. Notwithstanding the creator's artistic opinions, the original version has stood as the only one, and ironically is seen as perfect in every way. It was not until 1851, four years after his death, that it is was published.

The first movement instantaneously sets the mood: if any music may be said to be joyous, this is it! The vigorous repeated notes of the woodwinds propel the leaping theme in the strings—and Mendelssohn's reaction to the excitement and warmth of the Italian experience is palpable. Rhythmic drive pervades the whole movement, not lessened in the development section, where the composer's familiarity with J.S. Bach's contrapuntal wizardry comes to the fore. A few long held notes in the oboe heralds the recapitulation of a marvelously spirited and happy movement—no wonder it has almost become a cliché for those in the media who have appropriated it.

The second movement—traditionally a slow one—here takes the guise of an Italian procession of some kind, walking along leisurely. A Neapolitan religious procession comes to mine—a common sight there, then. It may be helpful to the imagination to think of the one in New York's Little Italy in the film, "The Godfather." It trudges along, borne above the pizzicato strings, with a middle section in a contrasting, somewhat lighter, mood, before returning to the tranquil, melancholy main tune, ending quietly. The third movement in the "old days" of late musical classicism would have been a minuet and trio, and Mendelssohn, ever the traditionalist, cheerfully supplies one. Beethoven's vigorous, energetic models for this movement still ringing in everyone's ears are nowhere to be heard—Mendelssohn is himself, here. This tender movement comes from an untroubled land of gentility; the important part for the horns in the middle section stem from the newly-developing sound of German romanticism, so clearly heard in the works of the composer's countryman, Carl Maria von Weber.

The last movement takes us back to the vivacity and élan of Italy in its driving evocation of the scintillating native dance, the saltarello. Others have posited the presence of the tarantella, as well. Driving breathlessly along, never relenting, Mendelssohn's interpretation of these old, mediæval frenetic dances is an exhilarating ride. Catapulting along to the climactic end, we sense dancers gradually reaching exhaustion, despite the constant rhythmic drive, only to reach down and pull out just enough energy to sizzle at the dynamic ending.

© 2015 William E. Runyan

Spring Concert 9

## Penn Chamber Orchestra: Director & Conductor

## **THOMAS HONG**

Hailed by Kurt Masur as "one of the most talented young conductors of his generation," **THOMAS HONG** enjoys the distinction of being one of many successful protégés of the great Maestro. Having won titled positions with the Dallas, Pittsburgh, and Seattle Symphony Orchestras as well as Orchestre National de France, Hong has conducted countless concerts with those orchestras, ranging from classical, community, education and pops concerts. Presently, he is the artistic director and conductor of the University of Pennsylvania Orchestras. Recent activities include being principal conductor for the inaugural season of the DSO on the "GO" series with the Dallas Symphony, performing in neighboring venues of the North Texas area, and a re-engagement with the Utah Symphony, where he was the conductor for the Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition in Salt Lake City.

Orchestras that Hong has conducted in the past include the Utah, Fort Worth, Virginia, Richmond, Spokane, and Winnepeg Symphonies as well as the Seoul, Buffalo, and Lutosławski Philharmonics. More recent invitations include the Berlin Symphony, North Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra Sinfonica di Siciliana and Cairo Symphony Orchestra. Among his operatic and vocal performances are Copland's The Tenderland, Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde, Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress, and Donizetti's L'exisir d'Amore at the Wortham Opera Theatre in Houston. Awards that Hong has received include the Leopold Stokowski Felowship, the Whitaker Opera Prize and a residency aware by the Brahms society of Baden-Baden. His latest recording was from the show "From the Top" with pianist/host Christopher O'Riley and the DSO at the Meyerson Symphony Center.

Hong was born in Incheon, Korea and immigrated to the United States with his family. He began his musical training as a pianist with Dr. Samuel Hsu at Cairn University. Later, he went on to earn a Master's degree in choral conducting at Temple University and an artist diploma in orchestral conducting from The Curtis Institute of Music, studying with Maestros Alan Harler and Otto Werner Meuller, respectively. He concluded his artistic training with Larry Rachleff at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music. Currently, Hong lives in Philadelphia with his wife Rachel Ku and their daughter Esther.

