

Notes for Classics 7: Korngold & Shostakovich

Saturday, March 9 and Sunday, March 10

Rei Hotoda, Music Director Finalist — Angelo Xiang Yu, violin

- **Aaron Jay Kernis – *Musica Celestis***
- **Erich Korngold – Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35**
- **Dimitri Shostakovich – Symphony No. 8 in C minor, Op. 65**

Aaron Jay Kernis

***Musica Celestis* (Heavenly Music)**

Composer: born January 15, 1960, Bensalem Township, PA

Work composed: 1991, based on the second movement of Kernis' 1990 String Quartet No. 1

World premiere: Ransom Wilson led the Sinfonia San Francisco on March 30, 1992, in San Francisco, CA

Instrumentation: string orchestra

Estimated duration: 11 minutes

“I don’t particularly believe in angels, but found this to be a potent image that has been reinforced by listening to a good deal of medieval music, especially the soaring work of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179).” Composer Aaron Jay Kernis included this observation in the original program notes for his first String Quartet, from which *Musica Celestis* is adapted. Kernis adds a quote from Aurelian of Réôme, “The office of singing pleases God if it is performed with an attentive mind, when in this way we imitate the choirs of angels who are said to sing the Lord’s praises without ceasing.”

Although written for strings, the melodies of *Musica Celestis* are essentially vocal in conception. Lines unfold gradually, deliberately, as individual themes interweave. Kernis creates a crystalline spaciousness, giving the music room to build, soar, and subside. The strings shimmer, while the stately tempo guides the listener towards a state of meditation. After an animated middle section, the “singing of angels” returns, sending exquisite melodies spiraling up into eternity.

Although the mood of *Musica Celestis* is ethereal rather than mournful, there are several parallels with Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings, which was also adapted from a movement of a string quartet. Over time, Barber’s Adagio has become an unofficial musical lament, beginning in 1945 when it was played on the radio as accompaniment to the announcement of the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Adagio was also played on television when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and at the funerals of many world figures, including Albert Einstein. *Musica Celestis* assumed a similar elegiac role in 2012, when a recording was posted on Youtube to mourn the slayings of students and staff at Newtown Elementary School in Connecticut.

Kernis adds, “*Musica Celestis* is inspired by the medieval conception of that phrase, which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end.”

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35

Composer: born May 29, 1897, Vienna; died November 29, 1957, Hollywood, CA

Work composed: 1937-1945. Commissioned by violinist Bronislaw Huberman. Dedicated to Alma Mahler-Werfel (Gustav Mahler's widow).

World premiere: February 15, 1947. Vladimir Golschmann led the St. Louis Symphony with Jascha Heifetz as soloist.

Instrumentation: solo violin, 2 flutes (one doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (one doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, vibraphone, xylophone, celesta, harp and strings.

Estimated duration: 24 minutes

Erich Korngold was a man out of time. Had he been born a century earlier, his romantic sensibilities and inclinations would have aligned perfectly with the musical and artistic aesthetics of the Romantic period. Instead, Korngold grew up in the tumult of the early 20th century, when the Romanticism of the 19th century had been eclipsed by the horrors of WWI and the stark modernist trends of fellow Viennese composers Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern.

Korngold's prodigious compositional talent emerged early. At age ten, he performed his cantata *Gold* for Gustav Mahler, whereupon the older composer called him "a genius." When Korngold was 13, just after his bar mitzvah, the Austrian Imperial Ballet staged his pantomime *The Snowman*. In his teens, Korngold received commissions from the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra; pianist Artur Schnabel performed his Op. 2 Piano Sonata on tour, and Korngold began writing operas, completing two full-scale works by age eighteen. At 23, Korngold's opera *Die tote Stadt* (The Dead City) brought him international renown; it was performed in 83 different opera houses.

By the 1920s, composers had embraced modernism. Their music bristled with dissonance, unexpected rhythms and often little that resembled a recognizable melody. Korngold's music reflected the style of an earlier, bygone era, and his unabashed Romanticism was dismissed as hopelessly out of date. Fortunately for Korngold, another forum for his lush, lyrical style emerged: film scores. In 1934, director Max Reinhardt invited Korngold to write a score for his film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Korngold subsequently moved to Hollywood, where he spent the next dozen years composing scores for 18 films, including his Oscar-winning music for *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).

While some composers and critics regard film music as less significant than works written for the concert hall, Korngold did not. "I have never drawn a distinction between music for films and for operas or concerts," he stated, and his violin concerto bears this out. The concerto is a compilation of themes from several Korngold scores, including *Another Dawn* (1937), *Juárez* (1939), *Anthony Adverse* and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937). Korngold composed it for an old family friend, Polish violinist Bronislaw Huberman. It was a longtime joke in the Korngold family that every time Huberman saw Korngold, he would demand, "Erich! Where's my concerto?" At dinner one evening in Korngold's house in Los Angeles, Korngold responded to Huberman's mock-serious question by going to his piano and playing the theme from *Another Dawn*. Huberman exclaimed, "That's it! That will be my concerto. Promise me you'll write it." Korngold complied, but it was Jascha Heifetz, another child prodigy, who gave the first performance.

Dmitri Shostakovich

Symphony No. 8 in C minor, Op. 65

Composer: born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia; died August 9, 1975, Moscow, U.S.S.R.

Work composed: summer 1943

World premiere: The Eighth Symphony was first performed in Moscow on November 4, 1943, by the State Symphony Orchestra of the USSR under the direction of Yevgeny Mravinsky. The concert was part of the Festival of Soviet Music's celebration of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the USSR.

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (2 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tam-tam, tambourine, triangle, xylophone, and strings.

Estimated duration: 67 minutes

“Music has a great advantage: without mentioning anything, it can say everything,” said writer Ilya Ehrenburg, after the first performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony. The tragic nature of this music is, as Shostakovich explained, “an echo” of the appalling events of WWII. Shostakovich was sharply criticized for focusing on the tragedy of the war rather than the Soviet triumph over the Nazis, but Shostakovich replied, “In my opinion, [the Eighth Symphony was] quite in the order of things.”

Shostakovich wrote the Eighth Symphony in approximately forty days during the summer of 1943; its five movements last over an hour. Although it was politely received at its premiere, Soviet critics later decried its tragic depiction of the horrors of WWII. At a Soviet musical conference five years after its completion, the Eighth Symphony was criticized, in typically Stalinist fashion, for its “extreme subjectivism,” “unrelieved gloom” and “willful complexity.” Andrei Zhdanov of the Central Committee of the Communist Party sneered, “From the point of view of the People, the Eighth is not a musical work at all; it is a ‘composition’ which has nothing whatever to do with art.”

Musicologist Michael Steinberg called the general soundscape of the Eighth Symphony “hard-edged and lean rather than lush.” This description is particularly true of the *Adagio*, a *cri de coeur* of epic length and scope. The stark, angular melodies tend toward the outermost upper and lower ends of the orchestra's pitch range, which evokes an emotional desolation. The music builds from a quiet dirge in the lower strings to shrieks of anguish in the upper strings and brasses. The sharp retorts of a snare drum portray military strength, while the haunting solo for English horn suggests a survivor wandering over a battlefield littered with the dead.

The *Allegretto*, in scherzo form, recasts several elements of the first movement in a bizarre self-parody: once again the low strings begin, overlaid by oddly jaunty winds and brasses (a grotesque transformation from their agony of the first movement). The piccolo's mocking solo is mimicked by a clarinet and later the entire wind section; the Trio features a derisive dance for solo trombone and fortissimo strings.

The *Allegro non troppo*'s relentlessly pulsing stream of notes bombard the ear like the rat-a-tat of gunfire. The unceasing rhythm suggests unmitigated brutality and the mirthless laughter of an officer torturing a prisoner in a cell. For the *Largo*, which begins with a shriek, Shostakovich wrote a Baroque *passacaglia*, a repeating bass line derived from the opening theme of the first movement. This unchanging bass line repeats numerous times, each repetition accompanied by a melodic variation. The eerily hushed music's final variation, (*pizzicato* strings and flutter-tongued flutes), sends a chill up the spine. The clarinets ease into the final *Allegretto* without pause. This music is by turns intimate and grandiose; interludes for solo instruments

are contrasted by the war music and anguished screams of the brasses of earlier movements. For the first time Shostakovich employs a major key, injecting a ray of hope. Shostakovich said of his Eighth Symphony, "I can describe the philosophical concept of my new symphony very briefly: Life remains beautiful. All that is dark and oppressive will disappear; all that is beautiful will triumph." The final movement reveals the triumph of that beauty over the forces of inhumanity and terror.

© 2019 Elizabeth Schwartz