

PROGRAM NOTES

MISSOULA SYMPHONY CONCERTS

NOVEMBER 12 & 13, 2011

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Concert Românesc (1951)

Hungarian composer György Ligeti is probably best known for his avant-garde music, such as the work *Atmosphères*, used to great effect by Stanley Kubrick in his epic film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This weekend's concerts, however, open with a rip-roaring early work that reveals Ligeti composing in a vein that evokes the spirit of Romanian folk music.

Amongst his childhood experiences in his native Transylvania, Ligeti remembered a wild band of musicians wearing animal masks bursting its way into the family courtyard and playing lively, dissonant folk tunes on violin and bagpipes; and even earlier, as a small boy of three, being fascinated when he encountered, in the Carpathian Mountains, a player of the alpine horn (called a bucium, after the Latin).

Ligeti's Concert Românesc opens with a reflective Andantino or Larghetto, launched shyly by upper then lower strings, followed by woodwind, whose sad modal harmonies and open fifths suggest a medieval underlay.

The bustling Allegro Vivace is very much in the spirit of Bartók's thrusting Romanian Dances: piccolo and clarinet both have their say, and there's a cheerful echo of that folk

violin Ligeti encountered as a boy. The Adagio, embracing sad horn calls and a plaintive, oriental-hued English horn melody, just briefly blossoms conjuring up memories of Kodály's full-blooded Hungarian dance suites before dying away in eerie spirals of intertwining woodwind.

The final movement, *Molto vivace*, is the longest, and here we find Ligeti at last spreading his composer's wings and scampering into the more sophisticated world of Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*: the dance element is heavily syncopated, with string and woodwind soloists alternately assuming the lead, rather like expressive jazz musicians. But there's a surprise. Near the close, the dance just won't let go: there is an exciting and utterly unexpected coda, in which the orchestra fails to muffle the high-riding solo violin, and we hear the music (amid mysterious horn calls)

wander off into the distance, almost as if it were evanescing or being reabsorbed into the atmosphere, as electricity - before it is silenced by an abrupt farewell.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Piano Concerto No.1 in E flat major

Recommended recording: Martha Argerich, piano with Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony Orchestra

In 1848, having turned his back on a glamorous and lucrative international concert career — he called it a “circus” life — Liszt took a low-profile, low-paying conducting job in Weimar, a provincial German town. Over the next 13 years, he made it the capital of Europe’s musical avant-garde. There he radically reconceived traditional forms (Mass, oratorio, symphony, sonata) and

invented new ones (symphonic poem - such as the *Les Preludes* heard on the first MSO concert this season), while revising some early works, including two of his three piano concertos. The Piano Concerto No. 1 — gleaming, extroverted, thrillingly virtuosic — was conceived around 1835 but went through many bouts of revision in the two decades that followed. Liszt gave the first performance of this work in Weimar on February 17, 1855, under no less a conductor than Hector Berlioz. He made the final revisions to the score the following year.

In form, the concerto is at once radically innovative and reliant (albeit loosely) on Classical models: it unfolds as a single continuous drama, yet comprises four discrete sections that mimic the movements of a Classical symphony (fast, slow, scherzo, fast). Each of the first three

“movements” has its own themes, but the march-like finale (heralded by the return of the opening theme) is made up entirely of themes from earlier “movements,” now wholly transformed. The cumulative effect provides a satisfying sense of closure.

Rhetorically, piano and orchestra are hardly equals here. From the very first pages, the piano takes the lead in developing the musical plot and forcibly wrests the focus of attention from the orchestra to itself. The brilliant piano writing is a culmination of techniques Liszt had been developing for 30 years, in solo works like the *Transcendental Études*, and, though the orchestra is more an accompanist than a partner, the scoring is colorful and innovative.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No.9 in E minor, "From the New World"

Recommended recording: Istvan Kertesz and the London Symphony Orchestra

Czech composer Antonín Dvořák was born in Nelahozeves, a small village near Prague, in 1841. He trained as an organist, violinist and violist, and started his career out as a member of the National Theater Orchestra in Prague. In his thirties he secured a job as a church organist, and was able to focus more on composing. His works caught the eye of the famous composer Johannes Brahms, who encouraged him and contacted the publisher Simrock on his behalf. In a rapid sequence of events, Dvořák's music gained an international audience. It had a unique and singular voice: long lyrical melodies, driving rhythms and unusual

harmonies, inspired by the deep love of Dvořák's native Bohemia.

By 1892, Dvořák's fame had become so great that he was offered the job of founding director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. His arrival that autumn marked the beginning of a three year period spent almost entirely in America. He found much there that fascinated him. He developed a particular interest in the music of African-Americans and American Indians. "I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what we call Negro melodies," he said. "This can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, merry, gracious, or what

you will. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot find a thematic source here.”

Dvořák wrote nine symphonies, variously numbered, since he tried to discard his initial attempts at the form. The last of the symphonies, published as No. 5, but in fact the ninth, has the explanatory title "From the New World". It was written as a sign of thanks to his new hosts and first performed to great acclaim at Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893 by the New York Philharmonic. Four days later, the composer made his methods and goals for it perfectly clear: “It is this American folk spirit that I have tried to reproduce in my new symphony. I have not actually used any of the melodies. I have simply written themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music and, using

these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources at hand.”

He also revealed that the symphony contains melodies from an opera – planned but abandoned – on *The Song of Hiawatha*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem of life among Native Americans. They appear in the second and third movements, inspired by a woodland funeral and a dance of celebration.

Following a brooding, melancholic introduction, the opening movement proper presents two themes. The first is bold and commanding. It is the idea that binds the entire Symphony together, reappearing in all four movements. The second subject appears on solo flute. It is as sweet,

restful and haunting a theme as Dvořák ever penned. The movement finishes with a powerful, dramatic coda.

A solemn brass chorale ushers in the slow movement. The English horn then gives out the celebrated main theme - words were later added to it to create *Goin' Home*, a song in the style of a spiritual. The middle section is increasingly agitated, climaxing in a grand combination of the English horn theme with the opening movement's first subject.

The scherzo bustles with dynamic, complex dance rhythms. Two separate trios provide graceful contrast. The finale surges ahead urgently, its unfolding shot through with episodes of nostalgic expressiveness. Dvořák interweaves new themes with fleeting reminiscences of melodies from

each previous movement, en route to a stirring yet eventually enigmatic conclusion.

- *Darko Butorac*