

### **Schumann (1810-1856) *Overture to “Genoveva” (1847)***

In the same way Beethoven used theatre overtures, such as *Coriolan*, not just for audience diversion but to prefigure character traits and basic dramatic elements, so does Schumann in the overture to his only opera, *Genoveva*. It is a medieval tale of wronged innocence, jealousy and revenge, in which (spoiler alert!) the victim is preserved in the end. Genoveva’s husband, the Duke of Brabant, has joined the Crusades, leaving his wife in the care of his steward, Golo, who is secretly in love with her. Golo’s embittered foster-mother, earlier banished for sorcery, takes this opportunity to get revenge by staging a scene of apparent adultery by Genoveva. When the absent Duke hears of this he condemns his wife to death. However, after episodes of considerable tension the truth emerges and Genoveva is vindicated.

Schumann’s overture creatively summarizes many essentials of character and action: Golo’s jealous passion and persistence (opening discords, and later a triplet figure), Genoveva’s suffering (falling fifth motif), possibility of her rescue (hunting call on horns) and, toward the end, a hymn of thanksgiving. And there are several other musical parallels besides. Whether we know the plot details or not, this is a powerful and coherently structured work in which Schumann makes imaginative use of orchestral colour to shape drama through music. Sadly, in performance the opera was not a success and Schumann never wrote another.

### **Brahms (1833-1897) *Double Concerto for Violin and Violoncello in A minor (1887)***

“I have been of late unable to resist the idea of a concerto for violin and cello, however much I have tried again and again to talk myself out of it.” Thus Brahms wrote to violinist Joseph Joachim in 1887. But as well as being gripped by the musical idea itself, Brahms may also have wished to compose a peace offering to his violinist friend with whom he had fallen out regarding Joachim’s bitter divorce. The concerto is the last of Brahms’ major orchestral works, though there was much important chamber music still to come. And Brahms had set himself a challenge: there is little precedent for the solo combination of these two instruments whose tonal weight and range are widely separated.

To start the lengthy *Allegro*, the orchestra sets out firmly to state the main theme, only to be interrupted by the solo cello asserting its presence. The wind instruments follow with part of a second melody, but they too are interrupted—by the violin. The two solo instruments converse at length, each revealing its own distinct qualities, until finally the orchestra reappears to state the main theme in full. A long discussion of this theme by the soloists leads to a full statement of the second theme by the solo cello. These two main melodies have contrasting characters: the first assertive, impassioned, almost tragic, the second more serene and lyrical. The development and interplay of these two themes, in the orchestra and between the soloists, accounts for much of the richness of this opening movement.

The *Andante* opens with the call of a rising fourth on the horns, then joined by the upper woodwinds. The soloists, with the strings, present a lengthy decorative phrase, a rising and falling arpeggio with octave leaps (all later inverted). A second theme with almost hymn-like qualities follows, given out by the flutes, clarinets and bassoons, which the soloists then elaborate on at length. The main theme returns, this time with pizzicato accompaniment, then the second theme, and the soloists help take us to the movement’s restful close.

The last movement rondo is marked *Vivace non troppo*, and has the exuberance, energy, and slightly exotic flavor that other Brahms’ concerto finales have. The rondo theme is announced by

the cello first then violin, before the full orchestra takes it up *fortissimo*. The first of the movement's two episodes, presented with double-stopping by the solo cello, and then by the violin, is a generous sounding melody. The main rondo-theme returns, which leads to a second episode whose melody is, by contrast, more bold and assertive. A third tune, gentler and warmer in character appears and is explored before the previous assertive tune returns briefly. Now the rondo-theme emerges again along with a quick reprise of the cello's earlier broad melody. A slower section that allows for decorated arabesques from the soloists leads, by contrast, to an ending of great energy.

### **Schumann (1810-1856) *Symphony No. 1 in B flat "Spring" (1841)***

Robert Schumann's first successes were as a composer of piano music, and then, after he had married the brilliant pianist Clara Wieck, as a composer of songs. Only then he turned to symphonic composition, of which this, "Spring," is the first. In their joint diary Clara writes: "The symphony is nearly finished, and though I have not heard any of it I am infinitely delighted that Robert has at last found the sphere for which his great imagination fits him." His inspiration came directly from a poem by Adolf Böttger that declaims "spring has awakened in the valley." So the symphony has a "programme." At first Schumann created titles for each movement, but in the end abandoned them as a possible distraction from the music itself. The first movement begins *Andante un poco maestoso*, with a lavish fanfare that Schumann saw as "like a call to awakening." The rest of this slow introduction he pictured as "the springtime green cropping up everywhere," even though the modulations into minor keys suggest Spring has not quite escaped Winter's grip. But the urgings of Spring cannot be resisted, and with the eager, assertive opening tune of the *allegro molto vivace* Spring is free. The joyful development of this tune dominates the rest of the movement, with just the occasional feeling of uncertainty captured in a second tune announced in the clarinets and bassoons.

The second movement, *Larghetto*, is dominated by a tender, sensuous melody that Schumann makes the centre of an extended meditation. We hear this haunting tune several times, at the outset in the violins, later in the cellos, and later still in the oboe and horn. The unmistakable ardour in its development, supported by rich and full orchestration, might make us think more of summer than spring. There is a darker moment of agitation toward the end, but the calm original melody briefly returns one more time before the trombones sound a somber message and we move forward directly into the Scherzo. The urgency and drive of the *Scherzo: Molto vivace* may remind us of Beethoven. Its theme is in a minor key, but its surly persistence is fortunately confronted by other musical forces including two trios in major keys, the second of which succeeds in cheerfully disarming its dark threatening tone—and the scherzo dies quietly away in the major key.

Of the final movement, *Allegro animato e grazioso*, Schumann wrote "I like to think of it as Spring's Farewell, and therefore I should not like it to be rendered frivolously." (Conductors take note!). It begins with a flourish of rising orchestral statements (reminiscent of the symphony's opening fanfare) that recurs in various forms throughout the movement, and that ushers in a playful first melody. Shortly a second tune emerges in the oboes and bassoons, but the first tune returns, and the lively development of all this leads eventually to hushed horn calls followed by a flute cadenza that launches the buoyant and sunny recapitulation. Then Schumann's Spring departs as it arrived, as the coda propels us with urgency and joy to its jubilant conclusion.