

BERKELEY
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA
NOW

08109 SEASON



Paul Haas

CONDUCTOR

PENMAN

BARBER

TCHAIKOVSKY

Thursday, November 20, 2008

UC Berkeley Zellerbach Hall

BERKELEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

2008–09 SEASON



KENT NAGANO, MUSIC DIRECTOR

PAUL HAAS, CONDUCTOR

JAMES A. KLEINMANN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

8:00 pm, Thursday, November 20, 2008
Zellerbach Hall

OSHUA PENMAN
Songs the Plants Taught Us

California Premiere

SAMUEL BARBER
Violin Concerto, Op. 14

Danielle Belen Nesmith, *violin*

— INTERMISSION —

PYOTR IL'YICH TCHAIKOVSKY **Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36**

- I. Andante sostenuto—Moderato con anima
- II. Andantino in modo di canzona
- III. Scherzo: Pizzicato ostinato
- IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco

Season Sponsors

Kathleen G. Henschel



Support for Berkeley Symphony's Music Director search is provided by
the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation,
the James C. Irvine Foundation,
and the Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation.

Presentation bouquets are graciously provided by Jutta's Flowers.

Tonight's concert will be broadcast on KALW 91.7 FM,
Sunday, May 10, 2009 at 4:00 p.m.

Berkeley Symphony is a member of the League of American Orchestras
and the Association of California Symphony Orchestras

Program Notes

Songs the Plants Taught Us

JOSHUA PENMAN

(b. 1979)

Joshua Penman was born in Brookline, Massachusetts in 1979. This piece was commissioned by the New York Youth Symphony and performed by them on November 21, 2004 at Queens College and on December 5, 2004, in Carnegie Hall. Tonight marks the work's California premiere. It is scored for a large orchestra consisting of 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, vibraphone, tam-tam, bass drum, slapstick, glockenspiel, suspended cymbal, triangle, electric bass and strings. Duration: ca. 9 min.

The composer has provided the following comments:

The inspiration for *Songs the Plants Taught Us* comes from the shamanic practices of many Amazonian tribal cultures, where special songs called *icaros* are used for magical purposes. The shamans, who guard their *icaros* jealously, believe that they learn these melodies from the spirits of specific “teacher plants.” While the piece is influenced by the music of ancient and recent ritual cultures far from the Amazon basin—from the deserts of the Middle East to the dance floors of Europe—it is also about learning and singing a song

that allows us to speak to the gods.

©2008, Joshua Penman

The conductor has provided the following comments:

Iwanted to write a few words about *Songs the Plants Taught Us*. I commissioned this piece with the New York Youth Symphony, and I conducted the world premiere performance in Carnegie Hall in 2004, with the composer in attendance.

A close friend of mine was at that performance—a friend who by coincidence had just attended a seminar on the plant rituals of the Amazon. (Yes, I have very “interesting” friends . . .) He came up to me after the performance, barely able to contain himself. All he could talk about was *Songs the Plants Taught Us*. It turns out that, without even reading the program notes, he knew exactly what the piece was about. As of that moment, “Songs” had become his new favorite piece, and Joshua Penman had become his favorite composer.

It's always been a philosophy of mine to program only pieces that I believe in, whether they are old or new. I believe in Joshua's music very strongly, and I believe that this piece in particular will withstand the test of time. I'm honored to be able to play it with the Berkeley Symphony, and I hope you'll feel as strongly about it as my friend and I do.

©2008, Paul Haas

Violin Concerto, Op. 14

SAMUEL BARBER (1910–1981)

Samuel Osborne Barber II was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania on March 9, 1910, and died in New York City on January 23, 1981. He wrote his violin concerto in 1939 and it was premiered in Philadelphia in 1941. Scored for solo violin, 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, strings, snare drum, timpani, and piano. Duration ca. 25 min.

In 1939 Barber was commissioned by American industrialist Samuel Fels to write a violin concerto for his protégé and adopted son Iso Briselli. He composed much of it in the Swiss village of Sils Maria, then went to Paris where he hoped to complete it. All Americans were soon warned to leave, however, so Barber sailed for America and took up a teaching position at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he completed the Concerto.

It was long reported, based on Nathan Broder's biography of Barber, that the young violinist found none of the bravura he had in mind when he saw the first two movements of the work in progress, but that when Barber showed him the virtuosic finale he had promised, Briselli declared it too difficult. With his fee in jeopardy, Barber had to prove that it was playable and, according to Broder, called on violinist Oscar Shumsky to play it in private for the sponsor and protégé.

This account, however, completely overlooked another occasion, finally brought to light in 1980 in the *New York Times*, when the last movement had to be proved playable by Herbert Baumel, a violin student at Curtis. Baumel was asked one day by Ralph Berkowitz (a pianist at Curtis) if he

could play the last movement for a few people.

I looked it over, practiced it for an hour or so, and returned to school in the afternoon to play it for Sam Barber, Gian Carlo Menotti, Mary Louise Curtis Bok (not yet Mrs. Zimbalist) and her friend Mrs. Braun in Josef Hofmann's studio. I proved to their delight that I could play it at any tempo they wanted me to. . . . Now Barber would be able to collect the full sum [and Briselli was to relinquish his right to the first performance].

Since then, from personal conversation with Shumsky, correspondence with Baumel, and the excellent 1992 Barber biography by Barbara Heyman, I have verified that there were indeed two different occasions on which the Concerto was tried out—one in Josef Hofmann's studio as reported by Baumel and one with Shumsky at the New York apartment of Gama Gilbert, who had gotten Barber and Fels together in the first place. On each occasion the violinist in question showed admirable skills, Baumel having to perform with only two hours' notice, and Shumsky actually sightreading over Barber's shoulder, the composer at the piano. Neither Fels nor Briselli heard either trial performance, but those present were impressed and pleased.

Briselli was interviewed many years later by Heyman, who reported that he hadn't actually thought the finale unplayable. Rather he felt that it was “too lightweight” compared to the other two “beautiful” movements, but was unable to convince Barber to make any changes. In the summer of 1996, almost sixty years after the work was commissioned for Briselli, his

attorney began threatening legal action against any organization performing the Concerto if “defamatory” remarks were printed concerning his client’s role in the affair. That the affair continued to rankle can be seen in the fact that as late as 2003 Briselli’s children sent out a round of letters, once again trying to clarify that the then ninety-year-old violinist had never questioned the finale’s playability. Briselli died in April 2005, without seeing an end to the debate.

In any case, Baumel’s participation was rewarded by the opportunity to play the entire Concerto at private performances, first with Fritz Reiner and the Curtis Symphony, and then with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra in preparation for its official premiere by Albert Spaulding on February 7, 1941. The work has become part of the standard concerto repertory, despite the misgivings of several early critics.

The first two movements are lyrical and Romantic, similar in style to other early works by Barber, such as the *Adagio for Strings*, *Essay for Orchestra*, and First Symphony. They follow traditional formal procedures: sonata form in the first, and ternary form in the second. The first movement employs two main themes, the first gracefully spun out for twenty-seven bars with the melody in the solo violin. The second, initiated by the clarinet, is still *espressivo* but slightly jazzy with its “Scotch snaps” (short-long rhythms); the violin does not play this theme until the very end. The lovely melody of the second movement features the oboe in the opening section and the violin in the reprise. Cadenzas provide drama in both movements—in the first the violin spins out a melodic idea over a sustained harmony, and in the

second the orchestra adds color.

The third movement drives forward in perpetual motion, activated by the hushed timpani. Only twice does the orchestra seize the propulsive activity from the violin in explosive fiery passages. Barber gives his traditional Classical scoring added color by including piano and “military drum.” The entirely different style of this movement with its irregular rhythms and unexpected dissonance once earned it the label “modernistic,” yet Barber never embraced the era’s avant-garde language. It is a fascinating quirk of history that his “conservative,” neo-Romantic orientation has returned to fashion.

©2008, Jane Vial Jaffe

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

PYOTR IL’YICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)

Peter Il’yich Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko-Votinsk in the Vyatka province of Russia, on May 7, 1840. He died in St. Petersburg on November 6, 1893. The symphony was written 1877–78 and premiered at a Russian Musical Society concert in St. Petersburg on February 22, 1878. Scored for a large orchestra consisting of 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drums, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings. Duration ca. 44 min.

The conductor has provided the following comments:

Tchaikovsky wrote his Fourth Symphony during the years

1877-78, at a time when his life was falling apart. As a teacher at the Moscow Conservatory, Tchaikovsky came into contact with many students, no doubt making an impression on many of them. Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova, one of these students, wrote him a searing love letter, in which she expressed her desire to spend the rest of her life with him. This sort of thing happens all the time in conservatories, so it wouldn’t even be worth mentioning except for the fact that Tchaikovsky was a closet homosexual—one who, in fact, had become increasingly desirous of the kind of domestic life which had so far eluded him. Although he had no physical attraction to her, he very gallantly (and misguidedly!) came around to accept her proposal, probably hoping that the marriage would provide him with some kind of psychological fulfillment.

Unfortunately, this would never come to pass. As the wedding approached, Tchaikovsky became more and more convinced that the whole idea was a mistake of the grandest proportions, but he felt trapped by his promise to her. They were married in St. Petersburg, and almost immediately he sent word to his brother Anatoly that he was “on the verge of screaming.”

He had begun composing the Fourth Symphony in May of 1877, two months before this ill-fated ceremony. The moment they moved in together, his ability to cope with life began to unravel. Soon work became impossible, and it was only a matter of time before this agony culminated in a suicide attempt, involving Tchaikovsky’s wading into the freezing, iced-over water of the Moscow River and standing there as long as he

could bear it. He caught pneumonia but survived, only to flee to St. Petersburg, where he asked his brother and sister to intercede with Antonina on his behalf. She never did grant the divorce, instead living out the remainder of her days in a highly promiscuous manner and giving up numerous children to the orphanage. Her tragic life ended after being committed to an insane asylum for 21 years.

Another woman also entered Tchaikovsky’s life in 1877—Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, the widow of a successful businessman (whose life, incidentally, may have been considerably shortened by the discovery that not all of his children were his own). Mme. von Meck was captivated by the composer and commissioned several pieces from him, after which their friendship deepened. She provided him with a comfortable income and intense emotional support through 13 years. They exchanged letters at the rate of two per week—soul-searching letters that now give us unbelievable access into the psyche of this great man. She, at last, was able to give Tchaikovsky what his ill-fated marriage never could: a deep bond of female friendship, a tireless ear for his cares and concerns—without the agony of physical proximity. In fact, one of the more bizarre stipulations of her support was her insistence that the two never meet face to face.

And so it was that Tchaikovsky dedicated his Fourth Symphony to Nadezhda von Meck, in the simple phrase “to my best friend.” The premiere took place in Moscow under the conductor Anton Rubinstein on February 10, 1878. There was not enough time to rehearse the piece properly, and the resulting performance was a disaster. One of

Tchaikovsky's colleagues and former students, the composer Sergei Taneyev, ventured his opinion that the piece was destined for failure because Tchaikovsky had "degraded a noble form"—that is, he had written program music (music which tells a story) in a symphony. Tchaikovsky's response is eloquent, and it strikes a chord in anyone who loves and is deeply affected by his music:

"[I] would never want to write a symphonic work consisting of meaningless harmonies and modulations and rhythmical schemes expressing nothing. Of course my symphony is program music, but I could not put the program into words . . . Isn't a program precisely what one would expect from a symphony, the most lyrical of musical forms? Should it not express everything that words cannot—things that rise in the heart and cry out for expression? In my innocence I thought the idea behind my symphony was so plain that everyone would grasp it, or at any rate its chief outlines, without the need of a written program . . . I don't express any new thought, and haven't even tried to. The idea . . . is basically a reflection of Beethoven's Fifth—not the musical content, of course, but the central plan. Must I tell you that the Fifth not only has a program, but such an obvious one that everybody agrees about it? The same ought to apply to my symphony; if you haven't grasped the program there, all it proves is that I am no Beethoven—and I won't dispute that!"

As we listen to this work of staggering genius—a genius for melody,

line, structure, emotion, and the expression of the human condition—we realize the truth of these words. This "program" perhaps eluded those who attended the first shoddy performance, but from the wildly successful second performance in St. Petersburg to the present day, no audience has experienced Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony without feeling intensely this epic journey from the moment of absolute despair at the opening of the piece to the triumphant victory of the human spirit at the end of the last movement.

Along the way, we are treated to glimpses of myriad sound worlds and fleeting pictures from the composer's imagination: the blows of Fate echoing throughout the first movement; the nostalgic memories of the second movement; the ghostly pizzicato strings subsiding into a distant military march in the third. But it's in the fourth movement where Tchaikovsky performs the superhuman task of lifting himself (and his audience) above the crushing despair, above the situation dealt out by fate. In a letter to Mme. von Meck, he describes the movement:

"If you find no joy in yourself, look about you. Go to the people: see how they can enjoy life and give themselves up to festivity. But hardly have we had a moment to enjoy this when Fate, relentless and untiring, makes his presence known. The others take no notice in their revelry . . . There still is happiness, simple and naïve; rejoice in the happiness of others and you can still live."

Listen, and be stirred.

©2008, Paul Haas

BERKELEY SYMPHONY

08 | 09 Season

Kent Nagano, Music Director

Thursday, December 18, 2008

Joana Carneiro

8pm at UC Berkeley Zellerbach Hall

Lindberg, *Chorale*

Adams, *Shaker Loops*

Beethoven, *Symphony No. 5*



BERKELEY AKADEMIE ENSEMBLE

Kent Nagano's final performances of his 30th anniversary season, in explorations of small orchestra repertoire.

Two Sundays at 7pm at First Congregational Church of Berkeley:



May 17, 2009 | Kent Nagano

Tobias M. Schneid, TBA (World premiere)

Mozart, *Divertimento, K. 136*

Alexander Muno, TBA (World premiere)

Brahms, *Serenade No. 1 in D Major*

May 31, 2009 | Kent Nagano

Bach, *Italian Concerto, BWV 971*

Ives, *Symphony No. 3*

Beethoven, *Septet in E-flat Major, Op. 20*

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

New works by our Emerging Composers in Residence.

Sunday, December 14, 2008 | Joana Carneiro

7pm at St. John's Presbyterian Church:

more information on page 67



You won't want to miss any of these concerts!
Call 510-841-2800 or visit www.berkeleysymphony.org