

NOTES - Romance and the Part Song March 25, 2007

By Larry Marietta

Ah! Spring is in the air, and with it come the songs of love and romance...and the consequences thereof: dashed hopes or euphoric triumphs. Tonight's program highlights these aspects through the music of 19th and 20th century romantic masters in waltzes and part songs.

Although the name of Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) is most commonly associated with his instrumental compositions, throughout his life he was also a premier composer of vocal pieces, naming his close friend Robert Schumann as his mentor and source of vocal inspiration. He composed his first set of 18 choral waltzes, *Liebeslieder-Walzer*, Op. 52, in 1868 and 1869, which were premiered in Vienna on January 5, 1870, and were labeled for "piano duet with voices ad libitum," implying that piano part could be played separately. Fortunately, the voices—either in a quartet or chorus—soon became an intrinsic element of popular performances. It is from the success of these Op. 52 waltzes that Brahms was urged to produce another set, and the *Neue Liebeslieder*, Op. 65, were composed in 1874, published in 1875 and premiered in Mannheim on May 8 of that same year. While the famous Viennese waltz musical forms permeate these compositions, they lend themselves to a wide interpretation of tempi from the poetic influence of the texts from "*Polydora, ein weltpoetisches Liederbuch*" by the German poet and philosopher Georg Friederich Daumer (1800-1875) and "*Nun, ihr Musen*" Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832).

From the lilting waltzes we go to choral compositions known as "part songs." Chiefly associated with the 19th century, a part song is composed in a homophonic (or successive chords) structure. Almost always the melody is carried by the top (or soprano) line. Occasionally the term is applied to Renaissance madrigals and polyphonic songs of the pre-madrigal period, but this aspect will not be used tonight. The composers listed next are mid-19th century to late 20th century part song masters.

The earliest of tonight's part song composers is Franz Schubert (1797-1828). At the time of the composition of "*La Pastorella*" D. 513, in the fall of 1817, the young Schubert was experiencing a growing audience of appreciation for his talents as a composer of songs, symphonies and chamber works. Solo songs such as "*Erlkönig*," "*Der Wanderer*," and "*Ganymed*" had been huge successes, and we see from Schubert's orchestral writing at this time that he was beginning to experiment with unusual keys, form and media. Concurrent in Vienna were the immense triumphs of Rossini, whom Schubert met and respected, but whose style did not appeal to him. Personally, Schubert was making friends in high places, although even they couldn't get their publishers to print much of Schubert's music of this time. Thus, like many other works, "*La Pastorella*" was published posthumously in 1891. Written for a four-part male choir, this fairly unknown composition is uniquely composed, with an accompaniment of running 16th notes, thus yielding a consistent "motor motion" over which begin long vocal lines that develop into sharp rhythmic chords, thus creating a unique texture *in toto*.

Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901) was an eminent German organist, composer, conductor and teacher. The majority of his professional career was centered in Munich, where he taught at the Conservatory and was an active promoter and participant in many community institutions and organizations. For his distinguished service, King Ludwig II bestowed on him the rank of "*Zivilverdienstorden*," the equivalent of nobility. His organ compositions, which are most often heard nowadays, are models of formal perfection and power and among the finest works in organ literature. His choral works are not as well known or performed, but they are a hidden treasure of choral beauty. In "*Die Nacht*" the ethereal poetry of Paul Eichendorff (1788-1857) is magically set by Rheinberger with a constant triplet accompaniment against a duple rhythm in the choral line. This produces the

effect of the calm of the darkness of evening against the ardent dream of a lover who awaits the morn.

The renowned English composer, Sir Edward William Elgar (1857-1934) had very little formal academic training. However, his compositions display a masterly technique of instrumental and choral writing that is firmly based in 19th century romanticism. While America's most common connection with Elgar stems from the section of his first *Pomp and Circumstance* march used at many a high school graduation, he was a composer of many forms, including choral orchestra works, symphonies and tone poems, solo vocal, piano and organ, chamber ensembles and sacred and secular choral works. It is from this last category that we find his noble settings of "My Love Dwelt in a Northern Land," Op. 5, composed in 1884, and the epitaph, "Owls," Op. 53, composed in 1907 with Elgar himself as the lyricist. What one immediately notices in both these pieces is the solidity of the choral writing. Both compositions are composed in a chordal structure that requires keen listening on the part of the chorus in order to properly tune to the constant shifting of each chord's root tone.

There is a unique connection in tonight's program in that the German composer and musical scholar Gustav Jenner (1865-1920) was the only formal composition student of Johannes Brahms. He had a rather challenging childhood, as his father, a Scottish doctor who claimed to be a descendent of Edward Jenner, the creator of the smallpox vaccine, committed suicide in 1884. While in school Jenner tried to teach himself to compose, and after his father's death, a friend took him to study with Brahms' old teacher Eduard Marxen in Hamburg. Marxen, in turn, handed Jenner over to Brahms, with whom he studied and received constant criticism of his composing efforts between 1888 and 1895. Nonetheless, Brahms kindly had him appointed Secretary of the Vienna Tonkünstlerverein and, in 1895, he arranged for Jenner to become the Musical Director and Conductor of the University of Marburg, where he remained until his death. Jenner's compositions were centered primarily on chamber music, but he did compose a significant opus of songs and choral works, which were labeled as "too conservative." In "*Ich will ein Haus mir bauen*" we hear the undeniable imprint of Brahms in the texture, especially the arpeggiated accompaniment. However lush and pretty the overall sound is, the "too conservative" label could be applicable in that the movement tends to be a bit static without Brahms' pervasive duple vs. triplet rhythms to animate the motion. Nonetheless, the song falls graciously on the ear and has its own inner beauty.

Ralph ("Rafe," as he preferred to be called) Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), a native of Gloucestershire, was born into an intellectual upper middle class family of lawyers, scientists and churchmen. Thus, his education was broad and eclectic, giving him a life-long quest for democratic liberalist ideals. At the beginning of the 20th century Vaughan Williams became keenly aware that the tradition of the English folk song was waning. According to his second wife, Ursula, "Ralph said that he found it difficult to read poems and plays without wondering if they 'would make good tunes.'" When World War I broke out, although Vaughn Williams was in his 40's, he nonetheless enlisted, becoming a stretcher-bearer in France and England. Throughout his time in the horror of the trenches he became more passionate about music being the essential palliative. Following the war he worked relentlessly, composing an amazing quantity of compositions, not even easing his pace with age. By 1938 Vaughan Williams was venturing into new tonalities that critics termed "musical philandering." It was also in this year that he went to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (Act V, Scene 1) for a text to set to music for the Jubilee honoring Sir Henry J. Wood's (a prominent conductor of the era) contributions to music. Given the title *Serenade to Music*, it was fashioned to be performed by a chorus and 16 specific soloists. The premiere was October 5, 1938, and the singers were some of Britain's best vocal luminaries. To this day the music is published with the designated singer's initials still listed at the beginning of his/her section. While the listener may distinguish some of Vaughan William's "musical philandering" in the use of some chromaticism and the occasional dissonant chord, the overall effect is one of lush beauty flowing freely as it exquisitely highlights the text.

In the music of Henk Badings (1907-1987) we take a significant leap from the predictable harmonies of Brahms, Schubert, Rheinberger, Elgar and Jenner to a musical landscape of impressionistic sound pictures. Although Badings' musical language is unique to him, one cannot help but notice the influence of Debussy and Ravel in his compositions (he said his music was based on a "lydo-mixolydian" scale). Badings was born in Java, but moved to the Netherlands when his Dutch parents died while he was still young. Yielding to the incessant pressure of his guardian he studied mining technology at the University of Technology in Delft, graduating cum laude in 1931. However, music coursed through his veins and he taught himself music theory and composition, studying only orchestration with a professional. With the performance of his Symphony No. 1 in 1930 he began to gain public interest in a very short time. Dedicating himself solely to music in 1937, he began a career that encompassed university teaching and administration, conducting and the establishment of an electronic music studio in Eindhoven. In the 1950's he became enamored of 31-tone instruments and delivered several papers on the subject at the Flemish Academy of Sciences. With this history as a background, one may wonder what to expect from his *Trois chansons bretonnes*, 1946, for mixed chorus and piano. Badings uses alternating vocal sections to create thick textures, and the effect is mesmerizing. Although not tonal in the traditional sense, the harmonic language is readily accessible and is exceptionally effective with the poetry of Théodore Botrel (1868-1925), known as the military minstrel of France.

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