

# Program Notes and Bios

## Shostakovich's Fifth

Thursday, April 8, 2010 8 pm

Saturday, April 10, 2010 8 pm

Sunday, April 11, 2010 2:30 pm

Jones Hall

\*Christian Arming, conductor

James Ehnes, violin

**Tchaikovsky**

Romeo and Juliet, Overture-Fantasy

**Barber**

Violin Concerto, Opus 14

I. Allegro moderato

II. Andante

III. Presto in moto perpetuo

## INTERMISSION

**Shostakovich**

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Opus 47

I. Moderato

II. Allegretto

III. Largo

IV. Allegro non troppo

## ROMEO AND JULIET, OVERTURE-FANTASY

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

**Born:** May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia

**Died:** Nov 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia

**Work composed:** 1869-70; revised, 1880

**Recording:** Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon)

**Instrumentation:** piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, harp and strings

This passionate overture-fantasy was among Tchaikovsky's early orchestral works; the idea for such a piece was suggested by Russian composer Mily Balkakirev. In fact,

Balakirev kept pestering Tchaikovsky with his own ideas, even to the point of writing out suggested themes and offering critiques of the piece as it progressed. Nevertheless, Tchaikovsky felt indebted to Balakirev and dedicated the work to him.

Having completed a first version of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1869, Tchaikovsky revised it extensively the following year and made more small revisions again in 1880. Though the famed piece is now frequently performed, it was not well received by audiences at its first few hearings; concertgoers even hissed at its Vienna premiere.

Tchaikovsky set the work as a large sonata form, whose slow, prayerful introduction represents Friar Laurence in his cell. The turbulent opening theme depicts the warring Montagues and Capulets, while the very famous lyrical theme following this section portrays Romeo and Juliet in love. The development is taken up with further clashes between the Montagues and Capulets, followed by an expanded restatement of their themes and the love theme in the recapitulation, leading to a short, gloomy coda representing the death of the lovers.

## **VIOLIN CONCERTO, OPUS 14**

Samuel Barber

**Born:** Mar 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania

**Died:** Jan 23, 1981, New York, New York

**Work composed:** 1939-40

**Recording:** James Ehnes, violin; Bramwell Tobe conducting the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. CBC, Sm 500 series)

**Instrumentation:** pairs of flutes (second doubling piccolo), oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani, percussion, piano and strings

Where composers sought commissions from kings and princes in 18<sup>th</sup>-century European society, industrialists in the United States have often been sponsors of modern American masterpieces. Samuel Fels, the manufacturer of Fels Naptha soap, won credit for offering Samuel Barber his first major commission, according to the composer's biographers, Barbara Heymann and Nathan Broder.

The concerto was commissioned in 1939 for Fels' adopted son, Russian-born prodigy Iso Briselli. Contrary to popular stories surrounding the commission, Briselli was enthusiastic after receiving the first two movements. However, the third movement, which was a fast, perpetual-motion piece, submitted in midsummer 1940, did not meet with the same enthusiasm.

Briselli commented that its substance did not match the quality the first two movements and suggested some revisions that would expand and structurally define the third movement. Barber declined, and his association with Briselli came to an end. Violinist Albert Spalding, Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra gave the premiere on February 7, 1941.

The concerto is written in the best traditions that Barber always championed. It is lyrical, conservative in style and fastidiously orchestrated. The first movement is in a quite

standard sonata form, opening with a transparent, long-spun solo violin theme that various commentators have likened (perhaps inappropriately) to one by Mozart. When this has run its course, the clarinet takes up a puckish second theme, then the violin returns with a rhythmically active theme, marked by numerous bounding-bow passages. The first two themes are rigorously developed before the first returns in a major orchestral climax, signaling the recapitulation.

A smoothly rising oboe melody at the beginning of the slow movement imparts an oriental flavor to the music. As this gradually fades away, it is joined by a horn theme that will become important at the end of the movement. In the meantime, the solo violin dominates the freely designed central section of the movement in what amounts to the closest thing to a cadenza heard anywhere in the concerto. The solo violin then takes up the oboe and the horn themes, bringing the movement to a close.

The perpetual-motion finale is not only a *tour de force* for the solo violin, but for the orchestra as well. It is a fleet, light-footed movement cast in a rondo form, and while much of its dazzling character is meant to show off the solo violin, the challenges to orchestra members are equally formidable.

## **SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN D MINOR, OPUS 47**

Dmitri Shostakovich

**Born:** Sep 25, 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia

**Died:** Aug 9, 1975, Moscow, USSR

**Work composed:** 1937

**Recording:** Christoph Eschenbach conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra (Ondine)

**Instrumentation:** piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, bells, xylophone, two harps, celesta, piano and strings

Themes associated with the simplistic, propagandistic style of Soviet realism, satirical frivolity, bitter irony, horrifying agony, human protest and, finally, a fragile withdrawal of the human spirit are blended into Dmitri Shostakovich's huge symphonic legacy. At various times, his 15 symphonies have been censored, dismissed and, more recently, admired as the most important body of symphonies since those of Gustav Mahler at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This symphony is the most popular of the 15 works, and it was of considerable political significance to Shostakovich's career. It restored the composer's reputation to a position of political favor, following official public denunciation of his sensationalistic opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, the previous year. The Fifth Symphony was received with a tumultuous, 30-minute ovation a year later, and it satisfied official Soviet demands for music composed in a simple idiom with an appeal to a mass audience. It also won the praiseworthy slogan, "A Soviet artist's reply to just criticism," from a critic attending an early performance of the work.

In recent years, particularly, there has been considerable debate whether the Fifth Symphony is a sincere expression of the "heroic classicism" proposed by Soviet realist movement, or whether its strong vein of satire and pompous chest-beating were examples of Shostakovich secretly thumbing his nose at Stalinist esthetics. In the opening movement, Shostakovich ingeniously superimposed a dramatic element upon the traditional symphonic sonata-form plan. What sounds like a long, moody slow introduction is actually the exposition of all the main themes. After briefly chasing itself in a canonic imitation, the jagged opening string theme spins itself out in several related ideas that are strategically brought back at important junctures toward the end of the movement. A lyrical second theme, also placed high in the violins, has a similar profile to the opening theme. It is soon intertwined with an ominous, twisting, serpent-like theme that brings the exposition to a close.

Suddenly, the piano (which Shostakovich incorporated as one of the orchestral tone colors), takes hold of this theme. The pace accelerates and the whole orchestra is caught up in a snarling, combative development of many of the themes, punctuated by a rhythmic pattern in the snare drum and xylophone that gives the impression of machine guns being fired. This entire section comes to a long, thrilling climax in one of the most famous examples of a melody played in unison by most of the orchestra. With its energy totally spent, the movement ends in a quiet and abbreviated restatement of its two main themes, decorated by a delicious-sounding celesta solo in its closing measures.

Sharp, biting satire dominates the second-movement Scherzo, with its clipped staccato bow strokes bouncing off the string section, mocking trills in the woodwinds and blatant refrains from the horns and trumpets. In a typical contrast of tone colors and a reduced volume level, the central trio section brings mincing solos from the violin and flute.

Brass instruments and the noisiest percussion are excised from the slow, mournful third movement, which features a string ensemble richly subdivided into eight parts. Its three sections build from deceptively simple themes heard in the violins, flute and oboe, to intense restatements of them in a carefully prepared climax. The finale is again blatant and facile, and it is dominated by one of Shostakovich's favorite ra-ta-tat-tat marching rhythms. In the center, the music accelerates to the point of caricature, but then broadens during a peaceful interlude before concluding in a pompous coda.

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## **Musician Biographies**

### **Christian Arming, conductor**

Christian Arming, 38, one of Austria's most sought after conductors, is highly successful both in the symphonic and operatic fields. Born in Vienna, he studied at the city's University of Music and Performing Arts.

At age 24, Arming was appointed chief conductor of the Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra in Ostrava, the youngest in the Czech Republic's history. He held the position until the end of the 2001/2002 season. From 2001 to 2004, he was chief conductor of the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra and music director of the Lucerne Theatre, where he conducted productions of *Carmen*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *Bählamms Fest*, *La bohème*, *Un ballo in maschera* and *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Since 2003, he has been chief conductor of New Japan Philharmonic.

Close collaboration with Seiji Ozawa from 1992 to 1998 took Arming to Tanglewood, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and to Tokyo and New Japan Philharmonic. In 2003, he worked with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra at the opening concert of the Prague Spring International Music Festival, the second youngest conductor in the Festival's history. A return invitation followed in 2008. In addition to conducting the Camerata Salzburg, the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, the National Orchestra of the Capitole de Toulouse and the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, he has made guest appearances with more than 50 orchestras worldwide. He debuts with the Houston Symphony with these performances.

Arming has conducted new productions of *The Turn of the Screw* and *Der Rosenkavalier* in Triest, *La bohème*, *Salome* and *Elektra* in Verona; *Prince Igor* in Strasbourg; a revival production of *Der fliegende Holländer*, as well as *Don Giovanni* and *Jenufa* at the Frankfurt Opera. He also conducted new productions of *Leonore*, *Jeanne D'Arc*, *Lohengrin* and *Die Fledermaus*. Numerous recordings with oeuvres of Brahms, Beethoven, Mahler and Janáček are on sale.

Christian Arming lives with his wife, actress Katharina Arming, and their two children in Vienna.

## **James Ehnes, violin**

Grammy<sup>®</sup>, Gramophone and JUNO award-winning violinist James Ehnes is widely considered one of classical music's biggest names. He has performed with renowned conductors and leading orchestras throughout Europe, Asia, the United States and Canada. Recitals and festivals have taken him around the world. As a chamber musician, he has collaborated with such artists as Jan Vogler, Louis Lortie, Leif Ove Andsnes and Yo-Yo Ma.

A prolific recording artist, Ehnes has added to his impressive discography with a re-recording of the Paganini *Caprices* (ONYX); he first recorded *Caprices* in 1995 for Telarc. His JUNO award-winning release of *Homage*, a CD/DVD set featuring performances on 12 of the greatest violins and violas ever made, all belonging to the Fulton Collection, continues to garner exceptional reviews.

In 2006, Ehnes celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mozart's birth with the release of the composer's complete oeuvre for solo violin and orchestra. The recording features an ensemble of extraordinary musicians directed by Ehnes (CBC Records).

Born in 1976 in Manitoba, Canada, Ehnes began violin studies at age 4. At 13, he made his orchestral solo debut with the Montréal Symphony Orchestra. He studied at the Meadowmount School of Music and The Juilliard School where he won the Peter Mennin Prize for Outstanding Achievement and Leadership in Music. He gained national recognition as winner of the 1987 Grand Prize in Strings at the Canadian Music Competition. The following year, he won First Prize in Strings at the Canadian Music Festival, the youngest musician ever to do so. In 2005, he won an Avery Fisher Career Grant and two years later, he became the youngest person ever elected as a Fellow to the Royal Society of Canada.

James Ehnes plays the 1715 "Marsick" Stradivarius and gratefully acknowledges its extended loan from the Fulton Collection.