

# Williams College Symphonic Winds

## Program Notes

written by Steven Dennis Bodner

### **Felix Mendelssohn (edited by John Boyd): *Overture for Winds, Op. 24***

Some artists develop their craft slowly; others seem almost at the top. There is little difference between Mendelssohn's early and his mature works.

George Marke, Boston Symphony Orchestra program annotator

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was a Mozart-like prodigy who demonstrated ability in everything he did, musical and otherwise. (Mendelssohn grew up to be the epitome of the wealthy German bourgeoisie; a humanist, he was cultured, interested in poetry and philosophy, and widely-read.) His parents carefully guided both his education and career in music, beginning with formal lessons in harmony and counterpoint with Carl Zelter in 1816. In fact, as Mendelssohn-scholar R. Larry Todd discusses, Mendelssohn's mature musical style was actually fully developed before he was 20. He began composing serious works age 10, his early works praised by such authorities as the Paris Conservatory's director Luigi Cherubini, who said in 1921 of the then-twelve year old Mendelssohn, "He is deeply founded in his art, and holds forth the finest promise." Throughout the 1830s and 40s, Mendelssohn stood at the forefront of German music, not only as a composer, but also as a conductor and a pianist/organist. As a conductor, he resurrected the then-forgotten music of J. S. Bach and astonished his audiences by conducting without a score and with a baton – both novelties at that time; at the keyboard (both piano and organ), he was known to be a brilliant improviser with a prodigious memory.

As a composer, though, Mendelssohn was regarded during his lifetime as near the divine. Robert Schumann once remarked, "I consider Mendelssohn *to be the finest musician* of our time, and take off my hat to him as a master." His mature style drew upon a variety of influences, including the complex chromatic counterpoint of Bach, the formal clarity and gracefulness of Mozart and the dramatic power of Beethoven and Weber. His music reflects the fundamental tension between Classicism and Romanticism in the generation of German composers immediately following Beethoven — his subtly Romantic attitude tempered by his Classic restraint and conservatism. One of the most prolific composers of the early Romantic era, Mendelssohn wrote pieces for almost every performance medium: symphonies, concerti, oratorios, chamber music, etc. His overtures, though, including *The Hebrides* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, occupy a significant place in his output. While he was not the first to create independent concert overtures, he was arguably the first major composer to probe extensively the ability of the non-dramatic, self-sufficient overture to treat programmatic ideas in purely musical terms.

During the summer of 1824, Mendelssohn and his father vacationed at the Spa of Bad Doberan in northern Germany. An essential feature of such a resort was an *Harmoniemusik* (a small wind band, typically 8 players) which performed daily concerts. Mendelssohn was keenly interested in this ensemble as detailed letters to his sister Fanny indicate. After sufficient observation and study, he composed an overture entitled *Notturmo* for the Spa's *Harmoniemusik* (1 flute, 2

clarinets, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 1 trumpet, and 1 English basshorn). This cheerful *Overture*, written when Mendelssohn was fifteen years old, bears the influence of Mozart and Weber. After a lyric, slow introduction in binary form, the main body of the work is in sonata-allegro form. Although the work is cast in a strict classical form, Mendelssohn's style can clearly be heard in the light, scherzo-like energy of the Allegro Vivace and in the chromatic shadings that abound.

The original score was lost soon after its first performance in Bad Doberan, but Mendelssohn recopied it two years later; this score, too, was unfortunately lost. In 1838, however, Mendelssohn sent his publisher Simrock an *Overture in C major for wind instruments*, with the following correspondence:

...I'm sending you an overture of mine today, which I composed earlier because of an opportunity I had to compose for wind band, and which I would like to publish now; without this, there is a 24<sup>th</sup> opus lacking in the catalog which you have most graciously made up for me, and the piece fits into it just right. You have the score for complete wind orchestra and a 4-handed piano version which I made of it; originally I had composed it for only 10 wind instruments, but I myself don't have it in this form any more.

Mendelssohn's revision of the work for an enlarged wind band of 23 winds and percussion (more than double the size of the original) was perhaps an effort to imitate the orchestral color of Weber's *Precosio* overture. This rewriting, though, demonstrates a remarkable feat of memory since he did not have in his possession his original version. The edition performed this evening, which melds characteristics of both the 1826 and 1838 versions, was created by John Boyd of Indiana State University after the rediscovery of the 1826 manuscript in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin in the late 1970s.

### **Randall Thompson (transcribed by Lewis J. Buckley): *Alleluia***

In 1940, Serge Koussevitsky, then Music Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, founded the Berkshire Music Center (now known as the Tanglewood Music Center) as a summer academy where young musicians could continue their training under leading musicians and teachers. For Tanglewood's inaugural ceremony, Koussevitsky wanted a living American composer to write a choral fanfare. However, Randall Thompson, the commissioned composer, wrote something very different. Moved by the circumstances in Europe during World War II (particularly the fall of France), Thompson offered the introspective *Alleluia* rather than a joyful fanfare; he acknowledged that it was a solemn piece, but he simply replied that he "had no heart for writing anything else." (Koussevitsky must have been pleased, though, as nine years later, for his twenty-fifth anniversary with the BSO, he again commissioned Thompson to write a celebratory work, this time *The Last Days of David*.) Just as it was on July 8, 1940 for the first season, the ritual singing of *Alleluia* by the entire student body (more than 400 students each year) is the final offering during the Tanglewood Music Center's opening ceremony. Often referred to as a "benediction," the *Alleluia* has a text of simply one word: "alleluia." Lewis J. Buckley, former Music Director of the U.S. Coast Guard Band, transcribed this music for winds – what is lost by the removal of the text and the human voice is hopefully made-up for by the sonorous palette of the wind ensemble.

Born in New York City, Randall Thompson (1899-1984) was an influential educator and one of the most performed American composers of his generation. While a student at Harvard University his mentors were Archibald T. Davison (the renowned choral editor and conductor, who introduced him to the choral masterworks of Palestrina, Monteverdi, and Bach) and George Herbert Palmer (professor emeritus in philosophy). Thompson distilled the teachings of both men into his aesthetic creed, given during his Inaugural Address at Princeton University in 1946:

A composer's first responsibility is, and always will be, to write music that will reach and move the hearts of his listeners in his own day.

After a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, he embarked on a three-year investigation of music education commissioned by the Association of American Colleges. His research resulted in an influential report, *College Music* (1935), which espoused a liberal arts approach to music education, rather than an emphasis on 'manual training' (i.e. lessons and performance). In 1937 Thompson resumed an academic career, taking up a professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. Two years later, he was appointed director of the Curtis Institute of Music, where Leonard Bernstein was one of his students. He joined the music department at Princeton University in 1946 and in 1948 was appointed to a position at Harvard, where he remained until his retirement from teaching in 1965.

From early in his career, Thompson's music was characterized by ingratiating vocal contours, effective sonorities, sensitive text-setting and a strong sense of dramatic structure, qualities that contributed to his music's appeal to performers and audiences alike. Although he wrote many chamber and orchestral works (of which his *Symphony No. 2* is, perhaps, the most substantial, he is best known for his choral works, such as *Frostiana*, *The Testament of Freedom* and *The Last Words of David* which achieved a popularity unprecedented in the United States. In fact, in 1968 his *Alleluia* was the best-selling choral work in the United States.

### **Jules Massenet (transcribed by Verne Reynolds): Ballet Music from *Le Cid***

Through "ill-lit corridors and over ill-lit stairs" rush the terrified ballet-girls in Gaston Leroux's novel, in their flight from the Phantom of the Opera to the *foyer de la danse*. This hall in the Paris Opéra, the Palais Garnier (actually intended as a rest-room, with practice barres and mirrors, for the dancers) became in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the center of Society life in Paris. As the fashion at the time was for men of standing to protect girl-dancers, the *foyer de la danse* thus became the meeting-place of aristocrats and politicians – French opera had forever left its former association with the courts and nobility to become a lyric theatre of the bourgeoisie.

From the mid-nineteenth century this social revaluation of the dance, as Helmut Schmidt-Garre states, went along with an artistic trivialization of the ballet:

It was not the dance that was loved, but the girl dancers... The form of most three- or four-act full-length ballets had become stereotyped with long intervals of up to 45 minutes, to give the aristocrats the opportunity of speaking to the dancers behind the stage.

To accord with its social importance, the Grand Opéra's ballet ensemble was constantly enlarged: it regularly maintained over 150 active members to which an extra 150 dancers were sometimes

added. As the aristocratic patrons wanted to see their girl dancers on the stage in the operas as well as in the evening-length ballets, big ballet padding becoming a *sine qua non* at the Paris Opéra (a circumstance which also resulted in Wagner's lengthy Bacchanale in Act 1 of *Tannhäuser*, written for the Paris performance of this opera in 1861). Not wishing to evade this strong demand for the inclusion of dance in opera, composers such as Jules Massenet, Ambroise Thomas, and Charles Gounod created a number of operas with large ballet numbers tailored to please this new audience.

The most prolific and successful composer of opera in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Jules Massenet (1842-1912) was a skillful master of sentimental lyricism. Realizing that his Parisian audiences had an unlimited appetite for exotic music, he placed his not-quite tragic figures in distant settings in sensational plots, all the while creating caressing melodies and vibrant dance numbers. As Massenet-biographer Hugh MacDonald notes:

Massenet's place in the history of French music is secure, for although he is not to be bracketed with Berlioz or Debussy or even Bizet, he generously satisfied the tastes of the *belle époque* and retained his standing as a master of the lyric stage for well over a generation. For all his scorn of Massenet, Debussy was unmistakably susceptible to the style in his early works. Despite individual works of great character, even genius, by Charpentier, Bruneau, Reyer, Debussy, Dukas and others, no one else sustained the flow of production or ranged so widely among operatic genres as Massenet, who always offered beautifully shaped music of exquisite craftsmanship and vital theatricality. In his prolonged exploration of the art of opera and in his sustained achievement he should be compared to Handel, Verdi or Strauss.

Massenet's sixth opera *Le Cid* (1885) is based on the tragedy of the French playwright Corneille, which in turn is based historically on the tale of the nobleman Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar (1040-1099). The opera follows the tale of Rodrigue who, in an attempt to avenge the humiliation of his father Don Diègue, mortally wounds Count de Gormas, the father of his beloved Chimène. Before the King can decide Rodrigue's fate, a Moorish envoy brings a declaration of war. After pledging to return and accept the verdict of the King – and Chimène, Rodrigue leads his army in battle. He conquers his foes, the vanquished Moors hailing him "Sid-i" (Lord), which in Spanish became "El Cid". Upon Rodrigue's return, the King asks Chimène for the verdict. She seems unable to speak, but when Rodrigue threatens to draw his sword to kill himself, she rushes to save him and the opera ends in rejoicing.

*Le Cid* is known today primarily for its evocative and extensive ballet music, containing some of Massenet's most attractive dance invention. The movements are based on the provinces of Spain: Castellane, Andalouse, Aragonaise, Aubade, Madrilène, and Navarraise. Although a Spaniard might quarrel with Massenet's interpretation of the traditional dances of Spain, the Ballet Music, extracted from the first scene of Act 2 of the opera, has maintained its place in the symphonic repertoire.

### **Frank Ticheli: *Blue Shades***

Previously the composer-in-residence of the Pacific Symphony Orchestra, Frank Ticheli (b. 1958) is Associate Professor of Music at the University of Southern California. He received his Doctor of Musical Arts and Master's degrees in composition from the University of Michigan

where he studied with Pulitzer Prize winning composers Leslie Bassett and William Bolcolm. His works have been described as expressing "direct emotion, creating dramatic, visceral impact." Besides *Blue Shades*, he has written many works for wind band, including *Cajun Folk Songs* and settings of "Amazing Grace" and "Shenandoah."

Ticheli writes the following about his *Blue Shades*:

In 1992 I composed a concerto for traditional jazz band and orchestra, *Playing With Fire*, for the Jim Cullum Jazz Band and the San Antonio Symphony. That work was composed as a celebration of the traditional jazz music I heard so often while growing up near New Orleans.

I experienced tremendous joy during the creation of *Playing With Fire*, and my love for early jazz is expressed in every bar of the concerto. However, after completing it, I knew that the traditional jazz influences dominated the work, leaving little room for my own musical voice to come through. I felt a strong need to compose another work, one that would combine my love of early jazz with my own musical style.

Four years and several compositions later, I finally took the opportunity to realize that need by composing *Blue Shades*. As the title suggests, the work alludes to the Blues, and a jazz feeling is prevalent — however, it is not literally a Blues piece. There is not a single 12-bar blues progression to be found, and except for a few isolated sections, the eighth-note is not swung.

The work, however, is heavily *influenced* by the Blues: "Blue notes" (flatted 3rds, 5ths, and 7ths) are used constantly; Blues harmonies, rhythms, and melodic idioms pervade the work; and many "shades of blue" are depicted, from bright blue, to dark, to dirty, to hot blue.

At times, *Blue Shades* burlesques some of the clichés from the Big Band era, not as a mockery of those conventions, but as a tribute. A slow and quiet middle section recalls the atmosphere of a dark, smoky blues haunt. An extended clarinet solo played near the end recalls Benny Goodman's hot playing style, and ushers in a series of "wailing" chords recalling the train whistle effects commonly used during that era.