

# San Juan Symphony

October 10, 2010

Program Notes

by Michael Allsen

The San Juan Symphony's 2010-11 season is an ongoing celebration of our 25th anniversary, and our season theme, suitably, is "Then & Now"—looking back as we look to the future as well. Clarinetist Alex Fiterstein, recognized internationally as a leading soloist on his instrument, begins this survey of the past and present with Weber's *Concertino*, a work written in the early 19th century when the clarinet was still a relatively new instrument. Two works then bring the clarinet up into the 20th century. Copland's *Clarinet Concerto* was written for the great Jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman. Ellstein's *Hassidic Dance*, draws on the sometimes melancholy and sometime exuberantly joyous Klezmer tradition. And the opening concert of a celebratory season can have no better ending than Schumann's "Rhenish" symphony—among his most festive works for orchestra

## **Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)** **Concertino for Clarinet and Orchestra, Op.26**

*Weber composed this work in 1811, and it was performed on April 5, 1811 in Munich by soloist Heinrich Bärmann. Duration 9:00.*

Weber, best known in his day as an opera composer, was nevertheless *very* kind to the clarinet, producing a concertino, two concertos, and a fine *Clarinet Quintet*. When he was beginning his career, the clarinet was still something of a novelty. It had existed through most of the 18th century in various forms, but it wasn't until the very end of the century that it began to appear regularly in the orchestra, and gained a solo repertoire of its own, particularly in the quintet and concerto Mozart composed for the Viennese virtuoso Anton Stadler. Like Mozart's clarinet works, Weber's were inspired by a single virtuoso, Heinrich Bärmann. The two met in Darmstadt in late 1810 or early 1811—Weber was then working his opera *Abu Hassan*, and Bärmann was on his way to join the court orchestra at Munich. Weber was deeply impressed by Bärmann's playing, and when he himself went to Munich on tour in February 1811, he quickly produced the *Clarinet Concertino* for his new friend to perform with the orchestra. King Maximilian II of Bavaria was so taken with the work, that he commissioned Weber to write two full-length concertos for Bärmann, which Weber completed in the next few months. And Weber was also besieged by requests from the members of the orchestra—as he later wrote to a friend: "Since I composed the *Concertino* for Bärmann the whole orchestra has been the very devil about demanding concertos from me..." He did oblige at least one of the orchestra members with his *Bassoon Concerto*, and a few years later wrote a fourth work, a quintet for clarinet and strings, for Bärmann.

Bärmann's instrument, a clarinet with ten keys, was somewhat less flexible than the modern instrument, and the designation "concertino" implies a somewhat lighter, smaller work than a concerto, but this is a thoroughly satisfying virtuoso work with a wide expressive range. It

begins with an *Adagio* that features dramatic writing for the clarinet that clearly shows Weber the opera composer at work. The body of the work is a set of variations on a theme laid out by the soloist—including one distinctly spooky variation that seems to be an early version of music from his operatic masterpiece *Der Freischütz*! The ending is a blazing technical showpiece for the soloist.

### **Aaron Copland (1900-1990)**

#### **Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra - First Movement (*Andante*)**

*Copland composed this work in 1947-48. Benny Goodman played the first performance on a radio broadcast with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, on November 6, 1950. Duration 7:00.*

Clarinetist Benny Goodman, America's "King of Swing," was of course best known as the leader of one of the great Swing bands of the 1930s and 1940s. But when he was at the peak of his fame, Goodman—who had studied as a child with a clarinetist from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—took an increased interest in art music for his instrument. He performed and recorded the classic works by Mozart, Weber, and Brahms, but he also took a strong interest in expanding the repertoire—and as a musical superstar, he had the money to do it. From the late 1930s onwards, Goodman commissioned works from prominent European émigrés like Bartók and Hindemith, from Englishman Malcolm Arnold, and from American Morton Gould. He also played early performances of new works for clarinet by Stravinsky and Bernstein. In 1947, he approached Copland. Goodman later wrote: "I made no demands on what Copland should write. He had complete free rein, except that I should have a two-year exclusivity on playing the work. I paid two thousand dollars, and that's real money..." For his part, Copland, who was about to leave on an extended tour of South America, purchased a trunkload of Goodman's records to bring along. Most of the concerto was composed while he was in Rio de Janeiro, and he completed it the next year when he returned to New York. Aside from Copland's close study of Goodman's playing on record, the two did not really collaborate, though Goodman asked for and got a few minor revisions after he received the score: primarily a few passages that Goodman felt were beyond his technical comfort level when performing with an orchestra. Then there was problem of getting it performed. Goodman was phenomenally busy, and needed time away from his jazz performances to prepare. It wasn't until two years later that Goodman finally had a chance to perform the concerto. It quickly became and remains one of the standard works for the instrument.

The concerto is scored with deliberate simplicity, for strings, harp, and piano—Copland noted that "...I did not have a large battery of percussion to achieve jazzy effects, so I used slapping basses and whacking harp sounds to simulate them." The work is in two linked movements. Copland described the wistful opening movement as "...simple in structure, based upon the usual A-B-A song form. The general character of this movement is lyric and expressive." The opening section has the clarinet above a gently insistent accompaniment, while in the contrasting middle episode the solo part is surrounded by a shimmering texture that clearly comes from the same pen that wrote *Appalachian Spring*. The movement closes with a return of the opening music.

**Abraham Ellstein (1907-1963)**  
**Hassidic Dance**

*This work was first published in 1963, as a piece for clarinet and piano. The orchestration heard here was completed by Richard Hayman in 1978. Duration 5:00.*

Abraham Ellstein was born on New York's Lower East Side, and his earliest musical experience was singing as boy in local synagogues, though he later earned a scholarship to study at Juilliard. Ellstein became one of the leading figures in New York's thriving Yiddish theatre scene, writing music for his first play while still at Juilliard, and eventually producing music for over 30 plays. In addition to his theatrical music and popular songs, Ellstein also produced a great deal of worship music and a pair of oratorios. Ellstein's best-known score was for the 1936 film *Yidl mitn Fiddle (Yiddle with his Fiddle)*, a movie about Klezmer musicians shot on location in pre-Holocaust Poland. Though Ellstein was not orthodox, he was interested in culture of orthodox *Hassidim* who were his neighbors in New York and whom he had come to know on a prewar trip to Prague. One of the distinctive traditions of the highly insular Hassidic sect—a group with roots in Eastern Europe—is dance. Dancing, whether meditative, or ecstatic, or merely celebratory, was part of the worship and cultural traditions of *Hassidim* in Ellstein's time...and remains so today. (In his entertaining and revealing 2007 book, *The Year of Living Biblically*, A. J. Jacobs chronicles a visit to a wild men-only dance in New York City, calling it “the loudest, rowdiest, most drunken party of my life!”) To characterize this dance, Ellstein drew on the vital Klezmer tradition of Eastern European Jews—a blending of traditional Jewish melodies with Gypsy music and other Eastern European styles, and eventually Argentinean Tango and American Jazz. Clarinet is often a lead instrument in these ensembles, playing in a distinctive highly inflected style, an in *Hassidic Dance* it is clearly in charge, beginning in an ever-accelerating dance. Near the end, the clarinet breaks into a *doina*—a lament—but there is a frantic cadenza that leads to a brief reprise of the opening dance and wild ending.

**Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**  
**Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 97 (“Rhenish”)**

*Schumann completed this symphony in 1850, and conducted the premiere in Düsseldorf on February 6, 1851. Duration 31:00.*

This is the final symphony by the troubled Romantic genius Schumann. (His *Symphony No.4* was actually written some years earlier and revised after he completed the “Rhenish.”) It was written at a relatively happy point in career, before the final onset of the mental disease that would effectively end his life. In September 1850, he moved from Dresden to the Rhine Valley town of Düsseldorf, to take up the post of municipal music director. Schumann and his wife, the piano virtuoso Clara Wieck Schumann, were welcomed rapturously by the town, with parties, nighttime serenades, and a concert of Schumann's music. While Schumann's conducting duties kept him occupied much of the time, he was inspired by his new circumstances and by the beautiful Rhineland to compose a new symphony. The *Symphony No.3* was written very quickly, in just over a month (November 2 to December 9). In the midst of this period he made a

visit to the nearby city of Cologne, and was deeply moved by the grandeur of its magnificent Gothic cathedral. He honored the inspiration of his new surroundings by applying the name “Rhenish” to the new work.

One biographer has referred to Schumann as the “quintessential Romantic composer.” While hardly a “programmatic” piece, the *Symphony No.3* is highly Romantic in its extra-musical associations with the Rhine landscape and in its intense expression of the composer's emotions: in this case, happiness and outward satisfaction. It is also Schumann's most thorough expression of the 19th-century ideal of organic unity: Many of the musical ideas in this innovative five-movement work spring from the same thematic material.

The opening movement (*Lebhaft* - “lively”) opens with a grandly-stated main theme, underlain by a syncopated and rhythmically complex background. Many writers have commented on parallels between this work and the third symphony of Schumann's friend and protégé Johannes Brahms, and here the similarity is most apparent. Schumann's movement is in sonata form, and the second theme is in the relative minor. Both themes are developed extensively, with great moments devoted in particular to the horns. (He had just completed his inventive *Konzertstück* a year earlier, and was obviously still smitten with the sound of four horns together.) The movement is rounded off with a majestic coda.

There are three distinctly contrasting inner movements. The second movement is a scherzo, but a remarkably relaxed and sedate scherzo, which Schumann marks *Sehr mässig* (“very moderate”). The whole movement has the character of a rustic *laendler*, with a simple theme subjected to set of loose variations. If there is anything distinctly aquatic about this “Rhenish” symphony, it is the flowing third movement (*Nicht schnell*). Rather than the expected slow movement, Schumann creates a gentle dialogue between two lyrical themes.

The fourth movement (*Feierlich* - “solemn”) is as close to directly programmatic expression as Schumann comes in this symphony. On November 12, 1850, as he was in the midst of composing the symphony, he and Clara visited Cologne, and attended ceremonies for the elevation of the Archbishop of Cologne to the rank of Cardinal. The Schumanns were both deeply impressed, and on returning to Düsseldorf, Robert composed this movement in just a few days, describing it in the score as “in the character of an accompaniment to a solemn ceremony.” This is one of the few thoroughly serious moments in this otherwise cheerful symphony, emerging as a solemn procession, and culminating in a great acclamation from the trombones.

The relatively brief finale is again marked *Lebhaft*—and is just as happy and bright as the fourth movement was sober. The two main themes are based directly on material from the first and third movements, and impose a kind of unity on the whole symphony. The movement closes with a brassy and jubilant coda.