Eastman Philharmonia

Neil Varon and Austin Chanu, conductors

Monday, November 14, 2022
Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre
7:30 PM

~ PROGRAM ~
Eastman Philharmonia
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A Midsummer Night's Dream: Overture (1827)
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
12'
Austin Chanu, conductor

The Oak (1943)
Florence Price (1887-1953)
15'
Austin Chanu, conductor

~ INTERMISSION ~

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, op. 73 (1877)
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
43'
I. Allegro non troppo
II. Adagio non troppo
III. Allegretto grazioso (Quasi andantino)
IV. Allegro con spirito
~ PROGRAM NOTES ~

**A Midsummer Night's Dream: Overture**

Mendelssohn’s overture to Shakespeare’s play dates 1826, when Mendelssohn was 17 and he and his sister Fanny first became acquainted with the brilliant Romantic German translation of Shakespeare by August Wilhelm Schlegel. Germans took to Schlegel’s translation so strongly that they spoke of “unser Shakespeare” (“our Shakespeare”), as if the Bard had written in German. Although the prodigious siblings had composed regularly during their youth, the overture served as Felix’s public debut, garnering for him recognition as a musical genius. The work immediately became spectacularly popular and was performed repeatedly throughout northern Europe.

Years later, in a letter to his publisher, Mendelssohn commented that the sequence of ideas in the overture follows the play closely: “We hear first the fairy music whispering on the violins, later we hear the bray of Bottom, he with the ass’s head, and also Bottom’s peasant dance towards the end. At the end, after everything has been satisfactorily concluded, and the principal players have joyously left the stage, the elves follow them, bless the house and vanish with the dawn. Thus the play ends, and my overture as well.”

Sixteen years later, in 1842, Mendelssohn was invited by Frederick William IV, King of Prussia, to compose incidental music for a Berlin production of *Ein Sommernachtstraum*. By using themes from the overture as a basis for the later sections, as well as recapturing the airy style of the earlier orchestra, Mendelssohn was able to make the music sound like a seamless whole. The eerie effect of the introduction into fairyland was such a touch of brilliance that subsequent composers have shamelessly borrowed it — note the opening measures of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*.

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**The Oak**

Florence B. Price was a musical pioneer of her time - she was one of the first Black students to graduate from the New England Conservatory of Music and the first Black woman to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra. Her catalogue includes three symphonies, with a fourth still lost, two violin concertos, a piano concerto, multiple orchestral tone poems, and a wide variety of chamber music.

Price’s *The Oak* was an unknown composition until its undated manuscript was discovered in the Sibley Library at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY in the late 1990s. It is exciting to have the first performance of this work at Eastman occur during the end of our centennial celebration. After the manuscript was discovered, it was moved to the Price Archives at the University of Arkansas, where scholars determined that *The Oak* had been composed in 1943. Price, who died in 1953, was never able to hear the work performed. The first documented performance of *The Oak* took place on March 25, 2000 with the Women’s Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Apo Hsu, in San Francisco and was recorded by the same ensemble a year later. The score was just recently, in 2019, published by G. Schirmer and has been programmed more frequently especially since Price’s renaissance in the past few years.

Price’s *The Oak* is one of her darkest works, departing from her overt hymnal vernacular that is present in her symphonies and violin concerti. In this
piece, there are moments where her spiritual influences shine through, but her compositional language is changing at this point in her career. *The Oak* explores a number of different moods and atmospheres, from mysterious to more aggressive and irritated. It begins with an incredibly soft yet ominous melodic fragment presented in the cellos and basses that reappears throughout the entire composition. This dark thematic opening is balanced out by soaring string melodies and faster paced passages within the entire orchestra. The work balances between light and dark motifs.

There is no research or writings from Price about the title, *The Oak*, so its significance is left to speculation. At this time in her career, Price was struggling to get her music performed as she was beginning to mature in her language and compositional approach, and this work is a major shift in Price's approach to harmony, structure, and melodic writing.

-Austin Chanu

**Symphony No. 2 in D Major, op. 73**

Less than a year after the successful premiere of Johannes Brahms' First Symphony on November 4, 1876, the composer left Vienna to spend the summer at the lakeside town of Pörtschach on Lake Wörth in southern Austria. There, in the beauty and quiet of the countryside, Brahms completed his Second Symphony. Pörtschach was to be a productive place for Brahms; over the course of three summers there he wrote several important works, including his Violin Concerto. In a letter to critic Eduard Hanslick, a lifelong Brahms supporter, Brahms wrote, “The melodies fly so thick here that you have to be careful not to step on one.”

Unlike the First Symphony, which took Brahms over 20 years to complete, work on the Second Symphony went smoothly, and Brahms finished it in just four months. Brahms felt so good about his progress that he joked with his publisher, “The new symphony is so melancholy that you won’t stand it. I have never written anything so sad … the score must appear with a black border.” In a different letter, Brahms self-mockingly observed, “Whether I have a pretty symphony I don’t know; I must ask clever people sometime.” As Brahms composed, he shared his work-in-progress with lifelong friend Clara Schumann. “Johannes came this evening and played me the first movement of his Second Symphony in D major, which greatly delighted me,” Schumann noted in her diary in October 1877. “I find it in invention more significant than the first movement of the First Symphony … I also heard a part of the last movement and am quite overjoyed with it. With this symphony he will have a more telling success with the public as well as he did with the First, much as musicians are captivated by the latter through its inspiration and wonderful working-out.”

The Symphony No. 2 is often described as the cheerful alter ego to the solemn melancholy of Brahms' First Symphony. No. 2 unfolds seamlessly, almost inevitably, without calling obvious attention to the elegant complexity of Brahms' compositional style. Brahms uses the lilting notes of the *Allegro non troppo* as a common link throughout all four movements, where they are repeated, reversed, and otherwise, in Schumann's words, “wonderfully worked-out.” In the extended coda, Brahms introduces the trombones and tubas casting a tiny shadow over the sunny mood. The *Adagio non troppo*’s lyrical cello melody also hints at the wistful melancholy that inhabits so much of Brahms' music. The *Allegretto grazioso* is remarkably gentle, with little of the joking quality for which scherzos are named, and the infectious joy of the *Allegro con spirito* expands on the first movement's amiable mood, so much so that at the Vienna premiere on December 30, 1877, the audience demanded an encore. - © 2019 Elizabeth Schwartz

**Upcoming Concerts**

Events are free unless otherwise noted.

Thursday, November 17

Eastman Jazz Workshop Ensemble
Andrew Watkins, director
Kilbourn Hall • 7:30PM

Friday, November 18

Eastman School Symphony Orchestra
Music of Wagner, Grieg, Rossini, and Schumann
Neil Varon, conductor
Featuring Megan Brilleslyper, mezzo-soprano
Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre • 7:30PM

Tuesday, November 29

Eastman Jazz Ensemble
Christine Jensen, director
Kilbourn Hall • 7:30PM

Friday, December 2

Eastman School Symphony Orchestra & Eastman-Rochester Chorus
Johannes Brahms: *A German Requiem*
William Weinert, conductor
Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre • 7:30PM

We acknowledge with respect the Seneca Nation, known as the “Great Hill People” and “Keepers of the Western Door” of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. We take this opportunity to thank the people whose ancestral lands the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester currently occupies in Rochester, New York.

Information about upcoming Eastman concerts and events can be found at: www.esm.rochester.edu/calendar

Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre fire exits are located along the right and left sides, and at the back of the hall on each level. In the event of an emergency, you will be notified by the stage manager. If notified, please move in a calm and orderly fashion to the nearest exit.

Restrooms are located on each level of Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre. Our ushers will be happy to direct you to them.

Please note: The use of unauthorized photographic and recording equipment is not allowed in this building. We reserve the right to ask anyone disrupting a performance to leave the hall.

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