

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

**Schicksalslied (“Song of Destiny”) for Chorus and Orchestra,
Op. 54**

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Overture to *La Scala di Seta* (“*The Silken Ladder*”)

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI (1792-1868)

Composed in 1812.

Premiered on May 9, 1812 in Venice.

Rossini entered the Bologna Liceo in 1806 as a student of Padre Stanislao Mattei, a disciple of the great 18th-century musical pedant Padre Martini. Rossini did not care much for Mattei’s arid counterpoint assignments or the academic life, but he did find many opportunities at the school to foster his talents and make professional contacts. His first opera, *Demetrio e Polibio*, appeared in 1808. He was sixteen. Two years later, he left the Liceo to fulfill a commission for a one-act opera from the Teatro San Moisè in Venice, a small, 800-seat house with an orchestra of 27 musicians. (He was also desperately in need of money to support his aging parents, whose health had been broken by the deprivations of the Napoleonic wars.) *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* (“*Marriage by Promissory Note*”), premiered on November 3rd, enjoyed enough success for Rossini to be appointed composer and *maestro di cembalo*, the 19th-century equivalent of rehearsal pianist and accompanist, at Bologna’s Teatro del Corso.

L’Inganno felice (“*The Fortunate Deception*”), premiered at the Venice’s Teatro San Moisè in January 1812, was Rossini’s first genuine hit, whose success immediately spawned five commissions for productions later that year. (His speed of composition became legend — he wrote 38 operas in the 19 years after 1810.) The second of those commissions to be completed was *La Scala di Seta* (“*The Silken Ladder*”), a one-act *farsa comica* (“*comic farce*”) written for San Moisè and premiered on May 9th. The libretto by Giuseppe Foppa, based on a French farce of the same name, dealt, as did Cimarosa’s then wildly popular *Il Matrimonio segreto*, with the complications of a secret marriage. (The silken ladder of the opera’s title is the means by which the husband, Dorvil, climbs to the chamber of his wife, Giulia.) The opera did not enjoy the success of *L’Inganno felice*, though it remained in the San Moisè’s repertory until mid-June. It has been infrequently revived in Venice and elsewhere, though it has almost never been staged outside of Italy. When it was new, *La Scala di Seta* drew some criticism (which Rossini slyly deflected to Foppa) because its libretto was too similar to that of Cimarosa’s opera, and also because the orchestral scoring was considered too elaborate. It is exactly this attention to instrumental detail, decried in its day, that makes Rossini’s overtures a continuing delight for modern audiences.

Rossini’s orchestral ingenuity sparkles throughout the Overture to *La Scala di Seta*, especially in the sophisticated contrast of wind and string sonorities. A flourish from the strings prefaces the slow introduction, which is otherwise entrusted entirely to the woodwinds and horns led by those *prima donne* of the orchestra — flute and oboe. The bubbling, scalar main theme is trotted out by the strings, repeated by the winds, and given a vigorous working-out by the full ensemble as transition to the second theme, a lyrical phrase for the flute and clarinet answered by a chattering motive in the paired oboes. Then comes the bracing build-up of sound and rhythm which appeared in so many of Rossini’s overtures that it earned him the nickname of “Monsieur Crescendo.” Development (using the second theme) and recapitulation follow, and this miniature masterwork ends amid whirling high spirits and festive brilliance.

Composed in 1868-1871.

Premiered on October 18, 1871 in Karlsruhe, conducted by Hermann Levi.

The idea for the *Schicksalslied* germinated during Brahms’ visit in 1868 to the home of his friend Albert Dietrich in Bremen. Dietrich left an account of the events of that day, which included an excursion to the great naval port at Wilhelmshafen. “On the way to Wilhelmshafen,” he wrote, “my friend, usually so lively, was silent and serious. He told us that early in the morning (he arose at about 5:00) he had found a volume of Hölderlin’s poems in a bookcase and had been stirred to his depths by the *Schicksalslied*. When later on, after much rambling and viewing of all the most interesting sights, we took a rest at the edge of the sea, but we discovered Brahms was far away, sitting on the beach and writing. Thus originated the first sketches of the *Song of Destiny*.... [He was so intent upon this project that] a lovely excursion which we had arranged to Urwald was never carried out. He hurried back home to Hamburg instead, in order to give himself up to his work.” Despite this impetuous beginning, Brahms did not finish his *Song of Destiny* for three years.

Hölderlin’s poem, in the words of Brahms’ biographer Karl Geiringer, “describes the bliss of the immortal gods, and, as a contrast, the despair and suffering of mankind.” Brahms’ music clearly reflects these contrasting emotional states. The poem ends with the expression of the sorrowful human condition and so, too, would have Brahms’ composition if it strictly followed the progression of the words. Such fidelity to Hölderlin’s text, however, would have made for an ending of hopelessness that was at odds with the optimism Brahms had expressed in such earlier choral works as the *German Requiem* and *Alto Rhapsody*. The solution that took him three years to discover was the repetition of the serene opening “music of the gods” as a postlude to the work. That innovation makes for a wonderful formal balance — with the peaceful music at beginning and end flanking the stormy central section — but it changes entirely the effect of the poem. The message of the music is a far more encouraging one than that of Hölderlin’s words, and says much about the personal philosophy of Brahms. The *Schicksalslied* brings to mind Suzanne Langer’s perceptive comment about vocal compositions: that “the music ‘eats up’ the text”; that it is the music rather than the words which makes the stronger impression. (The “text–music” relationship is almost never one-sided, however, but symbiotic.) Walter Niemann, in his study of the music of Brahms, put it this way: “Brahms does not see it as his principal task [in the *Schicksalslied*] to bring out the dread contrasts in this poem between heaven and earth, gods and men, in equally pitiless, inflexible and inexorable music ... but rather to veil it in compassion and pity.”

***Il Campanello di Notte* (“*The Night Bell*”), *Farsa in One Act*
GAETANO DONIZETTI (1797-1848)**

Composed in 1836.

Premiered on June 1, 1836 at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples.

Gaetano Donizetti was born in 1797 in Bergamo to a family of limited means, but his talent was recognized early by the *maestro di cappella* of the city’s cathedral, the German émigré opera composer Giovanni Simone Mayr, who gave him his first formal music instruction and arranged for him to attend Bologna’s prestigious Liceo Filarmonico Comunale to study with Padre Stanislao Mattei. Donizetti showed skill in writing instrumental music and sacred pieces, but his real passion was opera. He composed two operas before finishing his studies in Bologna in 1817 (neither was staged), and made his public debut with *Enrico di Borgogna* (“*Henry of Burgundy*”) in Venice in November 1818. He polished his craft and built a solid reputation over the next decade with 29 operas in a wide range of styles — *comico*, *eroica* (“*heroic*”), *semiseria*, *tragico*, *romantica* — and won international success with *Anna Bolena*, premiered in Milan on December 26, 1830.

Demand for Donizetti's work soared and his operas were performed in every major house in Italy. Confirmation of his growing renown came in the form of an invitation to compose a new work from Gioacchino Rossini, who was then heading the Théâtre-Italien in Paris, the headquarters for Italian-language opera in Europe's cultural hub at the time when the august Paris Opéra still allowed only works in French to be presented on its stage. *Marino Faliero* achieved only a modest success when it was premiered at the Théâtre-Italien on March 12, 1835, but Donizetti's stock continued to rise when *Lucia di Lammermoor* was introduced in Naples in September. After premiering four operas in 1836, two more (including *Roberto Devereux*) in 1837, and one in 1838, Donizetti composed *Poliuto* for the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, but he became infuriated when the work was banned from performance by the local censor for depicting the martyrdom of a Christian saint onstage. When he was denied the directorship of the city's conservatory at that same time, Donizetti quit Italy and moved to Paris in October 1838. His first projects in his new home were *La Fille de Régiment* ("The Daughter of the Regiment"), premiered at the Opéra-Comique on February 11, 1840, and a thorough reworking of *Poliuto* with a new French text (newly titled *Les Martyrs*) by the well-established librettist and dramatist Eugène Scribe for presentation at the Paris Opéra in April 1840; *La Favorite*, his greatest success at the Opéra during his lifetime, opened eight months later.

Donizetti became the darling of Parisian music lovers — Hector Berlioz, then patching together a living that necessitated writing criticism for the *Journal des Débats*, grumbled that his Italian competitor had "made a conquest" of the city's theaters — and his reputation and the demand for his works spread across Europe. In 1842, he accepted the post of *Hofkapellmeister* ("Music Director") at the Habsburg court in Vienna that was remunerated by a generous salary for, he said, "doing nothing" except giving a some lessons at the local conservatory, conducting concerts in the royal apartments two or three times a year, and writing a few pieces for the chapel and court. For the next few years Donizetti divided his time between Austria and France — *Linda di Chamounix*, Vienna, May 1842; *Don Pasquale*, Paris, January 1843; *Maria di Rohan*, Vienna, June 1843; *Dom Sébastien*, Paris, November 1843 — but then the effects of a long-

simmering syphilis infection quickly became debilitating and made further composition impossible. Both his health and his reason gave way and early in 1846 he had to be admitted to a sanitarium in a Paris suburb. In September 1847 he was taken home, to Bergamo, where he was lodged at the villa of his friend Baronness Rosa Rota-Basoni, but the comfortable accommodations did little to ease his fevers, headaches, immobility and dementia, and he succumbed to a stroke the following April. Gaetano Donizetti, the author of seventy operas, dozens of cantatas, scores of sacred pieces, hundreds of songs and vocal duets, and many works for orchestra, chamber ensembles and piano, was fifty years old.

Donizetti drew his own libretto for *Il Campanello di Notte* ("The Night Bell"), one of the four operas he premiered in 1836, from a recent French farce titled *La sonnette de la nuit* by Mathieu-Barthélemy Troin and the brothers Léon and Victor Lhérie (the former was also known by the pseudonym Léon-Lévy Brunswick). The piece was premiered so successfully on June 1, 1836 at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples that it was revived there annually for the next decade; it was staged at the Lyceum Theatre in London in September 1837 and brought back three years later in an English version. The story concerns the requisite *buffo* couple — an older prosperous man, a Neapolitan apothecary named Don Annibale Pistacchio in this case, and a young, beautiful maiden, here Serafina, who just that day became his wife. Fluttering occasionally through the proceedings are Madama Rosa, the bride's mother, and Spiridione, Annibale's servant. Comic interest is provided by Enrico, a former sweetheart of Serafina who contrives to discomfit the pleasures of Annibale's wedding night by repeatedly ringing his door bell — which Neapolitan law requires an apothecary to answer at any hour to dispense needed medications — disguised successively as a French dandy, an opera singer who has lost his voice, and an old codger with an absurdly long prescription to fill. By the time Annibale has dealt with all these interruptions, dawn has broken and the coach that he has to take to Rome for a necessary appointment is ready to leave. The wedding guests who had serenaded the newlyweds the night before return to hurry Annibale, who never did make it to the eagerly awaited bridal chamber, on his way.

BRAHMS: Schicksalslied

Ihr wandelt droben im Licht
Auf weichem Boden, selige Genien!
Glänzende Gotterlüfte
Rühren Euch leicht,
Wie die Finger der Künstlerin
Heilige Saiten.

Schicksallos, wie der schlafende
Säugling, atmen die Himmlischen;
Keusch bewahrt
In bescheidner Knospe
Blühet ewig
Ihnen der Geist,
Und die seligen Augen
Blicken in stiller,
Ewiger Klarheit.

Doch uns ist gegeben
Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn;
Es schwinden, es fallen
Die leidenden Menschen
Blindlings von einer
Stunde zur andern,
Wie Wasser von Klippe
Zu Klippe geworfen,
Jahrlang ins Ungewisse hinab.

Ye wander above in light,
on soft ground, blessed immortals!
Shimmering divine breezes
touch you lightly,
as the fingers of the artist
touch sacred strings.

Free of fate, like the sleeping
child, breathe the celestials;
Chastely guarded
in modest bud,
their spirit
blooms eternally,
and their blissful eyes
gaze in hushed,
eternal clarity.

But to us it is given
to rest in no place;
suffering humanity
reels, falls
blindly from one
hour to the next,
as water thrown
from crag to crag,
year-long downward into uncertainty.

THE IRIS ORCHESTRA
2016-2017 Season

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/

Chorus

/

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ROSSINI Overture to *La Scala di Seta*

BRAHMS *Schicksalslied* for Chorus and Orchestra, Op. 54

— INTERMISSION —

Il Campanello di Notte

Farsa in One Act

Music and Libretto by GAETANO DONIZETTI

Don Annibale Pistacchio, an elderly apothecary

Serafina, his wife

Madama Rosa, Serafina's mother

Enrico, Serafina's former lover

Spiridione, Annibale's servant