

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY

February 12-13-14, 2010

CHOPIN *Andante Spianato et Grand Polonaise Brillante, Op. 22*

CHOPIN **Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21**
Maestoso
Larghetto
Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

SIBELIUS **Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43**
Allegretto
Tempo Andante, ma rubato
Vivacissimo
Finale: Allegro moderato

Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise Brillante, Op. 22

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Born February 22, 1810, Zelazowska Wola

Died October 17, 1849, Paris

The *Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise Brillante* had a curious genesis and exists today in a variety of forms. Chopin originally wrote just the *Grande Polonaise* as a virtuoso concert piece for piano and orchestra between September 1830 and July 1831, when he was in his early twenties. This was an emotionally wrenching time for the composer. He had left his native Poland at exactly the moment it was being subjugated by Russia, and—suddenly homeless—he had spent a disappointing eight months trying to make a career in Vienna before finally fleeing to Paris in 1831. Three years later, in 1834, Chopin returned to the *Grande Polonaise* and wrote an introduction for it, the *Andante Spianato*, scored for piano alone. This was the period when touring piano virtuosos were entertaining audiences with concertos, and Chopin had hoped to win a following in Paris with this sort of large-scale work. He gave the premiere of the *Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise Brillante* in Paris on April 26, 1835, but this was to prove one of Chopin's final public performances: he disliked performing before large crowds (modern concert conditions would have appalled him) and thereafter limited his performances to private audiences. In 1836, Chopin returned once again to this music and arranged it for piano quartet, and two years after that he arranged the entire piece for solo piano; it is heard at this concert in the version for piano and orchestra.

The *Andante Spianato* is unusually calm (“spianato” has been variously translated as “level,” “even,” “smoothed out”). Over a rippling accompaniment, the gentle first idea of this nocturne-like introduction is heard; a brief trio section leads to the return of this opening material. Fanfares signal the beginning of the *Polonaise*, which is brilliant music, full of swirling triplets and hammered octaves. A polonaise is an old Polish dance in triple time, but to that stately old dance Chopin in this case brings unusual virtuosity. Like the *Andante Spianato*, the *Polonaise* is in ABA form: both the flowing main idea and the dark and noble center section (in C minor) feature some of Chopin's most characteristic melodic material, and the conclusion is dazzling.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, Op. 21
FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Chopin's extraordinary gifts were evident early—one of his teachers described him in his term-end evaluation in two words: “Musical genius.” His parents, however, were careful not to exploit the boy or to push him into a career as a prodigy. Chopin did not give an official public concert in Warsaw until March 1830, a few weeks after his twentieth birthday. In the fall of 1829, knowing that that occasion was coming, Chopin had set to work on a piece worthy of the event, a piano concerto. On March 3, 1830, a small orchestra crowded into the Chopin home in Warsaw as young Frederic gave the premiere before invited friends. Two weeks later, on March 17, he played the public premiere at the National Theatre in Warsaw, and the reviews were rhapsodic. Wrote one critic just after the concert: “He plays with such certainty, so cleanly that his Concerto might be compared to the life of a just man: no ambiguity, nothing false . . . His music is full of expressive feeling and song, and puts the listener into a state of subtle rapture, bringing back to his memory all the happy moments he has known.” Later that same year Chopin wrote another piano concerto, in E minor, which would be published in 1833 as his Piano Concerto No. 1. But while on his way to Paris in the fall of 1830, Chopin mislaid the orchestral parts of the Concerto in F minor, and they had to be completely reconstructed. This delayed publication, and when this concerto finally appeared in 1836 it was listed as his “Concerto No. 2”, even though it had been written first.

Chopin's two piano concertos are the work of a very young man, and he never wrote another. Mozart and Beethoven had transformed the piano concerto into a great form, a symphonic argument in which soloist and orchestra were equal protagonists. Chopin might respect such music, but it was not for him—he was interested, first and foremost, in the piano. In his concertos the musical interest lies in the piano part, and the orchestra functions only as a framework for the soloist. So subordinate a role does the orchestra play, in fact, that after his arrival in Paris, Chopin arranged both concertos for solo piano and played them in that form. Chopin's writing for orchestra in the two concertos has come in for a hard time—Berlioz said that the “orchestral concertos are cold and practically useless”—but this writing should be understood as the work of a very young man who was writing for a specific purpose, and the orchestral part is effective for that purpose. While he can create a “romantic” fullness of sound in the Concerto No. 2, Chopin scores it for what is essentially Mozart's orchestra: pairs of woodwinds, trumpets, and horns, plus timpani and strings, as well as one additional instrument—a single trombone.

The Concerto No. 2 is in the conventional three movements. Chopin marks the first movement *Maestoso* (“majestic”), but the opening impulse is lyric, as the orchestra launches the

concerto with a graceful falling idea that will shape much of the movement. With the entrance of the soloist, however, the orchestra retreats to the shade, and the pianist will dominate the remainder of the movement.

When Chopin wrote the *Larghetto*, he had (like many other teenagers) fallen in love, in this case with a young singer, Constantia Gladkowska. As he worked on this movement, he wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski: “I have—perhaps to my misfortune—already found my ideal, which I worship faithfully and sincerely. Six months have elapsed, and I have not yet exchanged a syllable with her of whom I dream every night. While my thoughts were with her I composed the *Adagio* of my concerto.” In ternary form, this movement has been compared to opera music, particularly to the music of Bellini, a great favorite of young Chopin. The quiet opening recalls *bel canto*, while the middle section grows more dramatic, as the piano declaims its animated song over rustling strings. This movement has been much admired. Schumann exclaimed “What are ten editorial crowns compared with one such slow movement!” and Liszt said: “The whole of this piece is of a perfection almost ideal; its expression, now radiant with light, now full of tender pathos.”

Solo piano leads off the concluding *Allegro vivace*, and Chopin marks its opening theme *semplice ma graziosamente* (“simple but graceful”). Some have heard folk-tunes in this movement, but all the material appears to have been original with Chopin. A great fanfare from the horns leads to a properly spirited conclusion.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43

JEAN SIBELIUS

Born December 8, 1865, Tavastahus, Finland

Died September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland

Sibelius’ Second Symphony, composed in Italy in 1901 when the composer was 35, has become one of the most famous in the orchestral repertory. It is easily Sibelius’ most popular symphony, it is a favorite of audiences around the world, and it is a favorite of performers too: over thirty recordings are currently available. This popularity has been explained in various ways. Some sense the sunny atmosphere of Italy warming Sibelius’ austere Scandinavian sensibilities. Others hear a *Finlandia*-like program that dramatizes Finland’s struggle for national identity in the face of foreign domination. But Sibelius would have had none of this. He wanted his music considered abstractly—as sound-drama and not as a vehicle for extra-musical interpretation—and there is no doubt that the Second Symphony, in all its austere grandeur, is a stunning success as sound-drama.

Sibelius' music has the sweep of the true symphonist, yet his symphonic methods are unique. Rather than presenting themes and then developing them, a Sibelius symphony will often present its themes at first only as fragmentary shapes. These shapes can come together to assume a more complete form within the course of a movement, but then shatter into fragments once again. And this transformation of material takes place during violent contrasts of mood, long buildups that culminate in a constant series of climaxes, and great splashes of instrumental color that burst out of the leaden skies of Sibelius' musical landscape. These methods may be unique, but they take us on a true symphonic journey: across the forty-minute span of the Second Symphony, Sibelius moves inexorably from the tentative beginning through the battlefields of the interior movements to the thrilling culmination of the heroic finale. No wonder this is one of the most emotionally satisfying—and most popular—symphonies ever written.

Many have noted that Sibelius seems to reverse the sequence of the first two movements. Rather than opening with a dramatic movement, Sibelius begins with a gentle *Allegretto*. The pulsing string figures at the opening will recur throughout, and over them woodwinds sing an almost innocent tune. These theme-shapes return in a variety of forms, but the movement resolves nothing and concludes on the same tentative chords with which it began. The drama one expects from a first movement erupts in the second, marked *Tempo Andante*. Over the deep pizzicato opening, a pair of bassoons chants the main theme, aptly marked *lugubre*, and soon the music explodes in furious brass and percussion outbursts. Such episodes alternate with melting lyricism in a lengthy movement that is never at peace for long.

The scherzo arrives like a blast of wind across the frozen tundra. Its brief trio section, marked *lento e suave*, is in the unusual meter of 12/4: solo oboe sings its gentle song, built of a number of repeated notes. A sudden return of the scherzo leads to a further surprise: Sibelius brings back the music of the trio one more time before the symphony proceeds—on gradually more excited waves of sound—directly into the finale.

This concluding *Allegro moderato* is heroic in every sense of the term: its broad D-major opening strides ahead in thunderous octaves, so powerfully that one may miss the fact that this appears to be a variation of the woodwind tune from the symphony's very beginning, now played backwards. Trumpet fanfares and throbbing accompaniment push this music steadily forward, and this heroic beginning might prove anticlimactic were it not for Sibelius' control of his material. More lyric secondary music intervenes, and Sibelius continually delays the return of the home key of D major until the shining return of the main theme in the triumphant final moments.

WHY THIS PROGRAM

– by Mel Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

Feb. 12th-14th, 2010:- Jahja Ling related that the SDSO and the La Jolla Music Society are collaborating during the current Chopin anniversary. “As part of that, Garrick will come back next season to play the First Concerto, as well as recitals for the La Jolla group. He is, of course, a world-renowned Chopin expert, and the only American to have won the International Chopin competition in Warsaw. Regarding the Sibelius, I said early in my tenure here that I wanted to play a large Sibelius piece annually, but a few years have been missed. We did do the Fifth Symphony and the Violin Concerto, and now, finally, it is the great Second Symphony’s turn. This is probably the easiest of the Sibelius symphonies for audiences to follow and simply savor. I don’t mean to say that it’s a simple work! It is a work, though, that never fails to stir listeners, who continue loving it, as I do. It is possible to sense the dark, northern forests that surrounded the composer’s house in Finland when this music is played.”

As differentiated from Chopin’s *Andante Spiniato and Polonaise*, which has never before been played at these concerts, his Second Piano Concerto has been programmed by the SDSO nine times. Lyell Barbour was its first soloist here, under Fabien Sevizky’s baton, during the 1950 summer season. Most recently, it was played here by Emanuel Ax, Jahja Ling conducting, opening the 2002-03 season. The great Second Symphony by Sibelius was introduced here under the direction of Nicolai Sokoloff, during the summer of 1941. Its seventh, most recent performance here was under Murry Sidlin, during the 1991-92 season.