

MasterWorks 3 Concert
Saturday, January 7, 2012

Rounds for String Orchestra
David Diamond (1915B2005)

Written: 1944

Movements: Three, connected without break

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 14 minutes

When the conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos commissioned David Diamond to write a piece for the Minneapolis Orchestra, he expressed an opinion about modern music that many audiences share: “most of the difficult music I play is distressing.” At the time, the United States was in the midst of World War II. Diamond himself was distressed. When the war broke out, he returned from Paris to the States. This gifted young composer found himself working the night shift at a soda counter in New York. Mitropoulos’s one request of Diamond was “Make me happy.”

David Diamond was born in Rochester, New York to Polish immigrant parents. He taught himself to play the violin when he was seven, and by the time he was twelve he was studying at the Cleveland Institute. Three years later, he was back home in Rochester studying violin and composition at the Eastman School of Music. He continued study in New York, and eventually in Paris, where he rubbed shoulders with Maurice Ravel, Darius Milhaud, Albert Roussel, and Igor Stravinsky. Most importantly, he joined the class of that most important French teacher of American Composers, Nadia Boulanger. Diamond spent the 1940s in the United States and in 1951 he returned to Europe where he spent the next fifteen years. When he came back to the United States, he taught at the Manhattan School of Music, the University of Colorado, and the Juilliard School.

In spite of critical praise of David Diamond’s work – Leonard Bernstein was an important champion, proclaiming the "seriousness, intelligence, weight, deftness, technical mastery, and sheer abundance" of his music, and called him "a vital branch in the stream of American Music" – he didn’t receive the same sort of widespread public admiration as his contemporaries, Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber. As noted in his *Boston Globe* obituary he “always went his own way, composing in a highly personal, lyrical, intense, and driven style that had nothing to do with the winds of fashion.” Another obituary stated, "He enjoyed enormous success in the 1940s and early '50s . . . but, in the 1960s and '70s, the serial and modernist schools pushed him into the shadows." There may have been other reasons. Diamond himself confessed, "I was a highly emotional young man, very honest in my behavior, and I would say things in public that would cause a scene between me and, for instance, a conductor.”

Diamond fulfilled Dimitri Mitropoulos’s plea to “Make me happy,” with his ebullient *Rounds for String Orchestra*. With its melodies based on a five-tone scale and its energetic rhythms, it has a distinctly American folk-like character. One compositional technique in *Rounds* comes from the title itself. A “round” can be a simple form of musical imitation like one voice following another in “*Row, row, row your boat*,” but the same principal takes place in a complex fugue. Throughout this highly virtuosic piece, you will catch various sections of the

string orchestra imitating snippets of the melody as they toss it back and forth. A series of sharply punctuated chords breaks the rhythmic intensity of the first movement and makes way for the more lyrical central movement. As it melts away, the angular third movement begins. Near the end, there is a brief lyrical respite and then a return to the opening ideas of the piece. A final flurry of activity brings *Rounds* to a exhilarating close.

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Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Opus 33

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835--1921)

Written: 1872

Movements: Three, connected without pause

Style: Romantic

Duration: 10 minutes

The biographer James Harding tells the story of a devout French peasant who bought a packet of chocolate that also contained a picture of a saint – one of a series of pictures of famous people given free with the confections – sort of like baseball trading cards. The peasant's son was seriously ill, and since all of her previous prayers had gone unanswered, she decided to try this particular saint, vowing to always wear his picture. The boy recovered, and ever afterwards "she carried reverently attached to her bosom the yellowing likeness of Camille Saint-Saëns."

Such was the fame of this prolific composer. Born only 7 years after the death of Beethoven, Saint-Saëns lived through most of the shaping revolutions in European classical music and lived long enough to be the first established composer to write for films (1908)! "I live in music like a fish in water," he stated. For him, composing music came as naturally and easily "as an apple tree produces apples."

Saint-Saëns was insatiably curious – he wrote on various historical and scientific subjects and he was an inveterate traveler, going as far afield as Moscow, Brazil, Greece, and the United States. He would cleverly arrange concert tours in parts of the world that would enable him to view solar eclipses or volcano eruptions. That sort of curiosity did not extend to music. Musical developments at the beginning of the twentieth century horrified him. Debussy referred to him as "the musician of tradition." The works that he composed in the last year of his life, 1921, could easily be mistaken for something from the 1860's!

Throughout his long and productive life, Saint-Saëns wrote nearly 200 works in almost every genre: operas, ballets, sacred works, songs, symphonies, chamber music, and lots of music for solo piano. He wrote five concertos for the piano, three for the violin and two for the cellos. For the most part, Saint-Saëns was part of the "art-for-art's sake" school, where the primary purpose of music was simply the enjoyment of sound. His concertos and symphonies are a result of that philosophy. The music he wrote exhibited characteristics of both the classical and romantic tradition. His clear and simple phrasing is reminiscent of the classical composers like Mozart and Haydn whereas the total integration of all of the movements of work, linked together by common melodies, is a very romantic trait much like the music of that arch-romantic Franz Liszt.

Saint-Saëns wrote his first cello concerto for Auguste Tolbeque, the principal cellist of

the Paris Conservatory orchestra. He collapsed the standard three movements of a concerto into one continuous, compact work. It begins immediately without the standard long orchestral introduction. The cellist introduces all of the themes of the first movement. The first is fiery and passionate while the second theme is more subdued and lyrical. After working through all the possibilities that both themes offer, the music dissolves into the second movement. Here the orchestra gets to play the theme by itself, a sort of gallant minuet. Finally, the cello enters with a reflective and, at times, impassioned commentary. The last movement begins with the same melody as the first but with a hint of a major tonality. More drama unfolds as old themes come back and new themes introduced. The mood shifts back and forth between impassioned and reflective while the cello part alternates between pyrotechnical display and fervent lyricism. A final orchestral interlude leads to the cellist's final bravura.

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Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 55, "Eroica"

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Written: 1802-04

Movements: four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 47 minutes

When music teachers try to make sense of the complex history of music so that students can take multiple-choice exams, they frequently make the year 1800 as the dividing line between the classical and romantic eras of music. It is a handy date, and easy to remember. However, the classical composer Franz Joseph Haydn was still going at that time and there were intimations of romanticism long before the turn of the century. 1800 does line up, however, with an important change in Beethoven's style: away from the classicism of his youth and toward something really quite new and remarkable. The signature piece of that change was his *Third Symphony*.

Of course, there were other things happening at about that time which marked a dramatic shift in thinking. Revolutionary fervor was successful in America in the 1770's and 80's. But it was running amok in Europe. Heads were rolling in France by 1792. Napoleon Bonaparte, first only a general, then part of a consulate, then First Consul for Life, and finally Emperor declared, I alone represent the People. The last vestiges of the Holy Roman Empire, now centered in Vienna, were crumbling before Napoleon's advance. Beethoven, living in Vienna, considered himself the equal of any aristocrat, even Napoleon. He declared, it is a pity that I don't understand the art of war as well as that of music. I would destroy him!

Three works that Beethoven wrote at about the same time show his progression in style. They all use the same melodic theme. He wrote a ballet in 1801 called the *Creatures of Prometheus*. In it, the god Prometheus brings two statues to life, but they are not fully human. It is only through their exposure to the arts that they are taught morality and emotion. For the final dance scene, Beethoven used a little country-dance melody. The next year he wrote an entire set of piano variations based upon that little tune. He declared to his publisher that the

variations were in a *new manner*. Beethoven used the country-dance melody once again, this time as the theme for the final movement of his *Third Symphony*. He initially dedicated the work to Napoleon, but upon hearing of his self-elevation to emperor, Beethoven remarked: So he too is nothing more than an ordinary man. Now he will also trample all human rights underfoot, and only pander to his own ambition; he will place himself above everyone else and become a tyrant. With that, he removed the dedication from the title page with a knife.

The *Eroica* symphony really is a new approach to writing music. Now, a symphony is no longer a collection of loosely related movements. They are connected by some underlying and often ineffable theme. In other words, the symphony means *something*. The first movement of the *Eroica*, while written in a traditional form, is longer and has more dramatic contrast than virtually any other symphony by Mozart or Haydn. The second movement has a simple plan. It is a slow march with a contrasting middle section—a profound treatment of a funeral march! The third movement, a rollicking scherzo, has a trio section that expects heroism on the part of the horn section. The final movement, based upon the Promethean theme, takes the concept of theme and variations beyond any previous symphonic treatment. Taken as a whole, Beethoven's *Third Symphony* somehow is a musical picture, a heroic symphony . . . composed to celebrate the memory of a great man.

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