

MasterWorks 1 Concert
Friday, September 16, 2011

Blue cathedral

Jennifer Higdon (1961 –)

Written: 1999

Movements: One.

Style: Contemporary

Duration: eleven minutes.

Since its premiere in 2000, more than 250 orchestras have performed *blue cathedral*. Given the current attitudes about “new music” in this country – *abysmal* – this is a remarkable testament to the accessibility and popularity of the work. Jennifer Higdon wrote *blue cathedral* to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Curtis Institute of Music, where she received her artist’s diploma and currently teaches. She provides the following about her piece:

Blue - like the sky. Where all possibilities soar. Cathedrals - a place of thought, growth and spiritual expression, serving as a symbolic doorway into and out of this world. Blue represents all potential and the progression of journeys. Cathedrals represent a place of beginnings, endings, solitude, fellowship, contemplation, knowledge, and growth. As I was writing this piece, I found myself imagining a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky. Because the walls would be transparent, I saw the image of clouds and blueness permeating this church. In my mind's eye, the listener would enter from the back of the sanctuary, floating along the corridor amongst giant crystal pillars, moving in a contemplative stance. The stained glass windows' figures would start moving with song, singing a heavenly music. The listener would float down the aisle, slowly moving upward at first and then progressing at a quicker pace, rising towards an immense ceiling which would open to the sky. As this journey progressed, the speed of the traveler would increase, rushing forward and upward. I wanted to create the sensation of contemplation and quiet peace at the beginning, moving towards the feeling of celebration and ecstatic expansion of the soul, all the while singing along with that heavenly music.

. . . Curtis is a house of knowledge – a place to reach towards that beautiful expression of the soul that comes through music. I began writing this piece at a unique juncture in my life and found myself pondering the question of what makes a life. The recent loss of my younger brother, Andrew Blue, made me reflect on the amazing journeys that we all make in our lives, crossing paths with so many individuals singularly and collectively, learning and growing each step of the way. This piece represents the expression of the individual and the group – of our inner travels and the places our souls carry us, the lessons we learn, and the growth we experience. In tribute to my brother, I feature solos for the clarinet (the instrument he played) and the flute (the instrument I play). Because I am the older sibling, it is the flute that appears first in this dialog. At the end of the work, the two instruments continue their dialogue, but it is the flute that drops out and the clarinet that continues on in the upward progressing journey.

This is a musical story that commemorates living and passing through places of knowledge and of sharing and of that song called life.

Jennifer Higdon was born in Brooklyn, New York, grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and Seymour, Tennessee, and now resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She has served as Composer-in-Residence with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (2005-06 season), the Green Bay Symphony Orchestra (2006-07 season), the Philadelphia Orchestra (2007-08) and the Fort Worth Symphony (2009-10). The Telarc recording of *blue cathedral* made the Classical Billboard charts. Telarc's *Higdon: Concerto for Orchestra/City Scape* received four Grammy Awards nominations. She received a Pulitzer Prize in 2010 for her *Violin Concerto*.

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Concerto in D Major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 61

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Written: 1806

Movements: Three

Style: Classical and Romantic

Duration: 42 minutes

Many of us share a personality flaw with Beethoven. In spite of his greatness, Ludwig van Beethoven was a procrastinator, especially when somebody was paying for his work. Consider poor Franz Clement and Beethoven's *Violin Concerto*.

Franz Clement was a virtuoso violinist who made his fame as a child prodigy. Later he became the concertmaster and conductor of the prestigious Theater an der Wien. Clement conducted the premiere of Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* and was the concertmaster at the premiere of his only opera, *Fidelio*. His ear was legendary; there are tales of Clement's ability to play back almost any piece of music after only a single hearing. Unlike many violinists of the day who were known for "bold, robust, powerful playing," Clement was known for an "indescribable delicacy, neatness, and elegance, and extremely delightful tenderness and purity." He was "indisputably . . . among the most perfect violinists.

One way to make money as a musician during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to hold a benefit concert—for yourself. Clement held his benefit concert on December 23, 1806. In spite of his delicacy and neatness, he wasn't above mere showmanship; he ended the concert playing a piece while holding the instrument upside down and using only one of the violin's strings! For that same concert, he asked Beethoven to write a concerto. Beethoven just barely finished it in time. Legend has it that Clement's first time through the concerto was when he sight-read it at the concert, in front of the paying audience! Pity the poor orchestra players who were also sight-reading. One might feel some pity for the conductor, except that it was Beethoven himself!

Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* reflects the qualities of Clement's playing, making it among the most perfect violin concertos. Nevertheless, it is not a typical concerto, a technical show-off piece for a soloist. Performing it is difficult but, even in the more robust sections, it has a sweet, serene character. Beginning with the timpani—which play a central role throughout the first movement—the orchestra plays for an extended period and gets to introduce all of the melodies before the violinist even enters. After he finally does, with a short cadenza, he embellishes everything that has come before. Even the cadenza at the end of this movement finishes without the typical flourish. Instead, it gently melts into the final orchestral utterance.

The second movement is a series of variations on a simple little theme resembling a chorale. A short cadenza at the end leads directly into the finale. Like the beginning of the concerto itself, it begins delicately. This time, however, it builds into a vigorous and virtuosic showpiece.

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Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835--1921)

Written: 1896

Movements: Four (grouped into two)

Style: Romantic

Duration: 34 minutes

When the French Composer Charles Gounod heard Camille Saint-Saëns' *Third Symphony*, he exclaimed, There goes the French Beethoven. High praise indeed, but could any composer be more honored than to have his music featured in a film about a pig? The 1990's hit *Babe* featured Saint-Saëns' *Third Symphony*!

Saint-Saëns was a true child prodigy. He wrote his first piano music when he was only three. He was ten when he gave his debut piano recital. The program featured solos by Handel, Kalkbrenner, Hummel, and Bach, a concerto by Mozart and Beethoven's *Third Piano Concerto*, all played from memory. For an encore, he offered to play, again from memory, any of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas! He wrote his first symphony when he was only 13. Although he was once in the avant-garde of French composers—and considered dangerously subversive—he lived long enough to be almost forgotten and relegated to the class of old-fogeys. By the beginning of the twentieth century the novelist Romain Rolland could write, "It's odd how one can talk with musicians for hours about French music without thinking of once mentioning the name of Saint-Saëns." Another contemporary, Reynaldo Hahn said, Today, it takes courage to admire Saint-Saëns.

Saint-Saëns wrote this *Third Symphony* in 1886 for the London Philharmonic Society after they invited him to perform his *Fourth Piano Concerto* with them and, in addition, provide the orchestra with a new work. Even though the *Third Symphony* is now often called the *Organ Symphony*, it is not a concerto like Poulenc's *Organ Concerto*. In fact, Saint-Saëns uses the organ as if it were simply another orchestral instrument, and only in the second and fourth movements. He knew that Philharmonic's hall had a big old organ because he had played on it several years earlier. Imagine his surprise when he arrived for the premiere performance only to find a smaller instrument had replaced the original!

All of the themes in this symphony seem to develop out of two simple melodic snippets that you will hear in the first few moments of the symphony. In the short, slow introduction, the oboe plays the first motive. The flutes echo it, and then the cellos and basses play it *pizzicato*. The second motive is the tune played by the violins and violas in the fast section that immediately follows the introduction.

The main theme of the first movement is a combination of both of those motives. A long, lyrical melody played first by the woodwinds, and then dramatically by the strings is the second theme. The violins introduce a rocking third melody that eventually develops into a

triumphant climax. Saint-Saëns works through all three of these themes and, as they finally spin themselves out, the organ enters with a cushion of soft chords. They provide the background for a reverent melody played by the string section. Saint-Saëns has slipped us, unannounced, into the slow second movement, based entirely upon that tune.

The third movement contrasts two separate themes. The first is a robust one introduced by the strings and timpani; the second is lighter and faster, played first by the woodwinds. At the end of this movement, Saint-Saëns begins a soft melody based upon the opening motive of the symphony. It dies away to nothing and, with a colossal blast from the organ, the fourth movement begins. Here the quiet melody from the third movement joins with the transformed opening melody of the first movement for a triumphant ending.

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