

Program Notes



Missy Mazzoli
(b. 1980)

Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)

Composed 2014, Revised 2016

Missy Mazzoli has made an incredible name for herself in a very short time in the classical music world. She was recently described by *Time Out New York* as “Brooklyn’s post-millennial Mozart.” This season is her first as the Chicago Symphony’s composer-in-residence, a title that has led to the identification of some of the most successful artists of the 20th and 21st centuries: John Corigliano, Osvaldo Golijov, and most recently, names familiar to fans of the PSO such as Mason Bates and Anna Clyne.

Mazzoli’s style is one of haunted beauty, and we hear familiar sounds used in strikingly unfamiliar ways. In listening to *Sinfonia*, I am immediately taken by the immensity of the sonic space that Mazzoli creates. The composer herself provides the following note:

Sinfonia is music in the shape of a solar system, a collection of rococo loops that twist around each other within a larger orbit. The word “sinfonia” refers to baroque works for chamber orchestra but also to the old Italian term for a hurdy-gurdy, a medieval stringed instrument with constant, wheezing drones that are cranked out under melodies played on an attached keyboard. It’s a piece that churns and roils, that inches close to the listener only to leap away at breakneck speed, in the process transforming the ensemble into a makeshift hurdy-gurdy, flung recklessly into space.

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Lowell Liebermann

(b. 1961)

Concerto for Flute and Orchestra, Op. 39

Composed 1992

Like Missy Mazzoli, Lowell Liebermann is also a New-York based composer, and both currently serve on the faculty at the Mannes School of Music. Liebermann has composed extensively for symphony and for opera—and for his primary instrument, the piano. This flute concerto, however, is the piece for which he has perhaps become best known. Famously, the work was commissioned by Sir James Galway.

Galway originally asked for Liebermann's flute sonata to be orchestrated by the composer. Liebermann would have agreed, but he posed to Galway that perhaps a new concerto would be a more fulfilling project. Now, the work is firmly in the repertoire and has been recorded over 20 times. We are lucky today to have Chelsea Knox return to the PSO stage to perform it.

The piece itself is traditional in its three-movement structure, but no take on sonata form. Instead, the first movement revolves around single thematic ideas paired with minimalist but forceful ostinato and interjection from the orchestra. Prokofiev comes to mind. The middle section of the movement adopts a five-variation structure atop a formal set of chaconne variations using the main theme, before the complexity diminishes, returning us to the feeling of the opening.

The middle movement, *Adagio*, is lyrical and expressive—layered over an off-beat accompaniment. The finale fulfills its closing duties through an agile rondo form that highlights the absolute virtuosic abilities of the soloist.

Antonín Dvořák

(1841-1904)

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, Op. 88, B. 163

Composed 1889

Why does the eighth symphony of Dvořák hold such a special place for orchestras? The seventh is thought of as the most profound of his nine symphonies, and the “New World” is famous for its musical cross-pollination. In reading a short stack of program notes from scholars on the eighth to prepare for this writing, I found that the words used most to identify the eighth symphony are “folk” and “Slavic.” Over and over again we are told that the Czechs, and especially Dvořák, relied on their national history and culture to produce the music that has become beloved the world over. Missing is an exploration, or really even an explanation, of what those folk elements might be, how they are incorporated musically, and how we can identify them as listener. So, let’s explore.

In the case of the Czech culture, there exists a distinct political history that runs alongside its cultural one. Exactly 400 years ago, Germanic influence overtook the regions of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia. German became the official language and only the peasants retained the Czech (Bohemian) language. For two hundred years, this remained the case—until the industrial revolution drove the peasants and farmers towards the cities. It was at this time, in the early 19th century, that artists began to reinvest in the preservation of a uniquely Czech culture.

To relate Czech “folk” influence, the creators turned to the spoken language and to the dances of the common people. The *furiant* dance is Czech and often used by the nation’s symphonic composers. In addition, and a surprise to me, the “oom-pah” *polka* is the other dance whose origins are Czech.

The *furiant* is distinctive because of its hallmark opposing beat structures. While the overarching rhythmic pattern is based in a triple meter, the *furiant* will infuse duple groupings that serve to create an intentional instability and therefore, a sense of spontaneity in the music. The *polka* is much more

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straightforward. Czech *Polkas* are framed in a 2/4 time, with emphasis placed on the primary beat of each gesture.

These rhythmic groupings and structures are uniquely Czech and help to form the folk music tendencies. They are generated from the stress patterns within the language, which emphasize the first syllable of every word, followed by an alternating pattern of stress on subsequent syllables. Therefore, the *polka* can be seen as the simplest derivative of this structure. ***Oom-pah, Oom-pah***: a musical representation of two-syllable words with the stress falling on the first syllable of each. The *furiant* is the evolved version—expanding the mirroring of language to include multi-syllable formations that would have additional stresses within each word. This allows for the mixed-meter time-signatures, for which composers like Smetana and Dvořák are known.

I would also argue that simplicity of orchestration is a hallmark of this folk style. In the eighth symphony, this manifests in certain characteristic ways: a single soloist or section is used for many main melodic lines (you will hear cellos and a solo flute open the symphony in this manner); block usage of the winds, the strings and the brass as separate units of color; limited use of percussion instruments; and a lack of intricate counterpoint. These types of musical decisions can lead to a feeling of rusticity around the music.

Dvořák's eighth is not a test of virtuosity, nor of ambition. It simply is. So today, perhaps consider how you respond to a symphony of this type—that aims to please rather than to challenge.

~By John Devlin

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