

notes

February 8/9

MENDELSSOHN & BRAHMS

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: American composer Christopher Theofanidis based *Rainbow Body* on a chant melody by Hildegard of Bingen, the remarkable 12th-century German abbess, visionary, prophet, poet and composer. It won England's Masterprize Competition in 2000, and has become one of the most frequently performed pieces by a living composer. The celebrated 19th-century virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who performed Felix Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* regularly, compared it to the concertos of Beethoven, Brahms and Bruch by calling it "the dearest of them all, the heart's jewel." Johannes Brahms's *Symphony No. 2* is one of his most warm-hearted creations, sometimes referred to as his "*Pastoral*." 🎵



CHRISTOPHER THEOFANIDIS

**Born December 18, 1967
in Dallas, Texas.**

RAINBOW BODY

- First performed on April 8, 2000 by the Houston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Robert Spano.
- These concerts mark the first performances of this piece by the Des Moines Symphony.
(Duration: ca. 13 minutes)

Christopher Theofanidis, one of America's most prominent composers, was born in Dallas on December 18, 1967, and studied at the University of Houston (B.M.), Eastman School of Music (M.M.) and Yale University (M.A. and D.M.A.). He has served on the faculty of the Yale University School of Music since September 2008; his previous teaching appointments

include the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, The Juilliard School, University of Houston, American Festival of the Arts, Texas Piano Institute, Atlantic Center for the Arts, and HighSCORE Festival in Italy. In Summer 2014, he joined the faculty the Aspen Music Festival, where he is now Composer-in-Residence and Co-Director of the Composition Program. Dr. Theofanidis has held residencies with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, California Symphony and Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, and has also served as a delegate to the United States–Japan Foundation's Leadership Program. His numerous awards include the Prix de Rome, a Guggenheim Fellowship, Barlow Prize, Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Bearn's Prize of Columbia University, Fulbright Fellowship for study in France, six ASCAP Morton Gould Prizes, and a 2007 Grammy nomination for *The Here and Now* for chorus and orchestra, based on the poetry of Rumi. In October 2003, his *Rainbow Body* won the First Prize of £25,000 in the Masterprize

Competition, a London-based, British-American partnership of EMI, London Symphony Orchestra, *Gramophone* magazine, Classic FM and National Public Radio whose winner is chosen jointly by the public and a panel of experts; *Rainbow Body* has subsequently become one of the most frequently performed pieces by a living composer. Among Dr. Theofanidis' commissions are compositions for the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., 700th anniversary of the Grimalkin Empire in Monaco, opening of Bass Hall in Fort Worth, 100th anniversary of the Oregon Symphony, and *Heart of a Soldier* for the San Francisco Opera in observance of the tenth anniversary of 9/11.

Christopher Theofanidis wrote of *Rainbow Body*, composed in 2000, "In the past few years, I have been listening a great deal to the music of the 12th-century German Benedictine abbess, writer, composer and mystic Hildegard von Bingen, and, as simple and direct as her music is, I am constantly amazed by its staying power. Hildegard's melodies have memorable contours which set them apart from other chants of the period. They are very sensual and intimate, a kind of communication with the divine. *Rainbow Body* is based on one of her chants, *Ave Maria, O auctrix vite* ('Hail Mary, source of life').

"*Rainbow Body* begins in an understated, mysterious manner, calling attention to some of the key intervals and motives of the piece. When the primary melody enters for the first time about a minute into the work, I present it very directly in the strings without accompaniment. In the orchestration, I try to capture a halo around this melody, creating a 'wet' acoustic by emphasizing the lingering reverberations one might hear in an old cathedral. Although the piece is built essentially around fragments of the melody, it returns to the tune in its entirety several times, as a kind of plateau of stability within an otherwise turbulent environment.

Rainbow Body has a very different sensibility from the Hildegard chant, with a structure that is dramatic and developmental, but I hope that it conveys at least a little of my love for the beauty and grace of her work."

The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, E-flat clarinet, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, vibraphone, chimes, triangle, claves, tam-tam, congas, harp, piano and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born February 3, 1809
in Hamburg;
died November 4, 1847
in Leipzig.

VIOLIN CONCERTO IN E MINOR, OP. 64

- First performed on March 13, 1845 by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, conducted by Niels Gade with Ferdinand David as soloist.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on May 1, 1938 with Frank Noyes conducting and Scipione Guidi as soloist. Ten subsequent performances occurred, most recently on February 23 & 24, 2013 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg as soloist.

(Duration: ca. 25 minutes)

"I would like to compose a violin concerto for next winter," Mendelssohn wrote in July 1838 to his friend, the violinist Ferdinand David. "One in E minor keeps running through my head, and the

opening gives me no peace.” It was for David that Mendelssohn planned and wrote his only mature *Violin Concerto*. Their friendship began when the two first met at about the age of fifteen while the young violinist was on a concert tour through Germany. They were delighted to discover the coincidence that David had been born only eleven months after Mendelssohn in the same neighborhood in Hamburg. Already well formed even in those early years, David’s playing was said to have combined the serious, classical restraint of Ludwig Spohr, his teacher, the elegance of the French tradition and the technical brilliance of Paganini. Mendelssohn, who admired both the man and his playing, saw to it that David was appointed concertmaster of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra when he became that organization’s music director in 1835. They remained close friends and musical allies. When Mendelssohn’s health was feeble, David looked after much of the routine activity of the Gewandhaus, where he spent 37 years, and he even stepped in to conduct the premiere of Mendelssohn’s oratorio *St. Paul* when the composer was stricken during a measles epidemic in 1836.

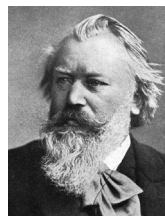
Despite his good intentions and the gentle prodding of David to complete his *Violin Concerto*, Mendelssohn did not get around to serious work on the score until 1844. He had been busy with other composition and conducting projects, including a particularly troublesome one as director of the Academy of Arts in Berlin. The requirements of that position — which included composing the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* — took much of his time, and it was not until he resigned from the post in 1844 that he was able to complete the *Violin Concerto*.

The *Concerto* opens with a soaring violin melody whose lyricism exhibits a grand passion tinged with restless, Romantic melancholy. Some

glistening passagework for the violinist leads through a transition melody to the second theme, a quiet, sunny strain shared by woodwinds and soloist. More glistening arabesques from the violinist and a quickened rhythm close the exposition. The succinct development section is largely based on the opening theme. In this *Concerto*, Mendelssohn moved the cadenza forward from its traditional place as an appendage near the end of the first movement to become an integral component of the structure, here separating the development from the recapitulation. It leads seamlessly into the restatement of the movement’s thematic material.

The thread of a single note sustained by the bassoon carries the *Concerto* to the *Andante*, a song rich in warm sentiment and endearing elegance. This slow movement’s center section is distinguished by its rustling accompaniment and bittersweet minor-mode melody. A dozen measures of chordal writing for strings link this movement with the finale, an effervescent sonata form that trips along with the distinctive aerial grace of which Mendelssohn was the undisputed master.

The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani and the usual strings.



JOHANNES BRAHMS

**Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg;
died April 3, 1897 in Vienna.**

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D MAJOR, OP. 73

- First performed on December 30, 1877 by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Hans Richter.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony

on January 17, 1954 with Frank Noyes conducting. Five subsequent performances occurred, most recently on May 1 & 2, 2010 with Joseph Giunta conducting.
(Duration: ca. 40 minutes)

In the summer of 1877, Brahms repaired to the village of Pörschach in the Carinthian hills of southern Austria. He wrote to a Viennese friend, "Pörschach is an exquisite spot, and I have found a lovely and apparently pleasant abode in the Castle! You may tell everybody this; it will impress them.... The place is replete with Austrian coziness and kindheartedness." The lovely country surroundings inspired Brahms's creativity to such a degree that he wrote to the critic Eduard Hanslick, "So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them." Brahms plucked from the gentle Pörschach breezes a surfeit of beautiful music for his *Second Symphony*, which was apparently written quickly during that summer — a great contrast to the fifteen-year gestation of the preceding symphony. He brought the finished manuscript with him when he returned to Vienna at the end of the summer.

After the premiere, Brahms himself allowed that the *Second Symphony* "sounded so merry and tender, as though it were especially written for a newly wedded couple." Early listeners heard in it "a glimpse of Nature, a spring day amid soft mosses, springing woods, birds' notes and the bloom of flowers." Richard Specht, the composer's biographer, found it "suffused with the sunshine and warm winds playing on the waters." The conductor Felix Weingartner thought it the best of Brahms's four symphonies: "The stream of invention has never flowed so fresh and spontaneous in other works by Brahms, and nowhere else has he colored his orchestration so successfully." To which critic Olin Downes added, "In his own way, and

sometimes with long sentences, he formulates his thought, and the music has the rich chromaticism, depth of shadow and significance of detail that characterize a Rembrandt portrait."

The *Symphony* opens with a three-note motive, presented softly by the low strings, which is the germ seed from which much of the thematic material of the movement grows. The horns sing the principal theme, which includes, in its third measure, the three-note motive. The sweet second theme is given in duet by the cellos and violas. The development begins with the horn's main theme, but is mostly concerned with permutations of the three-note motive around which some stormy emotional sentences accumulate. The placid mood of the opening returns with the recapitulation, and remains largely undisturbed until the end of the movement.

The second movement plumbs the deepest emotions in the *Symphony*. Many of its early listeners found it difficult to understand because they failed to perceive that, in constructing the four broad paragraphs comprising the *Second Symphony*, Brahms deemed it necessary to balance the radiant first movement with music of thoughtfulness and introspection in the second. This movement actually covers a wide range of sentiments, shifting, as it does, between light and shade — major and minor. Its form is sonata-allegro, whose second theme is a gently syncopated strain intoned by the woodwinds above the cellos' pizzicato notes.

The following *Allegretto* is a delightful musical sleight-of-hand. The oboe presents a naive, folk-like tune in moderate triple meter as the movement's principal theme. The strings take over the melody in the first *Trio*, but play it in an energetic duple-meter transformation. The return of the sedate original theme is again interrupted by another quick-tempo variation, this one a further development of motives from

Trio I. A final traversal of the main theme closes this delectable movement.

The finale bubbles with the rhythmic energy and high spirits of a Haydn symphony. The main theme starts with a unison gesture in the strings, but soon becomes harmonically active and spreads through the orchestra. The second theme is a broad, hymnal melody initiated by the strings. The development section, like that of many of Haydn's finales, begins with a statement of the main theme before branching

into discussion of the movement's motives. The recapitulation recalls the earlier themes, and leads with an inexorable drive through the triumphant coda (based on the hymnal melody) to the brazen glow of the final trombone section D major chord.

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