German Favorites

Our second concert of the ESO’s 69th season, with its theme of the enduring appeal of Romanticism for composers well into the 20th century, features three canonical composers of German Romanticism: Brahms, Strauss, and Wagner.

Our concert opens with the Third Symphony of Johannes Brahms (1833–1897). Please read Maestro Eckerling’s Behind the Scenes column on the next page for an explanation of why a major symphony begins the concert rather than concluding it. This 35 minute masterpiece was one of Brahms’ greatest triumphs at its 1883 premiere and it has remained a concert staple ever since. The opening three notes represent a “motto” (FAF) which pervades the work, reaching its ultimate resolution at the beautiful end of the fourth and final movement. This motto had a personal meaning for Brahms, who never married, because FAF is an acronym for the German “Frei, Aber Frohlich,” or “free, but happy.” By contrast, Brahms’ close friend, the great violinist Joseph Joachim, had a personal motto of FAE, which stands for “Frei, Aber Einsam,” or “free, but lonely.”

When Richard Strauss died in 1949 aged 85 he might have been called the “last of the romantic composers.” One of his final remarks, given to his daughter-in-law, was “Dying is just as I composed it in Death and Transfiguration.” This reference to one of his most popular tone poems (dating from 60 years earlier), is particularly appropriate for our concert because Strauss quotes its “transfiguration” theme opposite the last word of his Four Last Songs — “death.” The Four Last Songs are Strauss’ final work and with a premiere date of 1950 may be thought of as a farewell to German Romanticism. The words are taken from three poems by Herman Hesse and one by Joseph von Eichendorff and mirror the elegiac tones of the music with such lines as “Summer smiles, astonished and feeble, at his dying dream of a garden” and “We have through sorrow and joy gone hand in hand; From our wanderings, let’s now rest in this quiet land.”

Our third German Romantic composer, Richard Wagner (1813–1883), ranks with Bach and Beethoven for significance in the history of music. He devoted his compositional energies to opera, creating 13, of which 10 are staples of the operatic repertoire. He greatly expanded the use of the orchestra, by increasing the number of instruments as well as by increasing the importance of the music played by the orchestra to a level equal to that of the singers. Excerpts from his operas have been staples of the symphonic repertoire since their operatic premieres, and allow one to experience the magnificence of his orchestra in a shorter time frame than in his normal four hours of operatic performance time. Our concert concludes with the 15 minute Overture to Tannhäuser (1845), one of his most popular and exciting orchestral pieces.

—David Ellis
The Evanston Symphony Holiday Concert was the best start to the holidays

So what was your favorite part of our wonderful holiday concert? For many people, it was the brand new Magnificat by local composer James Stephenson. With 120 singers from the North Shore Choral Society and the large 90 member orchestra playing, this vibrant piece is an instant classic for the season. The Evanston Children’s Choir joined the NSCS in O Holy Night and provided essential children’s voices to the “Waltz of the Snowflakes” from The Nutcracker. Members of Elements Contemporary Ballet danced to an orchestral suite from Handel’s Messiah and the e2e2 dancers interpreted the “Sleigh Ride” by Mozart. Santa and his elves rounded off the afternoon with the audience Sing-a-long and the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

See you next year! 🎄

—Lawrence Eckerling
Music Director, Evanston Symphony Orchestra

Meet Michelle Arezyaga

Michelle Arezyaga didn’t set out to be a professional singer. In fact, she never had a formal voice lesson until she was 23!

Michelle was born and raised in Chicago. Her parents loved music and met when they were members of a choir at the Moody Bible Institute. When the choir director asked people representing other countries to stand up, Michelle’s father stood up to represent Mexico and her mother stood up for Bolivia. Some might say it was a match made in musical heaven!

When she was a child, Michelle and her parents would sing their favorite hymns in four-part harmony for church services or just for themselves. Michelle started playing piano when she was 3 and in high school was a choir accompanist. She then earned a scholarship to major in accounting at Southern Illinois University, where she joined the choir and minored in music. When a professor told her that she should consider majoring in voice, Michelle realized that accounting might not be the right career for her after all. She also realized that she didn’t like being so far from home, so she left SIU and came back to Chicago.

Michelle started investigating the various voice programs in the Chicago area and was offered scholarships at Northwestern and Northern Illinois. However, a friend strongly suggested she study with renowned Chicago soprano Maria Lagios, then and Northern Illinois. However, a friend strongly suggested she study with renowned Chicago soprano Maria Lagios, then teaching at Roosevelt University — which is how Michelle, at the ripe old age of 23, came to have her first formal voice lesson.

After receiving her B.A. in vocal music with honors from Roosevelt, Michelle made her opera debut with the Chicago Opera Theatre as The Girl in Viktor Ullmann’s The Kaiser of Atlantis. Her performance was hailed by one critic as “stunning.” Since then she has sung with opera companies and orchestras all over the U.S. and abroad to standing ovations.

Michelle’s most recent interaction with ESO musicians came this past December when she was the soprano soloist for the International Music Foundation’s perennial favorite, the “Do-It-Yourself” presentation of Handel’s Messiah. ESO violinists Les Jacobson and Rick Holbrook and violinists Cheryl Kaack and Gus Brest van Kempen were members of the DIYM orchestra.

Engaged to be married just before the Messiah performances, Michelle lives in Naperville with her son, Will, who is 10. Michelle describes Will as “shy, but with a good singing voice. He’s just selective about whom he share it with!” The ESO is delighted to welcome back one of our favorite artists to our stage! 🎶

—Kelly Brest van Kempen