

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Overture to *Béatrice et Bénédict* (1862)

In August of 1826, the young Hector Berlioz attended a performance of *Hamlet* by visiting an English theater company. Though he understood little English, that performance was the beginning of two major obsessions for Berlioz. The first was an overwhelming attraction to Harriet Smithson, the young Irish actress playing Ophelia. That didn't turn out well (short version: after pursuing her for years, she agreed to marry him, which turned out to be a huge mistake for them both), but at least it inspired his first acknowledged masterpiece, the *Symphonie Fantastique*.

His lifelong love of Shakespeare also began that day. Fortunately, that turned out better. As early as 1831, he had hit on the idea of adapting Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* as an opera, even sketching several ideas for it. It would have been his first opera, but career and personal pressures forced him to keep it on the back burner for nearly three decades, so it ended up being his last.

An opportunity finally arrived in 1860, when a wealthy casino owner commissioned a new work for the opening of a new theater in Baden-Baden. A historical drama was suggested, but after some persuasion from Berlioz, they agreed to a comic opera based on Shakespeare. The way was cleared for Berlioz's long-delayed project to take shape.

In the play's title, Shakespeare typically indulged in double-entendre; the word "nothing," which in 1592 would have been pronounced "noting," was also an idiom for spying or eavesdropping (it also had an anatomical meaning which we won't go into). The story concerns two young couples and a series of improbable plot twists that happen when they overhear certain things about each other. It all ends happily, of course.

Berlioz wrote his own libretto based on Shakespeare's play. In doing so, he placed greater emphasis on the second couple; Beatrice (who hates marriage and all men, especially Benedict) and Benedict (who hates marriage and all women, especially Beatrice). For some reason, their friends are convinced that the two are secretly in love with each other. Benedict's friends decide to stage a conversation intended for him to overhear, in which they comment on Beatrice's secret passion for Benedict. Meanwhile, Beatrice's friends do the same. It all gets sillier from there, but in the end, each are tricked into thinking that the other is madly in love with them, and true love conquers all, sort of.

Béatrice et Bénédict was Berlioz's only opera to enjoy unqualified success during his lifetime. It is not heard as often as it used to be, but the Overture frequently turns up on orchestra programs as a lively and boisterous concert opener. Two themes from the opera provide most of the material in the overture. It begins with a rhythmically jerky treatment of the first theme, which ends abruptly. It is followed by a slower section with all the strings in unison playing a long and passionate melody, lightly accompanied by winds from a gorgeous moonlit nocturnal duet about the nature of love that closes Act I. Both themes return in the main body of the piece, developed in a straightforward sonata form. The coda, full of unexpected harmonic changes, hints at plot twists to come, but ultimately everything gets triumphantly resolved.

Terre Haute Symphony Orchestra

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Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Double Concerto in A minor for violin, cello, and orchestra, op. 102 (1887)

In a letter to his longtime friend Clara Schumann, written early in 1887, Brahms wrote of a new project. "I can tell you something funny, for I have had the amusing idea of writing a concerto for violin and cello. If it is at all successful it might give us some fun." By then all of Brahms's friends knew of his penchant for teasing new works still in progress with deliberately misleading or trivializing descriptions, so it probably would not have surprised any of them when the new concerto turned out to be a monumentally serious affair.

Still, Brahms's decision to produce a concerto with not one, but *two* solo instruments, may have given his friends pause, for such a thing was nearly unheard of. They would have been aware of the precedent of Beethoven's Triple Concerto for violin, cello, piano, and orchestra. Probably they would have also known of Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* featuring violin and viola soloists. But little else of the sort existed, unless one went back further to the *concerto grosso* of the Baroque period, of which there were numerous examples. Still, Brahms's decision to write a Double Concerto in 1887 was novel enough to warrant questions about why he chose to pursue such an unusual idea. In this case, it seems that multiple factors were in play.

In part, it seems that the new work was intended as an olive branch to be extended to the violinist Joseph Joachim, in hopes of repairing their frayed friendship. Only two years after Brahms had written his magnificent Violin Concerto for Joachim, their relationship was ruptured when Brahms inserted himself into Joachim's divorce proceedings. Joachim had accused his wife of infidelity, despite flimsy evidence, and Brahms believed in her innocence. He wrote her a letter expressing his support, which was then introduced into the proceedings as evidence of her good character. In the end, Joachim's divorce petition was denied, and Joachim furiously broke off contact with Brahms for several years.

By 1887, it seems Joachim's temper had cooled, but he still had not contacted his old friend. Brahms made the first move with a postcard; "I should like to send you some news of an artistic nature," he wrote, "which I hope might more or less interest you." Joachim replied immediately; "I hope you are going to tell me about a new work, for I have read and played your latest works with real delight."

Brahms replied with evident relief. "Your friendly message makes my confession all the more pleasant! But be prepared for a little shock. I have been unable to resist the ideas that have been occurring to me for a concerto for *violin and cello* [Brahms's emphasis] much as I have tried to talk myself out of it." And with that their friendship had resumed. Brahms's plan was a success.

But that purpose could have been accomplished just as easily with a second violin concerto. Why bring a cello into it? Another friendship comes into play here, between Brahms and the cellist Robert Hausmann, who happened to be a member of Joachim's string quartet. Brahms was much enamored with Hausmann's rich tone and musical artistry and had just in the previous year written his Second Cello Sonata in admiration.

After an opening phrase from the orchestra, it is the cello which gets the first turn in the spotlight with a rhapsodic cadenza. Soon the violin takes its own turn, and finally the cello returns, joining the violin in an increasingly brilliant duet. Once the cadenza ends, it is the orchestra that takes over with a lengthy exposition of the main themes of the work. In time, the soloists return, restating and developing further the themes that

the orchestra has given them. The remainder of the movement unfolds as a broad sonata-form, typical in concerto first movements.

The second movement, following a four-note introduction in the winds, begins with the two soloists acting as one as they present the expansive first theme together in octaves. This is followed immediately by a second theme. The first phrase is simply stated by the winds, to which the soloists soon add delicate arabesques, before once again playing as one when the first theme returns.

The cello again gets things going in the final movement with a lilting dance-like theme, repeated by the violin. There seems, at times, to be an echo here and there of the “Gypsy” music which strongly influenced Brahms when he was still young, though here it is noticeably less extroverted than in earlier pieces. There are numerous episodes offering contrasting material, but the lilting theme always returns to the original mood, though never completely the same way.

The Double Concerto was premiered in October 1887 and met with a chilly reception. Even Brahms’s friends could not warm up to it. Clara Schumann wrote in her journal, “I do not believe the concerto has any future. Nowhere has it the warmth and freshness which are so often to be found in his works.” Another friend described it as “tedious and wearisome, a really senile production.” History is full of instances of a work being excoriated at its premiere, only to be lauded a few years later, and the Double Concerto would prove to be yet another example of this phenomenon. But Brahms only had ten years left to him and had no way of knowing this. Some biographers report that he had already drafted a second Double Concerto to follow up on the first, but it never saw the light of day, nor did Brahms ever write for orchestra again.

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AMY BEACH (1867-1944)

Symphony in E minor, op. 32 (*Gaelic*)

The 19th century was a period of rapid and dramatic change in the United States. In 1800, the country was still a young nation with an uncertain future, and no real standing among the other nations of the world. By 1900, had spread across the continent, increased its population fifteenfold, and established itself as a major economic and military presence. It should come as no surprise that musical life underwent similar expansion, though it started a bit later. In the early 19th century, music as a profession barely existed at all in the United States, but by the 1890s, America had produced a respectable crop of virtuoso soloists, orchestras, and opera companies that were the equal of any in Europe.

Many important composers emerged as well, but in this area America found itself at a disadvantage; composition was not widely taught as a discipline in the US, so aspiring young composers tended to seek their education in Europe. Since most of the first American composers traveled to Germany to learn their craft, American concert music was largely built on the German model. As the century drew to a close, this fact began to rankle. During the same period, Nationalism had become a sweeping force among European composers who sought to liberate themselves from German dominance and create a style of music distinct to their own lands and cultures. Why couldn't America do the same?

When Dvořák, the great Bohemian nationalist, arrived in New York for a three-year stint as director of the new National Conservatory, he decided to weigh in on the question. After studying the issue for several months, he would tell the New York Herald Tribune, "I am now satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States." To prove his point, he wrote his "New World" Symphony, which remains his most popular work to this day.

When a Boston newspaper interviewed several American composers about Dvořák's idea, the reaction was negative. John Knowles Paine, the first American composer to achieve international recognition, rejected Dvořák's ideas, and even questioned the need for Nationalism at all. Most of his younger colleagues followed suit. It fell to Amy Beach to offer a more measured response.

Born Amy Cheney in 1867, she was a true child prodigy, gifted with perfect pitch and total recall, playing the piano and composing her own melodies at the age of four, and debuting with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at sixteen. Her career changed directions when, at eighteen, she married Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, a Boston-based surgeon 24 years her senior. At her husband's insistence, she curtailed her performing career, limiting herself to one recital a year. Composition became her primary creative outlet. She proved quite prolific, with over three hundred works composed during her life. During her marriage, her music was published under the name, "Mrs. H. H. A. Beach," but after her husband's death in 1910, she began using "Amy Beach." She also took up her performing career again, touring Europe as a pianist/composer for three years before returning home in 1914.

Beach was the first American woman to achieve success as a composer. That she did so at all is evidence of her remarkable gifts and perseverance since the society she grew up in did not, on the whole, encourage young women, even gifted ones, to pursue careers outside the home. Although she was advised to travel to Europe to study, her parents could not afford the expense. She received some instruction locally, including a year of study in harmony and counterpoint from Junius Hill, but was for the most part self-taught. She therefore can be called the first prominent American composer to have been trained entirely in her homeland. To this we might add that during much of her life, she was the most famous American classical composer in the world.

And it was she, alone among her colleagues, to take up the challenge posed by Dvořák. In her response, she embraced the idea of American Nationalism in music, and agreed that it should be based on some kind of “vernacular” music; but she believed Dvořák was mistaken in his suggestion that Negro Spirituals should serve as its sole basis. In her view, “We of the North should be far more likely to be influenced by the old English, Scotch, or Irish songs, inherited with our literature from our ancestors.” She had a point. Her own forbears had come from the British Isles, and Irish and Scots music had been the wellspring of most of America’s folk music, as well as popular songs by such composers as Steven Foster. After hearing the Boston premiere of the “New World” Symphony in 1893, Beach decided to respond with her own symphony, composed between 1894 and 1896.

In composing her symphony (which would turn out to be her only one), she chose four authentic Irish tunes of “simple, rugged, and unpretentious beauty;” the rest of the melodic material she composed herself. In fact, the first two themes of the first movement are taken from her song *Dark is the Night*, op. 11 no. 1, about a turbulent sea voyage. The mood is lightened by the appearance of a lively Gaelic dance tune, heard first in the oboe. Beach uses only her own themes in the development section. The dance tune is heard again near the end of the movement, only to be swept away by a climactic coda.

The second movement has an unusual form, kind of a Scherzo turned inside out. A gently lilting Irish song, *The Little Field of Barley*, is the source of all melodic material in the movement. Again, the oboe introduces the tune in a lyrical introduction. The main body of the movement is a lightly tripping Scherzo in the best Mendelssohnian vein, built on two themes which are both variations of the original Irish song. Near the end, the original theme returns, now in the English horn in a more extended treatment, rounded off by a brief reminiscence of the Scherzo.

Beach wrote that the third movement described “the laments of a primitive people, their romance and their dreams.” Two main themes are heard, both of which are Irish folk songs. After a broad introduction, the solo cello introduces the first theme, based on the song *Cushlamacree*, a paean to Ireland’s natural beauty from the viewpoint of a lonely exile. Following a long development of the first theme, violins introduce the second, derived from *Which Way Did She Go?*, a lament for a dead child.

The vigorous *Finale* begins with a quotation of two measures from the first movement, which are spun into a march-like principal theme. Beach wrote that this movement “contains only themes of my own devising....The finale tries to express the rough, primitive character of the Celtic people, their sturdy daily life, their passions and battles, and the elemental nature of their processes of thought and its resulting action.” The second theme, introduced by violas and cellos, is in the best Romantic tradition. The development which follows is long, complex, and dramatic, and the symphony climaxes with the return of the second theme by all upper strings in unison.

The *Gaelic* Symphony was premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra on October 30, 1896. The reception was so overwhelmingly positive that they would repeat it three times that season. Soon it would be performed repeatedly throughout the US and Europe, always received with enthusiasm. After Beach’s death in 1944, the symphony along with her other work fell into obscurity for a while, but in recent years there has been a great resurgence of interest in her music, along with a reevaluation of her importance in American concert music. While some early reviewers felt they had to qualify their praise by referring to the composer’s gender, the fact is that Beach’s only symphony is a masterpiece by any standard, and certainly one of the finest concert works written by any American.