

PROGRAM NOTES
SYMPHONY OF THE REDWOODS - FALL, 2008
By Marcia Lotter

**Sergey Sergeievitch Prokofiev (1891-1953) – Symphony #1 in D Major, op. 25
“The Classical Symphony”**

It would be fascinating to be able to look ahead a hundred years from now and see what composers have withstood the test of time. We might be quite surprised at the music commonly played and known by then. In the Third Edition of the Groves Dictionary of Music, published in 1935, Prokofiev was mentioned only briefly and is dismissed as a composer who “produced a sheer extravagance of displeasing sounds.” The musicologist described his music as “cubist” in nature; that is, angular, symmetrical, and square. In 1935 Prokofiev had written most of his compositions, and it is unlikely that a modern critic would describe his music as unemotional, unromantic, or “merely decorative.” Today we value his music for its enormous power, variety, and wit. We celebrate his tendency toward mockery and satire and his playful nature that never seems to take itself too seriously.

All of these qualities are already evident in his first symphony. It has always been called “The Classical Symphony” because Prokofiev intentionally restricted himself to classical forms for this piece, just for fun. He wrote: “It seemed to me that, had Haydn lived to our day, he would have retained his own style, while accepting something of the new at the same time.” The composer was 27 when he wrote this symphony and had already written the Love for Three Oranges, his Third Piano Concerto, and many other important works. In his first symphony he used a gavotte, rather than a minuet, but this is something that Haydn also sometimes did. The structure is much simpler and more transparent than in his other work, but that is not to say that it is easy to play. Prokofiev tends to write charming, effervescent flurries of notes that sound sweet and witty but are often extremely difficult for the instrumentalist. Perhaps the patterns were easier to play on a piano than on a flute or oboe! His Haydnesque melodies also take unexpected twists, but this piece has been a popular favorite with audiences ever since its premiere in April of 1918. The physical exhilaration of the short movements is irresistible, and it is impossible to listen to it without feeling light-hearted and cheerful.

Ma Mere l’Oye – Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

French composer Maurice Ravel has always been compared to Claude Debussy, who was taken more seriously during their lifetimes. Ravel was a fastidious and tireless worker and a genius at orchestration. He could always assemble the exact combination of instrumental colors to achieve the effects he sought. Oddly enough, he considered two of his main inspirations to be Emmanuel Chabrier (for his Spanish style and enthusiasm) and Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote an essay on the meaning of poetry and other forms of art that struck Ravel to the core.

The lovely Mother Goose Suite (literally, “My Mother, the Goose”) was originally written to be played by two children on the piano. The first performance was given by children aged 6 and 10. The following year Ravel prepared an orchestral version for a ballet production in Paris in 1912. The five movements depict fairy tales well-known to children of that time. Movement One, *Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty*, is very short but solemn and thoughtful, like a tableaux of the silent castle. Movement Two is *Tom Thumb*, one of many deluded characters who scattered bread crumbs, in order to find his way back out of the woods. But birds came behind him and ate them all. Ravel cleverly uses solo oboe above wavering strings to convey the winding paths. You can also hear happy birds chirping over their feast of crumbs from a distance.

Movement Three is *Laideronnette (Little Ugly One), Empress of the Pagodas*. This is a story called “The Green Serpent.” Laideronnette, formerly a beautiful princess, was magically disfigured by an evil witch. The princess lives in a faraway castle and meets The Green Serpent, who has been similarly cursed, out in the woods. They have various adventures together, including visiting living pagodas made of crystal, diamonds, and emeralds, which nevertheless sing and play for the couple. Movement Four is *The Conversations of Beauty and the Beast*, written in waltz time. A solo clarinet conveys Beauty’s part of the conversation, and the bassoon represents The Beast. Beauty’s voice is later found in flute and oboe. After The Beast’s transformation back to a prince, Beauty becomes a solo violin, and The Beast becomes a solo cello. A clash of cymbals announces the end of the wicked witch’s spell. Movement Five *The Fairy Garden* is an account of Sleeping Beauty’s awakening by Prince Charming. The celeste has the role of the enchanted princess, as she slowly opens her eyes in the sun-flooded room. A joyous fanfare sounds at the end as the storybook characters gather about her, and the Good Fairy bestows her blessing on the happy pair.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827) – Concerto in D Major for Violin and Orchestra, op. 61.

When we think of Beethoven in his middle years, we often have an image of a rather grumpy, disheveled, abrupt person, whose music is intense and tempestuous. So this lovely, lyrical violin concerto comes as something of a surprise. Beethoven was primarily a pianist, but he also frequently played the viola and appreciated the singing legato tones strings could produce. He dedicated the concerto to a young violin prodigy, Franz Clement, who was 15 when Beethoven heard him for the first time and signed his autograph book. Clement could play entire scores of Beethoven’s music at the piano from memory. He was also Beethoven’s favorite concertmaster (playing the violin) when Beethoven rehearsed his newly composed pieces for performance with orchestra. Clement’s playing was renowned for its grace, delicacy, and purity of tone, all qualities which are shown to great advantage in this concerto. Even the dashing finale seems boisterous, folksy, and full of fun, rather than passionate or profound.

Concertos in general are meant to be pieces to show off the performer’s style and technical ability. Beethoven was much more interested in depth of musical expression than in flashy displays. But apparently, in the first performance, violinist Clement added a comical cadenza at the end of the first movement, a stunt piece with his violin held upside down! This could not have pleased Beethoven very much. But, on the other hand, Beethoven was, as usual, late in finishing the piece, and the poor soloist was forced to sight-read the premiere performance without rehearsal, so perhaps he could be forgiven for wanting to get back at Beethoven for putting him into this position. After that performance there were many changes made to the score, in collaboration with the violinist. But, perhaps partially because of the disastrous first performance, the piece was abandoned for many years until revived by the great violin virtuoso Joachim. How fortunate for us all that he recognized the importance of this magnificent concerto!