Romantic Journeys
By René Spencer Saller

Despite their different nationalities, Franck, Schumann, and Dvořák were all proponents of musical Romanticism, the dominant Western musical idiom from approximately 1820 to 1910. More than merely a musical style, Romanticism was the Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age. From the poetry of Goethe and Wordsworth, to the novels of Scott and Chateaubriand, to the paintings of Delacroix and Constable, the Romantics found inspiration across disciplines, unconstrained by arbitrary genre boundaries. Gradually, and then all at once, the subjective consciousness eclipsed Enlightenment-era reason. Rejecting rationalism meant embracing the fantastic, the terrifying, the sublime. It meant turning inward to find the infinite.

For most of his life, the Belgian-born French composer César Franck was known primarily as a brilliant organist and an influential teacher, but behind his rather ordinary exterior was a rigorous and inventive composer. He reached his creative peak late in life, galvanized by the thrilling possibilities of Wagnerian chromaticism. Like his countryman Hector Berlioz, Franck gravitated to the symphonic poem: a freestanding orchestral work based on a literary or descriptive program. Inspired by a German poem, Franck's *Le Chasseur maudit* ("The Accursed Huntsman") dissolves the natural/supernatural divide as ghouls and demons chase a sinful count across a dark and wild landscape.

Robert Schumann suffered from bipolar disorder, and his Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54, encompasses his extreme highs and lows, along with every nuance in between. The concerto isn't strictly programmatic, but it is, like most of his work, intensely autobiographical. Yet individual self-expression isn't the point: The concerto is all about relationships, connecting the soloist to the orchestra, the piano to the oboe, the clarinet to the strings.

Antonín Dvořák wrote several significant symphonic poems, and even his nominally absolute music often had distinctly programmatic elements. His Eighth Symphony revels in the pleasures and mysteries of the natural world. Dvořák composed it at his beloved country retreat, where he hiked, listened to the birds, felt the sun and wind on his skin. Full of folk tunes and feeling, the symphony is suffused with the vitality of the human animal in communion with nature.

Black Sabbath
Completed in 1882, when Franck was 59 years old, *Le Chasseur maudit* was inspired by the ballad *Der wilde Jäger (The Wild Hunter),* by the German poet Gottfried August Bürger. The story, a classic cautionary tale, involves a wicked count who defies the Sabbath to go hunting, thereby losing his immortal soul. The music follows the plot quite closely, and although the symphonic poem is cast in a single concise movement, Franck organized it in four clearly delineated sections: "The Peaceful Sunday Landscape," "The Hunt," "The Curse," and "The Demons' Chase."

Franck also supplied a detailed preface that further explains his symphonic storytelling: "It was Sunday morning; from afar sounded the joyous ringing of bells and the glad songs of the people." In this section the call of the huntsman's horn clashes with lyrical cellos and church bells. As the hunt gallops onward, the music grows increasingly frenzied and infernal: "The chase dashes through cornfields, brakes and meadows. Stop, Count, I pray! Hear the pious songs! No! And the horsemen rush onward like the whirlwind." Shivering strings and queasy woodwinds lead up to an ominous commandment blared by the trombones: "Suddenly the Count is alone; his horse will go no farther; he blows his horn, but his horn no longer sounds.... A lugubrious, implacable voice curses him. 'Sacrilege!' it says. 'Thou shalt be forever hunted through Hell.'" Finally, in the nightmarish conclusion, the music reaches its staggering G minor apotheosis: "The flames dart from everywhere. The Count, maddened by terror, flees, faster and faster, pursued by a pack of devils."

A Tricky Hybrid

Since at least 1827, Robert Schumann had been trying, and failing, to write a piano concerto. In 1839, the year before their marriage, he wrote to Clara Wieck about his creative struggle: "Concerning concertos, I've already said to you they are hybrids of symphony, concerto, and big sonata. I see that I can't write a concerto for virtuosi and have to think of something else." If he sounds testy, imagine the pressure he must have been getting from his 19-year-old fiancée, who just happened to be the greatest piano virtuosa alive.

In 1841, he gave his bride the *Fantasie* in A minor for piano and orchestra. Clara was delighted with the single-movement work, remarking in their marriage diary that "the piano is most skillfully interwoven with the orchestra; it is impossible to think of one without the other." But after two private performances, the *Fantasie* foundered. Unable to sell it to a publisher, Schumann put it aside and focused on chamber music while his depression worsened.

From Fantasie to Concerto

At the end of 1844, a particularly wretched year, the Schumann clan moved to Dresden, and Robert returned to the concerto challenge. This time he had a plan. After some revisions, the *Fantasie* became the first movement of a concerto. In 1845 he added an intermezzo and a finale. Taken together, the three movements fulfill a promise he had made in an essay published six years earlier: "We must await the genius who will show us in a newer and more brilliant way how orchestra and piano may be combined, how the soloist, dominant at the keyboard, may unfold the wealth of his instrument and his art, while the orchestra, no longer a mere spectator, may interweave its manifold facets into the scene." He was that genius, of course, and, masculine pronoun notwithstanding, Clara was the soloist at the Dresden premiere on December 4, 1845.

Clara did more than perform the work over and over again until her death, a half-century later. She is encoded into its DNA. Take the lambent, yearning main theme,

first sung by the oboe. As Michael Steinberg explained, "Bearing in mind that what we call B-natural the Germans call H, you can see that the first four notes of the oboe theme could be taken to spell Chiara, or CHiArA, using those letters that have musical counterparts (C/B/A/A) in this Italian version of Clara's name...."

Despite being composed over four turbulent years, the concerto is a miracle of coherence. Schumann spun out a wealth of melodies for his second and third movements by reconfiguring the first movement's main theme. The lustrous intermezzo shows off the skills he had honed during his chamber-music sabbatical. The finale contains some blazing bravura passages, certainly, but they're not the central concern. Whether forging new melodic paths or supporting other instruments, the piano is always essential, but that doesn't make it most important. Listen to the back-and-forth of the winds and the piano in the opening movement. Listen to the fervent cello-piano pairing in the intermezzo's second theme. Listen to how the opposing rhythms of two- and three-beat patterns—hemiola, the music-nerds call it—enliven the finale. This concerto shines because of its relationships.

A Bohemian Rhapsody

Unlike his other symphonies and the prevailing temper of his time, Antonín Dvořák's Symphony No. 8 is hopeful and pastoral. He wrote the Eighth in 1889, when he was in his late 40s, in a mere two and a half months, while staying at his summer home at Vysoká, in southern Bohemia. The occasion was a happy one: Having just been admitted to Prague Academy, he dedicated the work to "the Bohemian Academy of Emperor Franz Joseph for the Encouragement of Arts and Literature, in thanks for my election."

The symphony is structured according to the traditional four-movement format, but its rich array of thematic variation and the thorough development of each movement make it anything but predictable. It honors the folk music of Dvořák's beloved homeland, and it strongly evokes the bucolic splendor of his immediate surroundings, but it also displays his innovative approach to harmony and orchestral color while alluding to Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 ("Pastorale") and Brahms's Symphony No. 2. With his Eighth Symphony, Dvořák explained, he hoped to create something that was "different from the other symphonies, with individual thoughts worked out in a new way." He wanted to circumvent the "usual, universally applied and recognized forms" and create his own harmonic language.

Shortly after its 1890 premiere in Prague, Dvořák conducted the symphony in London, where it was rapturously received. "The concert came off wonderfully, perhaps more so than at any time in the past," he wrote to a friend. "After the first movement there was universal applause, after the second it was even louder, after the third it was so thunderous that I had to turn round several times and thank the audience, but, after the finale, the applause was tempestuous—from the audience in the auditorium, in the galleries, from the orchestra itself, and from the people sitting behind it by the organ—they all clapped so hard, it was almost unbearable. I was called back to the concert podium several times—in short, it was all so wonderful

and sincere, just like it is at premieres at home in Prague."

Movement by Movement

In the upbeat and spirited first movement, Bohemian folk tunes weave and wind through birdsong, and brass fanfares vie with hunting horn calls. Cellos, bassoons, and trombones circle in a G minor chorale before a lyrical solo flute introduces the symphony's dominant key, G major. Rich in instrumental color, the tranquil Adagio begins in a slightly melancholy minor key and then works its way to sunny C major. The third movement starts with a dulcet waltz, transitions to a livelier, folk-inspired dance, and culminates in a breathtakingly speedy coda. The finale is a wide-ranging and dramatic series of variations on a central theme. A cheerful Czech revision of Beethoven and Brahms, it fulfills the composer's goal of presenting symphonic ideas in an original way, leaping from slow to fast, from noisy to soft, from major to minor. The movement begins and ends with jubilant brass bursts, a triumphal close to Dvořák's happiest symphony.

Copyright 2016 René Spencer Saller