



Thundering Organ Symphony

Wagner's delightful *Die Meistersinger* prelude launches today's concert, followed by Mozart's final piano concerto — one of his greatest. Saint-Saëns' floor-shaking, but elegantly refined, Symphony No. 3 comprises the second half.

RICHARD WAGNER

Born 22 May 1813; Leipzig, Germany

Died 13 February 1883; Venice, Italy

Prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

Composed: 1862 (prelude); 1863-67 (opera)

First performance: 1 November 1862; Leipzig (prelude)
21 June 1868; Munich (complete opera)

Last MSO performance: September 1986; Zdenek Macal, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (cymbals, triangle), harp, strings

Approximate duration: 10 minutes

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg), the 12th of Richard Wagner's 13 music dramas, is one of only two comic works in his compositional oeuvre. (The other one, *Das Liebesverbot* (1834), is rarely — if ever — heard nowadays.) *Meistersinger* is a parable on the art of music, with a simple human love story at its center.

The popular prelude — Wagner preferred the term "Vorspiel" rather than "overture", just as he preferred the term "music drama" over "opera" — written and premiered far ahead of the larger work, boasts a large palette of orchestral color and melodic variety. In it, Wagner sets forth the various leitmotifs that will saturate the entire opus, music that ranges from the pompous to the humorous to the affectingly lyrical. It's little wonder that the Vorspiel for Wagner's stage work has served in the same capacity for many an orchestral concert.

Recommended recording: Sir George Solti, Chicago Symphony Orchestra (London) 🎧

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born 27 January 1756; Salzburg, Austria

Died 5 December 1791; Vienna, Austria

Concerto No. 27 in B-flat major for Piano and Orchestra, K. 595

Composed: 1788-91

First performance: 4 March 1791; Vienna

Last MSO performance: November 2009; Shi-Yeon Sung, conductor;
Jeremy Denk, piano

Instrumentation: Flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, strings

Approximate duration: 32 minutes

It is an axiom among music lovers that Beethoven's greatest, most profound musical utterances are to be found in his late string quartets and late piano sonatas. The same is said of Mozart's

late operas and late piano concertos. Nowhere is this more evident than in his Piano Concerto No. 27, his last work in the genre. Though it could be argued that Mozart never wrote music simply for its entertainment value, when he was making his name in Vienna, he had to please the fickle public. Several years — and a different set of circumstances — separate K. 595 from its immediate predecessors, so that by the time he reached this concerto, he had fallen a bit out of favor. The need to please the Viennese was not a consideration.

Mozart completed his final piano concerto on 5 January 1791 and gave its premiere two months later, acting as both soloist and conductor, on a concert sponsored by the clarinetist Joseph Bahr. The songful work is scored more modestly than most of his other late piano concertos — no trumpets or timpani here — calling only for one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings. The opening *Allegro* is notable not

only for its abundance of delightful themes, but also for the richness of its harmonic variety: In the development section, we pass through a series of keys — B-flat major, B minor, C major, E-flat minor — each with its own character.

The *Larghetto*, set in E-flat major, is serene and texturally transparent. It is chamber music of the highest order, with no room for virtuosic display. There are no striking contacts, though the mood darkens with a modulation to the minor mode in the middle of the movement. ("There's a sadness behind it," writes Canadian pianist Angela Hewitt.) The concluding rondo is back in the home key of B-flat, set in the traditional 6/8 "hunting" meter. Nine days after completing K. 595, Mozart used its main theme as the melody for his little one-page song "Sehnsucht nach dem Fruhling" (Longing for Spring, K. 596; words by Christian Overbeck): "Come, lovely May, and make the trees green again..."

Bahr and Mozart presented their concert in a hall in a structure on the Himmelpfortgasse that previously was a flour warehouse. Finding that address — Gate-of-Heaven Road — particularly appropriate, Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein noted that "it was not in the *Requiem* that Mozart said his last word... but in this work, which belongs to the species in which he also said his greatest."

Recommended recording: Geza Anda, Camerata Academica Salzburg
(Deutsche Grammophon) 

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Born 9 October 1835; Paris, France

Died 16 December 1921; Algiers, Algeria

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Opus 78 "Organ Symphony"

Composed: 1886

First performance: 19 May 1886; London, England

Last MSO performance: May 2010; Edo de Waart, conductor

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, triangle), piano, organ, strings

Approximate duration: 36 minutes

Like Mozart and Mendelssohn, Camille Saint-Saëns was a child prodigy. At age ten, he made his debut in a concert that included piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. As an encore, he offered to play any one of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas — from memory. Wedded to this remarkable precocity was an insatiable intellectual curiosity that shaped and informed his entire life. His tireless advocacy helped revive interest in Bach, Handel, and Mozart.

Saint-Saëns composed his Op. 78 in 1886 for the London Philharmonic Society and conducted its premiere there on May 19 of the same year. On that occasion, he included the following text in the program, explaining the work's unusual two-movement format:

This Symphony, divided into two parts, nevertheless includes practically the traditional four movements: the first, checked in development, serves as an introduction to the Adagio, and the scherzo is connected after the same manner with the finale.

For the whole of his compositional life, Saint-Saëns was influenced by the music of Franz Liszt, his friend and mentor. In the "Organ" Symphony, the elder composer's technique of thematic transformation — in which motives evolve throughout the work — is keenly evident. A "motto theme," in various guises, pervades the piece. This four-note ascending fragment, announced in the brief introduction, will serve as the primary musical material. In the turbulent opening measures of the Allegro, the character of the theme is immediately changed. A lyrical second subject follows; eventually, the main theme joins with it before the music subsides into the Poco adagio. Here, lush, quiet chords from the organ accompany the winds and strings. The agitation of the Allegro threatens to destroy the beautiful calm, but the movement fades gently away.

The second movement begins with a scherzo-like version of the motto theme, which makes way for brilliant "arpeggios and scales, swift as lightning" (Saint-Saëns) on the piano. A powerful chord from the full organ announces the Maestoso and shimmering four-hand piano arpeggios lead to a dialogue between the organ and brass. This well-known movement is one of grandeur, power, and expressivity: There's polyphonic writing, a brief pastorale for wind soloists, and a massive climax as the motto theme is transformed and repeated.

Sadly, Liszt never heard the work he so influenced: He died on 31 July 1886, ten weeks after its London premiere. It had long been Saint-Saëns' intention to dedicate the work to his friend. Thus, it bears the elegiac inscription, *À la mémoire de Franz Liszt*.

Recommended recording: Olivier Latry; Christoph Eschenbach, Philadelphia Orchestra (Ondine) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.