notes

Nov 9/10

GRIEG & DVOŘÁK

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: American composer Michael Torke (TOR-kee) has a special gift for capturing motion and color in his compositions. He wrote *Javelin* in 1994 for the 50th Anniversary of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and its spirit and excitement anticipate the Olympic Games being planned for the city two years later. Edvard Grieg wrote his *Piano Concerto* soon after he completed his studies at the Leipzig Conservatory, and it is built according to the formal principles of German Romanticism but imbued with some of the folk music quality of his native Norway. Antonín Dvořák's *Symphony No. 8*, one of his most melodic creations, is music that caused the late *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg to call him "the happiest and least neurotic of the late Romantics.... With Handel and Haydn, he is the healthiest of all composers."

MICHAEL TORKE

Born September 22, 1961 in Milwaukee.

JAVELIN (1994)

• First performed on September 8, 1994 by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Joel Levi.

• The first and only prior performance of this piece by the Des Moines Symphony was on September 21 & 22, 1996 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

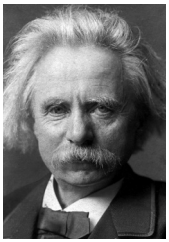
(Duration: ca. 9 minutes)

Michael Torke was born in Milwaukee on September 22, 1961. His parents enjoyed music, but they were not trained in the field, so they entrusted Michael to a local piano teacher when he early showed musical talent. He soon started making up his own pieces, and by age nine he was taking formal composition lessons. His skills as a pianist and composer blossomed while he was in high school, and he took his professional training at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, where he studied with Joseph Schwantner and Christopher Rouse. Though he had surprisingly little familiarity with popular idioms before entering Eastman in 1980, Torke absorbed all manners of music from the students and faculty at the school, coming to realize that he could make pop, rock and jazz coexist with the "classical" idioms in his music. After graduating from Eastman in 1984, he spent a year at the Yale School of Music as a student of Jacob Druckman before moving to New York City, where his practice of submitting scores to every available competition had already made his name known to a number of contemporary music buffs. (He has won the American Prix de

Rome and grants and prizes from the Koussevitzky Foundation, ASCAP, BMI and the American Academy & Institute of Arts and Letters.) In 1985, his music was taken on by the prestigious publishing firm of Boosey & Hawkes. In 1990, he received a first-refusal contract for all of his compositions from Decca/London Records, the first such agreement that company had offered since its association with Benjamin Britten; in 2003, he launched his own label, Ecstatic Records. Torke now has more requests for commissions than he can accept, and he is one of a handful of American composers supporting themselves entirely through the income from their compositions.

Javelin was commissioned by the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games Cultural Olympiad in celebration of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's 50th anniversary. Of this work, whose title and mood reflect the spirit of the 1996 Atlanta Games, Torke wrote, "I had three goals in mind when I began this piece for the Atlanta Symphony anniversary: I wanted to use the orchestra as a virtuoso instrument, I wanted to use triads (traditional three-note tonal chords), and I wanted the music to be thematic. I knew I would welcome swifter changes of mood than are found in my earlier music. What came out was (somewhat unexpectedly) a sense of valor among short flashes and sweeps that reminded me of something in flight: a light spear thrown, perhaps, but not in the sense of a weapon, more in the spirit of a competition. The word 'javelin' suddenly suggested itself. The piece's fast tempo evokes the generally uplifting, sometimes courageous, yet playful spirit."

The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, tam-tam , harp and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



EDVARD GRIEG

Born June 15, 1843 in Bergen, Norway; died there on September 4, 1907.

PIANO CONCERTO IN A MINOR, OP. 16 (1869)

• First performed on April 3, 1869 in Copenhagen, conducted by Holger Simon Paulli with Edmund Neuport as soloist.

• First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 17, 1946 with Frank Noyes conducting and Rudolph Ganz as piano soloist. Six subsequent performances occurred, most recently on May 11 & 12, 2013 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Joyce Yang as piano soloist.

(Duration: ca. 30 minutes)

Grieg completed his studies at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1863. Rather than heading directly home to Norway, however, he settled in Copenhagen to study privately with Niels Gade, at that time Denmark's most prominent musician and generally regarded as the founder of the Scandinavian school of composition. Back in Norway, Grieg's creative work was concentrated on the large forms advocated by his Leipzig teachers and by Gade. By 1867, he had produced the *Piano Sonata*, the first two *Violin and Piano Sonatas*, a *Symphony* (long unpublished and made available only as recently as 1981) and the concert overture *In Autumn*. He also carried on his work to promote native music, and gave an

unprecedented concert exclusively of Norwegian compositions in 1866. Grieg arranged to have the summer of 1868 free of duties, and he returned to Denmark for an extended vacation at a secluded retreat at Sölleröd, where he began his *Piano Concerto*. He thoroughly enjoyed that summer, sleeping late, taking long walks, eating well, and tipping a glass in the evenings with friends at the local inn. The sylvan setting spurred his creative energies, and the new *Concerto* was largely completed by the time he returned to Norway in the fall.

Grieg's *Piano Concerto* closed the youthful period of his life that was devoted to large-scale compositions. In 1869, a year after the *Concerto* was completed, he discovered *Aeldre og nyere fjeldmelodier*, Lindemann's collection of Norwegian folk tunes, and turned his attention thereafter to the idealization of the folk song in miniature musical works, producing only three compositions of sonata length during his remaining forty years. The Concerto exhibits some of the folk-influenced characteristics that mark Grieg's later works, but it is also firmly entrenched in the German Romantic tradition of Schumann's *Piano Concerto*.

The *Concerto*'s first movement opens with a bold summons by the soloist. The main theme is given by the woodwinds and taken over almost immediately by the piano. A transition filled with skipping rhythms leads to the second theme, a tender cello melody wrapped in warm harmonies in the trombones. An episodic development section, launched by the full orchestra playing the movement's opening motive, is largely based on the main theme in dialogue. The recapitulation returns the earlier themes, after which the piano displays a tightly woven cadenza. The stern introductory measures are recalled to close the movement. The *Adagio* begins with a song filled with sentiment and nostalgia played by the strings and rounded off by touching phrases in the solo horn. The soloist weaves elaborate musical filigree above the simple accompaniment before the lovely song returns in an enriched setting. The themes of the finale's outer sections are constructed in the rhythms of a popular Norwegian dance, the *halling*. The movement's central portion presents a wonderful melodic inspiration, introduced by the solo flute, derived from the dreamy atmosphere of the preceding movement.

The score calls for flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and the usual strings.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeves, Bohemia; died May 1, 1904 in Prague.

SYMPHONY NO. 8 IN G MAJOR, OP. 88 (1890)

• First performed on February 2, 1890 by the National Theater Orchestra in Prague, conducted by the composer.

• First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 10, 1968 with Robert Gutter conducting. Five subsequent performances occurred, most recently on March 15 & 16, 2014 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 36 minutes)

You would probably have liked Dvořák. He was born a simple (in the best sense) man of the soil who retained a love of country, nature and peasant ways all his life. In his later years he wrote, "In spite of the fact that I have moved about in the great world of music, I shall remain

what I have always been — a simple Czech musician." Few passions ruffled his life — music, of course; the rustic pleasures of country life; the company of old friends; caring for his pigeons; and a child-like fascination with railroads. When he was in Prague during the winters, he took daily walks to the Franz Josef Station to gaze in awe at the great iron wagons. The timetables were as ingrained in his thinking as were the chord progressions of his music, and he knew all the specifications of the engines that puffed through Prague. When his students returned from a journey, he would pester them until they recalled exactly which locomotive had pulled their train. Milton Cross sketched him thus: "To the end of his days he remained shy, uncomfortable in the presence of those he regarded as his social superiors, and frequently remiss in his social behavior. He was never completely at ease in large cities, with the demands they made on him. Actually, he had a pathological fear of city streets and would never cross a busy thoroughfare if a friend was not with him. He was happiest when he was close to the soil, raising pigeons, taking long, solitary walks in the hills and forests of the Bohemia he loved so deeply. Yet he was by no means a recluse. In the company of his intimate friends, particularly after a few beers, he was voluble, gregarious, expansive and good-humored." His music reflected his salubrious nature, and the late *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg concluded, "He remained throughout his entire creative span the happiest and least neurotic of the late Romantics.... With Handel and Haydn, he is the healthiest of all composers." The *G Major Symphony*, in its warm emotion and pastoral contentment, mirrors its creator. It was composed during Dvořák's annual summer retreat to his country home at Vysoká, and contentment with his surroundings there shines through this music.

Dvořák was absolutely profligate with themes in the *Symphony*'s opening movement. In the exposition, which comprises the first 126 measures of the work, there are no fewer than eight separate melodies that are tossed out with an ease and speed reminiscent of Mozart's fecundity. The first theme is presented without preamble in the rich hues of trombones, low strings and low woodwinds in the dark coloring of G minor. This tonality soon yields to the chirruping G major of the flute melody, but much of the movement shifts effortlessly between major and minor keys, lending a certain air of nostalgia to the work. The opening melody is recalled to initiate both the development and the recapitulation. In the former, it reappears in its original guise and even, surprisingly, in its original key. The recapitulation begins as this theme is hurled forth by the trumpets in a stentorian setting greatly heightened in emotional weight from its former presentations. The coda is invested with the rhythm and high good spirits of an energetic country dance to bring the movement to a rousing close.

The second movement contains two kinds of music, one hesitant and somewhat lachrymose, the other stately and smoothly flowing. The first is indefinite in tonality, rhythm and cadence; its theme is a collection of fragments; its texture is sparse. The following section is greatly contrasted: its key is unambiguous; its rhythm and cadence points are clear; its melody is a long, continuous span. These two musical antitheses alternate, and the form of the movement is created as much by texture and sonority as by the traditional means of melody and tonality.

The third movement is a lilting essay much in the style of the Austrian folk dance, the Ländler. Like the beginning of the *Symphony,* it opens in G minor with a mood of sweet melancholy, but gives way to a languid melody in

G major for the central trio. Following the repeat of the *scherzo*, a vivacious coda in faster tempo paves the way to the finale.

The trumpets herald the start of the finale, a theme and variations with a central section resembling a development in character. The bustling second variation returns as a sort of formal mile-marker — it introduces the "development" and begins the coda. (One point of good fun in this variation: note how the horns, pulling the low woodwinds along with them, ascend to their upper register and blow forth an excited trill generated by the pure joy of the surrounding music.) This wonderful *Symphony* ends swiftly and resoundingly amid a burst of high spirits and warm-hearted good feelings.

The score calls for piccolo, pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and the usual strings.