Program Notes: ASCEND, November 13, 2021

Jessie Montgomery was born and raised on New York's lower East Side in the 1980's. The "downtown" artistic and political scene at that time attracted a wide range of artists, such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, making the arts in the neighborhood particularly lively. Montgomery's parents were artists and part of that scene. As a result, Montgomery was exposed to a wide range of musical and social influences that inform her music to this day. She studied violin with Sally Thomas and Ann Setzer and holds degrees from the Juilliard School and New York University. Currently, Montgomery is Composer in Residence with the Chicago Symphony, on the faculty of the Mannes School of Music, is a Graduate Fellow in Music Composition at Princeton University, and, since 1999, has been connected with The Sphinx Organization, which supports young African American and Latinx string players. (Editor's note: The Binghamton Philharmonic works regularly with the Sphinx Organization to increase diversity in the orchestra.)

Montgomery's *Starburst*, a one-movement composition for string orchestra, was written for the Sphinx Organization's star performing group, the Sphinx Virtuosi, which premiered it in Miami in 2012. She relates the piece to the natural world as "a play on imagery of rapidly changing musical colors. Exploding gestures are juxtaposed with gentle fleeting melodies in an attempt to create a multidimensional soundscape. A common definition of a starburst: 'the rapid formation of large numbers of new stars in a galaxy at a rate high enough to alter the structure of the galaxy significantly' lends itself almost literally to the nature of the performing ensemble who premieres the work, The Sphinx Virtuosi, and I wrote the piece with their dynamic in mind."

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The German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was a completely scurrilous person. He was an anti-Semite, a serial philanderer, a colossal egotist, and completely untrustworthy (at best) in his professional and personal affairs. The music that Wagner composed changed music history. He felt that Beethoven had exhausted the possibilities of pure instrumental music (epitomized by his Symphony No. 9) and that the way forward, the "music of the future," would fuse instrumental and vocal music into the new form of music drama that rejected the trivial and corrupt travesty known as opera. And who would invent, develop, and compose these music dramas? Wagner himself, of course.

The world took note. Musicians took to the ramparts to defend or attack Wagner's innovative music and Wagner the man. Composers wrote music that clearly accepted or rejected Wagner's style and innovations, and even composers who rejected Wagner's music, such as Debussy and Tchaikovsky, were still reacting to it. (Only Verdi seemed to stand apart.) And musicians were not the only artists who felt caught in Wagner's gravitational pull. Philosophers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, poets such as

Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, and authors such as Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann fell under his spell. The atmosphere is perhaps best described by the composer George Bizet after he attended the Paris premiere of Wagner's opera (yes, opera) *Rienzi*: "Some say: It's bad Verdi; others: It's good Wagner. Ah, it's sublime! It's horrible! It's mediocre! It's not too bad."

Wagner, by focusing on music for the stage, wrote very little purely instrumental music, and most of it was not very good. (Wagner himself said of his *American Centennial March*, written for the 1876 Philadelphia celebration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, "Between you and me, the best thing about the march was the $5000 they paid me.") But there was one great exception, and it was a birthday present.

Cosima Wagner (1837-1930) was Wagner's second wife. She and Wagner had declared their love for one another in 1863 and had three children before she asked her husband, the conductor Hans von Bülow, for a divorce in 1869. (Van Bülow, a passionate advocate of Wagner's music, responding to Cosima's request wrote, "You have preferred to consecrate the treasures of your heart and mind to a higher being: far from censuring you for this step, I approve of it." Go figure.) Her marriage to Wagner in 1870 seems to have started an era of unknown domestic tranquility for her Lothario husband, and, after they were married, they returned to their lavish lakeside villa in Tribschen on the shore of Lake Lucerne in Switzerland that was provided by King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who was secretly in love with Wagner. (Wagner's life would make a great soap opera script.) There, Wagner returned to composing the music for *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, the third and fourth music dramas of his Ring Cycle tetralogy.

But that was not the only thing Wagner was composing. He decided in November 1870 to compose a piece for Cosima's birthday, honoring their newborn son Siegfried (all of the Wagner's children were named after characters in Wagner's work), and completed his *"Tribschen Idyll with Fidi-Birdsong and Orange Sunrise,"* on December 4. Rehearsed in secret, it was the first thing Cosima heard on Christmas morning, played by fifteen musicians arrayed on the staircase to her bedroom. Originally intended as a private piece for the Wagner family, Wagner sold the piece, retitled as *Siegfried Idyll*, to a publisher in 1878 to raise some much needed cash.

The music of the *Siegfried Idyll* weaves together motifs and tunes from Wagner's *Siegfried*, a cradle song Wagner had written a year earlier, and a bit of original material into an intimate and restrained piece unusual for Wagner, but as befits the pastoral nature of an idyll. That it reflects Wagner's personal feelings on marital bliss and issue can be seen in the original title. Fidi was the Wagners' nickname for their son, and Orange Sunrise refers to the light in the room where Cosima gave birth to Siegfried. Indeed, Wagner said that every note of music could be described as part of a story, one that he never told. Perhaps, but the *Siegfried Idyll* is so eloquent in its musical intentions that it does not need a single spoken word added to it.

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The Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) worked in the same socio-economic system as did his older contemporary, Joseph Haydn. Unlike Haydn, Mozart did not thrive in this environment. Haydn, as a servant, got along splendidly with his royal patrons and was commercially very successful when he later presented his music to a wider public. Mozart bridled at his role as a servant in the court in Salzburg, and his royal patron was not too fond of him either. (His final dismissal from the court in 1781 was literally "a kick in the arse" from the court steward.) As a result, Mozart decided to make his living as a freelance composer and performer in the big city – Vienna.

Initially, Mozart was very successful. He was able to support himself from a steady stream of commissions (including some from the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II (1741-1790)), popular public performances as a pianist, and private teaching for the Viennese elite. He was so successful that his reputation spread beyond Vienna (particularly to Prague), and his music enjoyed popularity with not just the aristocracy, but also with people on the street. (Viennese organ grinders played tunes from Mozart's opera "*The Marriage of Figaro*", and in Prague, Mozart wrote that "Here they talk about nothing but '*Figaro*.' Nothing is played, sung or whistled but '*Figaro*.' Nothing, nothing but '*Figaro*.'")

But part of Mozart's success was from being the new guy in town, and nothing gets older faster than something new. And after the fickle Viennese music public moved on to other novelties, the public treasury was exhausted by expensive military adventures, and many of Mozart's patrons were gone fighting the Ottoman Empire. As a result, Mozart's stream of commissions began to dry up, which is why Mozart's final three symphonies, Nos. 39 – 41 (K. 543, 550, 551) are a mystery.

Mozart, as did Haydn, had experimented and expanded his symphonies from simple curtain raisers and light entertainments to sophisticated musical statements. His final three symphonies, written in two months during the summer of 1788, are some of the greatest symphonies ever written. The mystery of the symphonies is that no one can figure out why Mozart wrote them. No one has found any record of their being performed or plans for performances for the remaining two-and-a-half years of Mozart's life. As Mozart rarely wrote pieces without having occasion to use them, much less with work of this scale and ambition, much effort and speculation has been expended trying to discover the symphonies' purpose. But, despite musicologists' best efforts and theories – bupkis. Unlike Haydn's final twelve London symphonies, Mozart's final three symphonies only became widely known after Mozart's death.

Each of these final symphonies has a distinctive character and, as each has a different instrumentation, a unique sound. The final symphony, No. 41, which uses horns, trumpets and timpani, has the grandest sound of the trio, a sound that reinforces the noble musical gestures Mozart used. Those noble gestures are reflected in the symphony's nickname. It was dubbed *The Jupiter* in the early 1800's in London.

(Publishers loved doing this to increase sales. Modern advertising copywriters would say "Mozart's Symphony No. 41 - now with Jupiter!") And those gestures are used in incredibly sophisticated ways.

The first movement is striking in how Mozart manages to weave the symphony's contrasting single ideas (e.g., the very different parts of the first few measures) into a continuous whole. Perhaps a clue as to what Mozart was up to is the tune he reused from his aria "*Un baccio di mano"* K. 541, which he wrote as an addition to someone else's opera. The aria's character clearly is rooted in one of Mozart's main preoccupations – the hybrid of comic and serious opera that Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte (1749-1838) called *drama giocoso* in which comedy and drama, the high born and the hoi polloi, the serious, and the silly, rub elbows. Mozart's control in balancing the disparate parts in his *drama giocoso Don Giovanni* K. 527 informs his control here.

The second movement, marked Andante cantabile (flowing and songlike), is often described as based on a courtly dance called a sarabande. But, as the musicologist Neal Zaslaw points out, it rewards close listening as the music "not only moves, it profoundly disturbs."

The Menuetto: Allegretto that follows would, in some of Mozart's youthful pieces, typically be a simple dance with a contrasting center. But, as in the second movement, its seemingly simple surface belies the musical sophistication that Mozart used without drawing attention to itself.

While the symphony now has the nickname *The Jupiter*, it was originally known as "*The symphony with the fugal finale*." (Fire that copywriter.) Mozart, as was common then, had been thoroughly trained in a musical method called species counterpoint, in which students write contrasting lines to a given line (called a *cantus firmus*), following a set of conventions to develop their control of musical techniques. While Mozart had used counterpoint throughout his career, he approached it with renewed interest after studying works of J.S. Bach and Handel in 1782. But that fact does not prepare anyone for what Mozart composed in this finale. He starts the movement with one of the most basic and popular cantus firmi, consisting of four long notes, and composes six – SIX – contrasting themes to it that he uses to construct the rest of the movement. But wait, there's more! (Hire that copywriter.) In the final section of the movement, the coda, Mozart combines five of those themes simultaneously with the cantus firmus in a virtuoso display of contrapuntal technique that fully engages the audience in a musical, rather than technical, moment.

That coda is an impressive capstone for an impressive symphony. And while we may never know why Mozart composed his final three symphonies or why he did not compose a 42nd, it is hard to imagine a more impressive capstone to a composer's symphonic output than "*The Jupiter*."

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