

Reno Chamber Orchestra
"Feed the Camel" Concert – August 28, 2024
Program Notes by Chris Morrison

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*, K. 492
(1786, 4 minutes)

No reminder is really needed of the unique stature of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the history of Western music. His vast catalog of compositions – over 600 of them, including some seventeen masses, fifty symphonies, twenty piano concertos, twenty-three string quartets, and much more – epitomizes the German-Austrian Classical style. Of the fifteen operas he composed, among the most popular is *The Marriage of Figaro*. Set in Spain at the castle of Count Almaviva, *The Marriage of Figaro* tells the tangled story of the Count's valet and former barber, Figaro, who is to marry the Countess's maid, Susanna. But the Count also wishes to seduce Susanna, while the Countess is pursued by the page Cherubino. The original play by Beaumarchais, which King Louis XIV had denounced as "detestable" and Napoleon had seen as "the revolution already in action," had been banned in many places but nevertheless became quite popular. Mozart loved it, and, in his first collaboration with his great librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, created his opera based on it in just six weeks. As was not atypical for him, Mozart composed the opera's Overture just hours before its premiere. Its quiet bustling opening suddenly erupts in high spirits, the joyful momentum carrying through to the very end.

Juan Crisóstomo Arriaga: Symphony in D major, fourth movement
(1824, 6 minutes)

Juan Crisóstomo Arriaga was at one time nicknamed "the Spanish Mozart," although, as a composer from the Basque country who became an important symbol for Basque nationalism, that nickname has been changed by many to "The Basque Mozart." Both Arriaga and Mozart were noted child prodigies who died young. They also shared January 27 birthdays, fifty years apart. In 1821, after showing great talent as a youth, Arriaga went to Paris to continue his studies at the Paris Conservatoire. He made a considerable impression on his teachers, and by age eighteen had become an assistant professor at the Conservatoire. Sadly, he died ten days before his twentieth birthday of a combination of tuberculosis and exhaustion. Despite such a short life, Arriaga still managed to produce a number of compositions, including his one and only symphony, composed when he was eighteen. For many years the work was forgotten. It seems only to have won its first performance in 1888, decades after the composer's death, and it only appeared in published form, with cuts and changes, in 1933. An agitated theme, in a minor key, opens the fourth movement with dramatic flourishes from the orchestra. A more playful, yet subdued, second idea brings back the major key. Contrapuntal exchanges between the string choirs lead to a return of the opening theme. After a repeat of the second theme, a sequence of closing

gestures bring the work to a powerful, major key finish.

Victor Herbert: Serenade, Op. 12
(1884, 28 minutes)

While Victor Herbert was a renowned conductor and cello virtuoso, he is largely remembered nowadays for his many successful Broadway operettas – he wrote forty-three of them, including such notable works as *Babes in Toyland* and *Naughty Marietta*. Along with the operettas, he wrote music in a variety of other genres, including over thirty works for orchestra. The Serenade for string orchestra was composed in Germany but given its very well-received premiere, conducted by Herbert himself, in New York City on December 1, 1888.

Marked *Aufzug* – literally “pulling up,” in the sense of a curtain rising, but also a reference to the kind of march one might hear at a parade – the first movement begins with a rhythmic theme that has a bit of a swagger. A contrasting theme, flowing and genial, is heard next. The opening theme returns, even more assertively, to round out the movement. The second movement Polonaise is graceful and light in texture. A repeating rhythm from the basses introduces the flowing, rather more darkly-colored second theme, after which the opening theme makes a return.

The Serenade's longest movement is the third, a *Liebes-Szene* or Love Scene. It begins placidly, but the extended theme that follows has more than a hint of passion and longing in it. This twilit music becomes more impassioned, then quiets again in the movement's final moments. The playful swing of the brief fourth movement Canzonetta provides a nice contrast. *Pizzicati*, or plucked notes, introduce the main theme of the Finale. A warm second theme has an almost valedictory flavor. Some of the rhythmic quality of the first movement is heard again here, as the music marches its way to a jovial conclusion.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: Flight of the Bumblebee
(1899-1900, 2 minutes)

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was a famous composer and teacher, as well as a leading light in the “Mighty Five” of Russian nationalist composers. He was also fascinated with folklore and exoticism, evident in many of his works like the famous symphonic suite *Scheherazade* as well as his fifteen operas. One of those operas, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, is the original source of two of the most famous minutes in music, *The Flight of the Bumblebee*. In the opera, the Tsar has gone off to war. In the meantime, back home, his wife the Tsaritsa has given birth to a son. In an act of betrayal, the Tsaritsa and her son, named Gvidon, have been put into a barrel and thrown into the sea. They land on the island of Buyan, where Gvidon is hailed as its Prince. At one point, Gvidon saves a swan from being killed, and in return this Swan-Bird shares its magical powers with him. When Gvidon becomes anxious to re-connect with his

father the Tsar, the Swan-Bird turns Gvidon into a bumblebee, allowing him to fly over the sea to visit him. His buzzing is depicted in Rimsky-Korsakov's famous music.

**Felix Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave)*, Op. 26
(1830, 11 minutes)**

As part of a European tour that occupied him for some three years, in 1830 Mendelssohn visited Scotland. While traveling there with his friend Karl Klingemann, the twenty-one-year-old Mendelssohn sent a postcard to his family from the Isle of Mull, in the Hebrides archipelago off Scotland's west coast. Written on the postcard was the opening phrase of what became the overture *The Hebrides*, along with a note in which Mendelssohn said, "In order to make you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, I send you the following, which came into my head there." The Overture has two main themes, both evocative of the movement of the sea. The first, the one that Mendelssohn wrote on the postcard, is an undulating idea heard first in the violas, cellos, and bassoons. It emerges from the depths of the orchestra and, as it repeats, moves to the violins and gains power. The second theme, a flowing idea introduced by the cellos and bassoons, was called "the greatest melody Mendelssohn ever wrote" by musicologist Sir Donald Francis Tovey. Dramatic crescendos and *sforzandi* evoke the crashing of waves against rocks. The opening theme later takes on a more martial tone, then is shortened into brief staccato statements passed around the orchestra, before the second theme emerges peacefully in the clarinet. That same instrument takes up the opening theme, as does the flute, which closes the Overture accompanied by *pizzicati* from the strings.

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Serenade No. 13 in G major, K. 525 "Eine kleine Nachtmusik," first movement
(1787, 6 minutes)**

The serenade, a sequence of several short, tuneful movements often enlivened by dance rhythms, was a common musical form during the eighteenth century. Most composers of the day supplemented their incomes by writing these lighthearted works, which often accompanied civic functions, dinners, wedding and holiday parties, and other celebrations. Mozart wrote quite a few of these for the aristocracy and the court in his hometown of Salzburg. But he hadn't written a serenade in several years when he produced his last such composition, "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" (A Little Serenade), in July and August of 1787. No one knows for certain why he wrote this work, which has gone on to become one of the most famous of classical compositions. Its opening gesture, known to music fans around the world, is just one of several memorable melodies that follow in close sequence in the lively and charming first movement.

**Antonio Vivaldi: *Summer from The Four Seasons*
(c. 1723, 10 minutes)**

Antonio Vivaldi is remembered as one of the fathers of instrumental music and the master of the concerto for soloist(s) and orchestra – of which he wrote over 550, including some 240 for the violin. The four concertos known collectively as *The Four Seasons* (Le quattro stagioni) are among music's enduring masterpieces. Each of *The Four Seasons* has a short poem, a sonnet, associated with it, possibly written by Vivaldi himself, describing the scenes and events of each movement. At first, the second concerto, *Summer* (L'estate, in G minor), evokes the relentless heat of midyear. But soon bird songs are heard, and cool winds relieve the oppressive heat for a time. The violin soloist is called on for a number of imitations – cuckoos, turtledoves, breezes and rustling winds. Neighbors made impatient by the heat argue, and a storm threatens to break. Towards the end of the movement, a lonely violin solo describes a shepherd's fear of an impending storm. That fear also comes out in the orchestral tremolos of the second movement. The shepherd tries to sleep through his fear, but flies and gnats, heard in repeated notes by the orchestra under the solo violin, pester him. The storm breaks out vividly in the third movement, with frenzied outbursts from the violin and orchestra – darting violin scales evoke lightning, while the cellos and basses portray thunder.

**Gioacchino Rossini: Overture to *La Cenerentola*
(1816-17, 8 minutes)**

The operas of Gioacchino Rossini remain among the most beloved in the repertoire. By the time Rossini turned twenty, works like *The Italian Woman in Algiers* had made him Italy's most famous composer. From 1815 to 1822 he wrote an amazing nineteen operas, including *Otello*, *The Barber of Seville*, and *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella). Based on the famous story of Cinderella as originally told by Charles Perrault in his story *Cendrillon* of 1697, *La Cenerentola* was written quickly, in a little over three weeks. As he often did, Rossini actually borrowed the opera's overture from an earlier work, in this case the 1816 opera *La gazetta*. A lyrical opening in the low strings is contrasted with interjected brass fanfares and woodwind figures. Rushing strings introduce a note of tension before sprightly faster music begins. Then the clarinet introduces a new theme. The strings take up another figure, which repeats several times, getting louder with each repetition, in what came to be known as a "Rossini crescendo." The faster melodies parade past again, varied in orchestration this time. The crescendo section returns before a fast paced coda brings the work to an exciting close.