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Symphony Orchestra

Gary Lewis, conductor

Jude Dow-Hygelund, piano

7:30 p.m., Thursday, Feb. 15, 2024

Macky Auditorium

Program

RE|Member

Reena Esmail (b. 1983)

Totentanz (Dance of Death), S. 126

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Jude Dow-Hygelund, piano

Winner, Undergraduate Division of Honors Competition

— Intermission —

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

- I. Un poco sostenuto – Allegro
- II. Andante sostenuto
- III. Un poco allegretto e grazioso
- IV. Adagio – Più andante – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio – Più allegro

Program notes

RE|Member

Reena Esmail (b. 1983)

When writing this work, Reena Esmail was Artist-in-Residence with the Seattle Symphony. She explains that *RE|Member* is a chance to explore what the world has gone through: “When I first spoke to Maestro Dausgaard about this piece, we thought it would be opening the 2020 season. We spoke about that feeling of returning to the concert hall after the summer—a change of season, a yearly ritual. But as the pandemic unraveled life as we knew it, the ‘return’ suddenly took on much more weight.”

Now the piece charts the return to a world forever changed... writing the musicians back onto a stage that they left in completely uncertain circumstances, and that they are re-entering from such a wide variety of personal experiences of this time.”

I wanted this piece to feel like an overture, and my guides were two favorites: Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* and Bernstein’s *Candide*. Each is breathless and energetic, with pockets of intimacy and tenderness. Each contains many parallel universes that unfold quickly. Each has beautiful, memorable melodies that speak and beckon to one another. I strove for all of this in *RE|Member*.”

It is a multifaceted title, and by happy coincidence also allowed Esmail to ‘sign’ the work with her initials, RE: “I only noticed that after the fact! This piece connects two meanings of the word ‘remember’. Firstly, the sense that something is being brought back together. The orchestra is re-membering, coalescing again after being apart. The pandemic will have been transformative: the orchestra is made up of individuals who had a wide variety of experiences in this time. And they are bringing those individual experiences back into the collective group. There might be people who committed more deeply to their musical practice, people who were drawn into new artistic facets, people who had to leave their creative practice entirely, people who came to new realizations about their art, career, life. All these new perspectives, all these strands of thought and exploration are being brought back together.”

“And the second meaning of the word: that we don’t want to forget the perspectives which each of these individuals gained during this time, simply because we are back in a familiar situation. I wanted this piece to honor the experience of coming back together, infused with the wisdom of the time apart.”
—Program note by Raff Wilson

Totentanz (Dance of Death), S. 126

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Franz Liszt’s *Totentanz* is a virtuosic and dramatic work for piano and orchestra, representing a unique fusion of macabre themes, technical brilliance, and profound musicality. Composed between 1838 and 1849, Liszt created various versions, culminating in the final orchestral version, which premiered in 1859. *Totentanz* draws inspiration from the medieval concept of the “Dance of Death,” a theme prevalent in art and literature, portraying a skeletal figure leading individuals from all walks of life in a dance symbolizing the inevitability of death.

The work is structured as a set of variations on the medieval plainchant melody *Dies irae* (“Day of Wrath”), a melody associated with death and judgment in Christian liturgy. Liszt ingeniously transforms this sacred theme into a virtuosic showcase, exploring a wide range of textures and moods. The piece opens with a somber introduction, introducing the *Dies irae* motif in the low register of the piano. Liszt establishes a dark and foreboding atmosphere, setting the stage for the unfolding dance of death.

The main body of the work consists of a series of variations, each portraying a different character or scenario. Liszt’s genius is evident in his ability to weave intricate pianistic figurations while maintaining the thematic connection to the *Dies irae*. The variations range from ominous and haunting to frenetic and dazzling, showcasing Liszt’s technical prowess and inventive use of the orchestra. A dramatic cadenza for the solo piano emerges, serving as a focal point of the composition. Liszt exploits the full capabilities of the instrument, pushing the boundaries of technique and expression. The cadenza serves as a virtuosic confrontation with death, leading to a climactic resolution. The work concludes with a powerful and tumultuous coda, bringing the Dance of Death

to its inevitable climax. Liszt unleashes the full force of the orchestra, creating a thrilling and apocalyptic finale.

Totentanz is a tour de force that encapsulates Liszt's innovative approach to piano writing and orchestration. The work not only demonstrates his technical brilliance but also his ability to infuse profound thematic content into a showpiece. Liszt's *Totentanz* remains a captivating and influential contribution to the Romantic repertoire, capturing the imaginations of performers and audiences alike with its vivid portrayal of mortality and the eternal dance with death.

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, is a monumental work that stands as a testament to the composer's mastery of form and emotion. Completed in 1876 after over two decades of gestation, this symphony is often regarded as Brahms' "Beethovenian" symphonic statement, echoing the influence of Ludwig van Beethoven while displaying Brahms' unique voice and innovations.

I. Un poco sostenuto – Allegro

The symphony begins with a brooding introduction (*Un poco sostenuto*), setting a dark and mysterious tone. Brahms slowly unfolds a tapestry of tension, gradually building anticipation. This leads seamlessly into the *Allegro*, where the storm breaks with full force. The movement is characterized by its dramatic contrasts, turbulent orchestration, and the relentless drive of the principal themes. Brahms skillfully navigates through various key areas, maintaining a sense of urgency and struggle.

II. Andante sostenuto

The second movement, *Andante sostenuto*, provides a contrasting lyrical respite. Here, Brahms showcases his melodic gifts with a soulful and expansive theme introduced by the strings. The movement unfolds with a deep sense of introspection, allowing for moments of reflection and emotional richness. The orchestra explores a wide range of colors, creating a lush and expressive landscape.

III. **Un poco allegretto e grazioso**

The third movement, marked *Un poco allegretto e grazioso*, brings a change of character with its dance-like elegance. Brahms injects a folk-inspired quality into the symphony, presenting a charming intermezzo. The movement serves as a delightful contrast to the gravity of the preceding movements, showcasing Brahms' ability to incorporate diverse elements into his symphonic language.

IV. **Adagio – Più andante – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio – Più allegro**

The final movement is a grand culmination of the symphony's journey. Opening with an *Adagio*, Brahms introduces a noble and expansive theme that becomes a foundation for the entire movement. The *più andante* section features variations and developments, building tension. The *Allegro non troppo, ma con brio* unleashes a powerful and triumphant finale, bringing together motifs from earlier movements. Brahms concludes with a *più allegro* coda, providing a brilliant and satisfying resolution to the symphony.

Brahms' Symphony No. 1 is a work of profound emotional depth, structural ingenuity, and orchestral brilliance. Its synthesis of classical forms, romantic expression, and folk influences solidifies its place as a cornerstone of the symphonic repertoire. Through its rich thematic development and masterful orchestration, Brahms creates a symphony that resonates with both intellectual rigor and visceral emotion, leaving a lasting impact on listeners.

Personnel

Text that is bold and underlined is a hyperlink; click or tap for more information.

Gary Lewis, conductor

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