# Longwood Symphony Orchestra – December 3, 2011
# Weber, Mendelssohn & Schumann
# Program Notes
# By Steven Ledbetter

**CARL MARIA VON WEBER**
**Overture to *Oberon*, J.306**
*Carl Maria von Weber was born in Eutin, Germany (near the Danish border), probably on November 18, 1786, and died in London on June 5, 1826. He composed the opera* Oberon*, his final composition, between January 23, 1825, and January 1826. The work was premiered under Weber's direction at Covent Garden in London on April 12, 1826. The score calls for an orchestra consisting of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Duration is about 9 minutes.*

Weber was marked for the theater from birth. His father was a professional actor, and much of his all-too-brief career was spent as a conductor in opera houses all over Germany. He himself began composing for the theater at the age of twelve. Weber eventually came to cherish the goal of creating a true German opera, a goal he substantially accomplished in his last three major works, *Der Freischütz* (1821), *Euryanthe* (1823), and *Oberon* (1826).

*Der Freischütz* was a Singspiel—a musical drama in German with spoken dialogue linking the musical numbers. In evoking the natural beauties of the German forest, in offering creepy scenes of the supernatural in a battle between good and evil, and above all, in transmitting these images through fresh and colorful music, Weber created a whole new repertory of sounds that were copied and imitated by an entire generation of composers (in fact, they remain to this day a basic part of the musical imagery employed in soundtracks for films and television). *Euryanthe* came next, planned by Weber as a determined effort to write a full-scale serious opera, without spoken dialogue. *Euryanthe* has a beautiful score that is, alas, hampered by an utterly ludicrous libretto, which has prevented the opera from achieving more than a *succés d'estime*. Again Weber's musical imagination created a wealth of ideas that inspired Wagner and others, but the opera is almost never performed today.

*Oberon* suffered the same fate for different reasons. It was to be produced in London and sung in English. Even as he was dying of tuberculosis, Weber feverishly studied the English language so that he could set the libretto to music to achieve (so he hoped) a huge success that would provide an income for his family, since he knew that the end could not be far away. Unfortunately he did not know that the English stage of the 1820s was probably in the lowest state it ever achieved in its entire history. Serious drama and opera was out of the question; what counted was spectacle to delight the eye of the "tired businessman." It had long been the English tradition that opera was a mixed phenomenon, performed by actors in the principal roles (who did not sing) and singers in the mostly unimportant roles (who had little to do with the plot). And since the libretto was based (very freely!) on a classic of German literature—Wieland's epic poem *Oberon*—Weber was horrified when he realized exactly what was happening. It was too late to withdraw from the project, but he consoled himself with the idea that he would completely recompose the work for the German theater, in order to do the subject justice. Alas, he did not live to accomplish this aim.

As always, Weber wrote the overture last. This allowed him to bring together some of the expressive themes, to alert the audience as to the character and subject of the story, even if the libretto prevented them from understanding what was actually going on. The story involves a test of constancy between two lovers, Huon the Bold and Rezia. The test has been set by the fairy king Oberon, who has vowed to refrain from visiting the bed of his wife Titania until he finds two mortals who are faithful to one another, come what may. For purposes of listening to the overture, this is really all you need to know about the opera. Periodically we hear the horn of Oberon blowing; it is, of course, a magic horn that annihilates time and distance, bringing Oberon at once to the scene. At the end of the overture we hear a grand triumphal procession in the court of Charlemagne. And in between we hear a theme in the cellos that depicts the awakening of love in Huon's breast; later a solo theme in the clarinet that similarly relates to the beginning of love between the principals. Given the presence of Oberon and Titania, we may naturally expect some fairy music as well; Weber obliges us with elements that might have influenced the young Mendelssohn and certainly did influence Arthur Sullivan when he came to compose *Iolanthe*. Despite the incredible hodgepodge of the libretto with which he was saddled, Weber managed to mine from it wonderful images that he turned to musical jewels. We can only lament that he did not live long enough to rewrite the opera into a form that would have been consistent with the poetry of his overture.

**FELIX MENDELSSOHN**
**Violin Concerto in E minor, Opus 64**
*Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg on February 3, 1809, and died in Leipzig on November 4, 1847. He planned a violin concerto as early as 1838, but it was not until 1844 that he settled down to serious work on it; the finished score is dated September 16, 1844. The first performance took place in Leipzig under Niels Gade's direction, with Ferdinand David as the soloist. The concerto is scored for solo violin with an orchestra consisting of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets all in pairs, timpani, and strings. Duration is about 26 minutes.*

Ferdinand David (1810-1873) was one of the most distinguished German violinists and teachers of his day. When the twenty-seven-year-old Mendelssohn became director of the Gewandhaus concerts in Leipzig in 1836, he had David, just a year his junior, appointed to the position of concertmaster. Relations were always cordial between composer and violinist, and their warmth was marked in a letter that Mendelssohn wrote to David on July 30, 1838, in which he commented, "I'd like to write a violin concerto for you next winter; one in E minor sticks in my head, the beginning of which will not leave me in peace."

But having said as much, Mendelssohn was in no hurry to complete the work. He sketched and drafted portions of it in at least two distinct stages over a period of years. His correspondence with David is sometimes filled with discussions of specific detailed points of technique and sometimes with the violinist's urgent plea that he finish the piece at last. By July 1839 Mendelssohn was able to write to David reiterating his plan to compose a concerto and commenting that he needed only "a few days in a good mood" in order to bring him something of the sort.

Yet Mendelssohn didn't find those few days for several years—not until he decided to shake off his wearying appointment at the court of Frederick William IV in Berlin. It wasn't until July 1844 that he was able to work seriously on the concerto. On September 2 he reported to David that he would bring some new things for him; two weeks later the concerto was finished.

As Mendelssohn's adviser on matters of technical detail for the solo part, David must have motivated the composer's decision to avoid sheer virtuoso difficulty for its own sake. In fact, he claimed that it was his suggestions—which made the concerto so playable—that led to its subsequent popularity. It is no accident that Mendelssohn's concerto remains the first major Romantic violin concerto that most students learn.

At the same time it is, quite simply, one of the most original and attractive concertos ever written. The originality comes from the new ways Mendelssohn found to solve old formal problems of the concerto.

Ever since Antonio Vivaldi had set his seal on the Baroque concerto with over 500 examples, certain features had been passed on from one generation to another. First of all, the traditional concerto built its first movement on a formal pattern that alternated statements by the full orchestra (ritornellos) with sections featuring the soloist. It was an effective device when the ritornellos were short summaries of the musical material and functioned like the pillars of a bridge to anchor the soloist's free flight. But as first movements took on the shape of a symphonic sonata form, the orchestral ritornello got longer and longer. Instead of waiting perhaps a minute or two to hear the soloist, the audience had to wait five minutes or more. Proportions seemed skewed.

In his last two piano concertos, Beethoven tried to sought to change the situation somewhat by introducing the soloist and establishing his personality at the outset, and then proceeding with the normal full orchestral ritornello. Mendelssohn takes the much more radical step of dispensing with the tutti ritornello entirely. He fuses the opening statement of orchestra and soloist into a single exposition. The soloist enters with the main theme after just two measures of orchestral "curtain," and idea that was part of Mendelssohn's design from the very beginning.

The other problem of concerto form that Mendelssohn attacked in a new way is that of the cadenza. Normally, just before the end of the movement, the orchestra pauses on a chord that is the traditional signal for the soloist to take off alone. Theoretically only two chords are necessary after this point for the movement to end (though in practice there is usually a somewhat longer coda). But everything comes to a standstill (as far as the composer's work is concerned) while we admire the sheer virtuosity of the soloist—this, despite the fact that the cadenza might be outrageously out of style with the rest of the piece or that it may be so long and elaborate as to submerge entirely the composition to which it is attached. The problem is not quite so serious when the composer himself provides the cadenza, because it is then at least in an appropriate style. But there remains the absurdity of coming right up to the end of the movement and suddenly putting everything on hold.

Mendelssohn's solution is simple and logical—and utterly unique. He writes his own cadenza for the first movement, but instead of making it an afterthought, he places it in the heart of the movement, where it completes the development and inaugurates the recapitulation! Before that time—and rarely afterwards—no other cadenza ever played so central a role in the structure of a concerto.

Finally, Mendelssohn was an innovator with his concertos by choosing to link all the movements together without a break, a pattern that had been used earlier in such atypical works as Weber's *Konzertstück* for piano and orchestra, but never in a work having the temerity to call itself a concerto. Yet we can't imagine the Liszt concertos and many others without this change.

The smooth discourse of the first movement, the way Mendelssohn picks up short motives from the principal theme to punctuate extensions, requires no highlighting. But it is worth pointing out one of the

loveliest touches of orchestration at the arrival of the second theme, which is in the relative major key of G. Just before the new key is reached, the solo violin soars up to high C and then floats gently downward to its very lowest note, on the open G-string, as the clarinets and flutes sing the tranquil new melody. Mendelssohn's lovely touch here is to use the solo instrument—and a violin at that, which we usually a high voice—to supply the *bass* note, the sustained G, under the first phrase; it is an inversion of our normal expectations, and it works beautifully.

When the first movement comes to its vigorous conclusion, the first bassoon fails to cut off with the rest of the orchestra, but holds his note into what would normally be silence. The obvious intention here is to forestall intrusive applause after the first movement; Mendelssohn gradually came to believe that the various movements of a large work should be performed with as little pause as possible between them, and this was one way to do it (though it must be admitted that the sustained bassoon note has not always prevented overeager audiences from breaking into applause).

A few measures of modulation lead naturally to C major and the lyrical second movement, the character of which darkens only with the appearance of trumpets and timpani, seconded by string tremolos, in the middle section. Once again at the end of the movement there is only the briefest possible break; then the soloist and orchestral strings play a brief transition that allows a return to the key of E (this time in the major mode) for the lively finale, one of those brilliantly light and fleet-footed examples of "fairy music" that Mendelssohn made so uniquely his own.

**ROBERT SCHUMANN**
**Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Opus 97, *Rhenish***
*Robert Alexander Schumann was born in Zwickau, Saxony, on June 8, 1810, and died in Endenich, near Bonn, on July 29, 1856. He composed the E-flat symphony (published as the Third, though it was fourth in order of conception) in Düsseldorf between November 2 and December 9, 1850, and conducted the first performance in Düsseldorf on February 6, 1851. The nickname Rhenish was used by Schumann in casual reference to the work, though he did not attach it to the published score. The score calls for flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Duration is about 32 minutes.*

Schumann's biography has many pages detailing periods of mental instability, attempted suicide, and eventual madness. But the picture was never entirely devoid of a bright side, and when Schumann was feeling well, he composed with an energy, a richness of imagination, and a sheer speed that is little short of astonishing. The *Rhenish* Symphony is a case in point. The Schumann family had spent the last half of the 1840s in Dresden, a city that was musically conservative and rather dull (the golden years of the Dresden opera and its series of Richard Strauss premieres were a half century in the future). After five years there, Schumann had few real friends and no official recognition. Despite a prolific spell now and then during that period, composition was often difficult, and he nearly gave up work on large-scale instrumental forms. In November 1849 he was approached with the suggestion that he apply for the soon-to-be-vacant directorship of the municipal orchestra in Düsseldorf. After temporizing for a time, Schumann finally accepted the post and moved to Düsseldorf with his family at the beginning of September 1850.

Almost immediately he returned to composing for orchestra. His mood must have been brighter than it had been for a long time, since his work preceded smoothly and with almost effortless ease. He began a cello concerto on October 10, completed a sketch before the week was out, and finished the full score in another week! On November 2, barely a week after finishing the concerto, he began work on his Third

Symphony. Again progress was rapid. Despite the interruption of a visit to Cologne, he completed the sketch of the first movement in a week, had worked out the scherzo by November 29, and completed the entire score by December 9! The character of the music, too, bespeaks a new warmth and positive outlook in Schumann's life. It is brimming with energy and color.

The familiar nickname of the symphony invites the listener to imagine all sorts of images of the mighty Rhine, its scenery, its legends, and its history. But Schumann himself never specified a program, and in the fourth movement, which originally bore a hint as to its inspiration, Schumann suppressed even that hint from publication. More important, though, is the fact that this symphony finds Schumann at the height of his powers, producing a first movement that is quite likely his finest single symphonic achievement. The whole work suggests vast open spaces and stretches of time, though, oddly enough, the *Rhenish* actually *feels* to be about the same length as Schumann's other symphonies—and this despite the fact that it consists of five movements rather than four.

The very opening has a magnificent breadth brought about by presenting what sounds like a theme in a slow 3/2 meter, though by the end of the first phrase the 3/2 melts into a whirling waltz apparently at double speed. The extension of the opening sentence develops that characteristic broad rhythm with a new, faster idea, in a carefully planned dialogue that cadences finally in a tender contrasting theme. More than one commentator has noted the wonderful continuity of Schumann's thought in this movement, more logical and inevitable than ever before, and compared it to the similar character of Beethoven's symphony in E-flat, the *Eroica*, which evidently stands godfather to this Romantic offspring. The development section of the first movement draws upon all the material that has been heard before, worked out in a grand harmonic arc. Eventually Schumann begins a dominant pedal for the extended build-up to the thrilling moment of recapitulation, in full orchestral splendor, with the four horns sounding the theme in unison along with the flutes and violins. A new idea enlivens the energetic coda.

The second movement is called a "scherzo," but the tempo marking *Sehr mässig* ("Very moderate") belies that title. It suggests rather a slow country dance of the *Ländler* type, and the tunes just might be drawn from the wealth of German folk song, though they are really Schumann's own, composed in homage to that rich body of song that was such a fundamental part of his musical heritage. In its formal pattern, too, the movement is not a simple scherzo, which usually followed a simple ABA design. This one seems to combine that basic pattern with elements of variation form and of sonata development.

The third movement is a rather short slow movement, though it is filled with intimate musical poetry in gentle melodic ideas that run throughout, a vein of Schumann's musical thought that is especially characteristic in certain of the songs and selected pages of the piano works. Here Schumann's innermost warmth fills the entire movement from beginning to end.

Shortly after arriving in Düsseldorf, Robert and Clara Schumann traveled down the Rhine to Cologne, where they witnessed the enthronement of the Cardinal Archbishop Geissel on September 30, 1850, and where Robert was especially impressed by the gigantic Gothic cathedral, then still unfinished after centuries of construction. When writing his E-flat symphony, Schumann recalled the experience musically in the fourth movement (really a self-sufficient introduction to the finale), which he labeled *In the character of a solemn ceremony*, though he later withdrew even this much of a programmatic hint. It is rich with the sounds of trombones in elaborate contrapuntal lines, using devices learned during Schumann's lifelong study of Bach but distilled through his own Romantic personality into something utterly individual and bearing no trace of the academy about it. The polyphonic edifice, with its learned techniques of canon, augmentation, and diminution, provides a splendid foil to the bustle and energy of

the real finale, in which, before the end, palpable references to the polyphonic theme of the fourth movement—now in the major mode—and the very opening of the symphony sum up the musical world of Schumann's Rhine valley.

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