

**Longwood Symphony Orchestra**  
**October 11, 2008**

PROGRAM NOTES  
By Steven Ledbetter

### **ARTHUR HONEGGER**

#### ***Pacific 231 (Mouvement Symphonique No. 1)***

*Arthur Honegger was born in Le Havre, France, on March 10, 1892, and died in Paris on November 27, 1955. He composed Pacific 231 between March and December 1923. The work is dedicated to conductor Ernest Ansermet. Serge Koussevitzky conducted the premiere at the Paris Opera on May 8, 1924. The score calls for three each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, and strings. Duration is about 6 minutes.*

Without question *Pacific 231* is Honegger's most famous composition, though not really his most typical. Honegger is often grouped with Milhaud and Poulenc and the other composers known as "The Six," who, for a time in the early '20s, thumbed their noses at the puffed up and prim respectability of much late romantic music with sassy, insouciant music celebrating the new age. But Honegger was never really a comfortable member of this circle; Swiss rather than French, he was more serious in his world view and made his name before he was 30 with an oratorio on the Biblical subject of *King David* (1920), and later followed that up with an even larger work on *Joan of Arc at the Stake* (1934), in both of which his deep religious beliefs found expression.

Most of his music has some kind of dramatic thrust, even his abstract symphonies, and he explained that he found his work "much easier" if he could come up with a visual or dramatic image when composing his music. This he certainly did for his first orchestral work, *Pacific 231*, composed in 1923, the title of which refers to a model of locomotive, and which certainly suggests musical imagery better than its alternative title, *Symphonic Movement No. 1!* Many composers at the time were creating music from images of "noise"—of airplanes, factories, foundries, and all kinds of machines. The Italian Futurists predicted an entire art form built from such "reality-based" noises.

Honegger's work, however, though it clearly (and brilliantly) suggests a large steam engine huffing and puffing and slowly starting to move, then building up speed to a free run on open track, is constructed on a far more artistic basis than the mere imitation of natural sounds. Honegger loved the music of Bach, his structures built of out interlocking contrapuntal melodies, each supporting the other; as Honegger's train gets underway, we find that the dynamic energy of the piece grows out of just such an interplay between the musical lines. Indeed, as the composer himself described it, the score is "strewn with counterpoint in the manner of J.S. Bach," and culminates in a kind of grand chorale melody, a "song of the open track," if you like, before the engineer must put on the brakes.

No one will ever confuse Honegger's score for a work that Bach might have improvised on the organ in his church at Leipzig, but *Pacific 231* is a splendid demonstration of how a musical approach from one world, created two centuries earlier, can be adapted and created anew to express the energy and drive of an entirely different world.

## **ROY HARRIS**

### **Symphony No. 3**

*Roy Harris was born in Lincoln County, Oklahoma, on February 12, 1898, and died in Santa Monica, California, on October 1, 1979. He wrote his Third Symphony in 1938 and the beginning of 1939. Serge Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony in the premiere in Symphony Hall on February 24, 1939. The score calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, xylophone, vibraphone, and strings. Duration is about 19 minutes.*

With the premiere of his Third Symphony in 1939, Roy Harris was hailed as a truly American composer (he had even been born in a log cabin—and on Lincoln’s birthday!) who had produced the “Great American Symphony.” Though naturally pleased with the reception of the work, he was also realistic enough to tell Nicholas Slonimsky in 1951, “Let’s not kid ourselves; my Third Symphony happened to come along when it was needed.” In fact, Harris’s first contribution to the symphonic genre, which he called *Symphony 1933*, had already been hailed by conductor Serge Koussevitzky (who premiered both works) as America’s first great tragic symphony.

At that time Harris had written a forceful essay called “Problems of American Composers,” in which he maintained that the expression heard in the work of American composers was “not warmed-over moods and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European society.” Harris was given to grandiloquent statements about the power and originality of his music, but there is no question that, at its best, he strikes a sturdy, forceful, if sometimes homespun, American note.

There had long been a symphonic tradition in America, one that had developed in Boston with the works of John Knowles Paine and George W. Chadwick, among others. These composers never agonized over the question of what “American” music might be, since they themselves were descended from immigrants who had arrived in New England in the 1630s. They simply assumed that they wrote American music because they were so obviously Americans. But after World War I, significant changes in the social landscape cast the older generation of composers into the shade for more than half a century (though their music has gradually come to be rediscovered and honored in the last few decades).

The World War itself made all things German suspect in the United States—even the work of Americans who had earlier studied in Germany. France was becoming the new place to go for composers to get their European “finish,” particularly once Aaron Copland encouraged talented young Americans to make the pilgrimage to work with Nadia Boulanger. Perhaps more important was the fact that many of the new composers—certainly including Copland, Gershwin, William Schuman, and many others—were descended from parents who had only recently arrived in this country and who were, in many cases, Jewish. They felt a great need to “prove” their Americanness. And in any case, the modern musical styles that grew up following the war were far more dissonant, more “modern” than the romantic style of the older generation. So it was relatively easy to promote the newness of their music as well.

Already the musical theater had developed original American traditions quite distinct from that of England or the Continent. Ragtime and then jazz had developed their own traditions and had also changed the sound of popular music, in Tin Pan Alley or on the stage.

But concert music still needed a “prophet” who would hold high the banner of American nationalism. Throughout the 1930s the younger composers, many of them back from Boulanger’s studio in Paris, explicitly aimed to sound “American” in orchestral works for the concert hall as well. Aaron Copland was a leading figure, of course, but the number also included Roy Harris, Virgil Thomson, and later William Schuman.

Harris loved to speak and write grandiloquently about his music. Virgil Thomson, who knew Harris when they were students in Paris, used to tease him about always writing “masterpieces.” He had begun his musical studies rather late, in his twenties (an age when Copland was already famous). His first composition teachers were German trained—Henry Schoenfield and Arthur Farwell—but in 1926 he followed a number of other composers to Paris. By 1933, he had found a sponsor in Serge Koussevitzky, who introduced his first symphony, *Symphony 1933*, in Boston. Koussevitzky went on to premiere five of Harris’s first six symphonies. The conductor’s commitment to American composers was significant in itself, but even more so because the Boston Symphony’s concerts were broadcast widely, thus bringing the music to a nationwide audience.

Harris went on to write fifteen symphonies (and much else), plus a symphony for band composed for West Point. (In his later years, he often wrote for his wife, the pianist Johanna Harris, who, it now seems, also frequently served as co-composer, a fact that has only recently come to be recognized.

In many ways, though, the Third Symphony is the high point, and certainly the most often performed, of his output. Elliott Carter reviewed it in 1940 (soon after the premiere), calling it “a folklore work with literary overtones.” Several critics had regarded the first two symphonies as rather rough in character, and overly complex. Carter found that the Third was much clearer in structure, “so that only the most typical and fundamental characteristic are expressed in it. It is in five block-like sections, each one with a dominating idea so definite that its character can be grasped at once....Each of the five sections is built on clearly stated themes, often of considerable length. The articulation of phrase and of section is always clearly marked.”

In each section, the main theme or themes predominates, sometimes to occur later, recalling the emphasis it received at its first appearance. Harris himself provided a description of the five main sections into which this one-movement symphony falls:

- I. Tragic—low string sonorities
- II. Lyric—strings, horns, woodwinds
- III. Pastoral—woodwinds with a polytonal string background
- IV. Fugue—dramatic
  - a. Brass and percussion dominating
  - b. Canonic development of materials from section II constituting background for a further development of Fugue
- V. Dramatic—tragic
  - a. Restatement of violin theme of Section I: tutti strings in canon with tutti woodwinds against brass and percussion developing rhythmic motif of climax of Section IV
  - b. Coda—development of materials from Section I and II over pedal timpani

Harris liked to write his themes in long paragraphs, as is obvious in the opening section. He develops his music with a sense of contrapuntal interplay between the lines, so that the lengthy themes build up muscular textures. The abstract musical argument makes no attempt to draw pictures—no grand western landscapes here—or to recount stories or depict personalities from American history. Yet it feels throughout like a work that projects an American spirit, so it is little wonder that, appearing early in 1939, at the end of one strenuous American decade and just at the beginning of an even more tormented one, it struck listeners all over the country as a musical expression of themselves, their labors, hopes, and dreams.

## **JOHANNES BRAHMS**

### **Symphony No. 3 in F, Opus 90**

*Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He completed his Third Symphony during a stay at Wiesbaden in the summer of 1883; the two middle movements may date back to a never-completed "Faust" project on which Brahms was working in 1880-81. Hans Richter led the Vienna Philharmonic in the first performance of the F major symphony on December 2, 1883. It was first heard in America at one of Frank Van der Stucken's "novelty concerts" at New York's Steinway Hall on October 24, 1884. The symphony is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Duration is about 33 minutes.*

By the time Brahms wrote his Third Symphony, he had come to be regarded with great respect, at least, by many of the critics and the public, particularly those who saw in him a bulwark of instrumental abstract music against Wagner's "Music of the Future." That is not to say that new works were received with universal acclaim. For one thing, Wagner's partisans were always as vicious in their denunciations of Brahms as the Brahmsians were in their attacks on the Wagnerian faction. And many well-intentioned music-lovers simply found Brahms's elusive, complex music unclear, demanding, highly intellectual rather than emotional. When the Third Symphony was first performed in Boston in the fall of 1884 (the second performance in the United States), the response was all-too typical: "Like the great mass of the composer's music," wrote a critic, "it is painfully dry, deliberate and ungenial; and like that, too, it is free from all effect of seeming spontaneity."

For the average listener it took decades—and many rehearsals—to find the extraordinary lyricism, the rapturous interplay of lines and rhythms which create a complexity that does indeed benefit from the sorting-out acquired by familiarity. A hundred years ago it was a commonplace to say that Wagner was the avatar of musical modernism and Brahms of a musical conservatism. And yet the situation cannot have been so simply stated, or the music of Brahms would have been much easier to grasp. No less a musical mind than that of Arnold Schoenberg, whose *Transfigured Night* may be the apotheosis of Wagner's *Tristan*, also wrote a profound essay entitled "Brahms the Progressive." in which he drew attention to Brahms's unsurpassed genius at melodic variation and the complex richness of his rhythms, to which no other composer of his time came close.

It is well known that Brahms waited until he was well into his forties—in 1876—before daring to bring forth his first symphony (though he claimed to have written and destroyed several

before that). But once having broken ground for a symphonic edifice, he quickly moved onto his second such structure the following year. Then he concentrated for a time on concertos (the one for violin and his second for the piano), chamber music (a violin sonata, a piano trio, and a string quintet), and choral works (including the exquisite *Nänie*, with its classicizing text by Schiller lamenting that “Even Beauty must die”).

Finally, in the summer of 1882 he began his Third Symphony, completing it the following summer. Indeed, so ready was he to give birth to the work that he interrupted a journey on the Rhine and rented lodgings in Wiesbaden so that he could write out the score, which he apparently did without pause. The first performance took place that December in Vienna, where it was well received except for the noisy opposition of a few members of the Wagner-Bruckner camp. In those days, of course, there were neither recordings nor radio broadcasts to carry the sound of a new work beyond the audience that first heard it in the concert hall. Brahms’s friends in other cities—particularly his oldest and dearest friend and confidante, Clara Schumann—were eager to hear the piece. But they did not have to wait long; orchestras all over Europe and even the distant United States undertook to perform it in 1884 (before the end of the year performances had taken place in Cambridge (England), Berlin, Leipzig, Cologne, Meiningen, as well as both New York and Boston).

Brahms had prepared an arrangement for two pianos (in those pre-recording days, most music-lovers studied new compositions at home, playing them on the piano, before going to hear them in concert) and twice allowed the powerful Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick to hear the score in a two-piano reading before the official premiere. After the performance, Hanslick hailed the new work as “a feast for the music lover and musician... artistically the most perfect” of the composer’s works to that time.

Naturally Brahms sent a copy of the two-piano score to Clara Schumann, who wrote to him on February 11 offering her friend an enthusiastic response:

I don’t know where this letter will find you, but I can’t refrain from writing it because my heart is so full. I have spent such happy hours with your wonderful creation...that I should like at least to tell you so. What a work! What a [musical] poem! What a harmonious mood pervades the whole! All the movements seem to be of one piece, one beat of the heart, each one a jewel! From start to finish one is wrapped about with the mysterious charm of the woods and forests. I could not tell you which movement I loved most. In the first I was charmed straight away by the gleams of dawning day, as if the rays of the sun were shining through the trees. Everything springs to life, everything breathes good cheer, it is really exquisite! The second is a pure idyll; I can see the worshipers kneeling about the little forest shrine, I hear the babbling brook and the buzz of the insects. There is such a fluttering and a humming all around that one feels oneself snatched up into the joyous web of Nature. The third movement is a pearl, but it is a grey one dipped in a tear of woe, and at the end the modulation is quite wonderful. How gloriously the last movement follows with its passionate upward surge! But one’s beating heart is soon calmed down again for the final transfiguration which begins with such beauty in the development motif that words fail me! How sorry I am that I cannot hear the symphony now that I know it so well and could enjoy it so much better. This is a real sorrow for me...

For all the immediate fame and success that the symphony achieved (and for all its influence on Brahms's contemporaries, including Dvořák and the American George W. Chadwick, whose own Third Symphony is in some ways an homage to this piece), the Brahms Third is the least-often programmed of the four symphonies. And this in spite of the fact that Brahms's great devotee Hans Richter referred to the piece "Brahms's *Eroica*." Actually the epithet could be, in part, the cause of the symphony's relative infrequency in performance, because the two works have almost nothing in common except the fact that they are both "third symphonies" and bear the tempo marking "Allegro con brio" for their first movements.

The Beethoven work shatters the past with a two-fisted aggressive outburst of dynamism; the Brahms is altogether quieter, more internalized, more evocative. Every movement ends quietly, including the finale, and this may be another reason why it is heard rarely, since audiences are psychologically more attuned to applaud a loud, brilliant finish rather than the quiet close.

The first, second, and fourth movements of the symphony are linked by the presence of a "motto" that appears in the opening measures: three chords underlie a three-note melody that consists of F rising to A-flat, the soaring upward to the F in the higher octave. Now in this context, A-flat would suggest that the symphony is to be in F *minor*, but the chords underlying the first and third pitches have instead an A *natural*, which suggests (as indeed the score officially decrees) that the symphony is in F *major*. From the first three measures, then, the symphony unfolds an expressive scheme that is constantly playing with the opposition between major and minor, sometimes forcefully, but most often in delicate ways.

Nearly thirty years earlier Brahms had composed a violin sonata movement based on the musical emblem F-A-F, which (according to the composer's biographer Kalbeck) stood for the phrase "*frei aber froh*" ("free but happy"). Here the same phrase recurs, except its middle member is now A-flat, bringing in a totally different mood. A and A-flat contend dramatically throughout the movement, a harmonic competition that helps to generate the great forward thrust the continues even past the more delicate and ravishing secondary theme, first heard in the clarinet.

The two middle movements are both more delicate, lighter, of the type that Brahms often (though not here) chose to call "intermezzo." The second movement features a melody that seems almost as simple as a folk song, developed with rich changes in the orchestration. The lyric flow is twice interrupted by a succession of chords that sound vaguely ominous.

The cellos sing a gorgeously poignant melody at the opening of the third movement, and the first violins soon take it up. Though this movement lacks specific references to the continuing struggle between A and A-flat, its mood of overall melancholy fits right in with the nature of that harmonic combat.

The finale opens in F minor, giving the impression that the A-flat will ultimately triumph. A chorale-like passage and a succession of motives build a powerful symphonic struggle. But rather than carrying this through to anything like a heroic conclusion, Brahms draws all of the thematic materials of this movement together in a calm apotheosis that finally settles the original question—minor or major?—in favor of the latter, with shimmering strings and a hushed close.