



Masterworks Series

Symphony in the Spotlight | November 19th, 20th and 21st

Program Notes by Anna Norris

HAYDN Symphony No. 96 in D major “Miracle” Hob. I:96

Franz Joseph Haydn had bad luck with leaving jobs. His very first period of musical employment, as a chorister at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, ended abruptly with a caning and a shove out the door after the composer cut off a colleague's pigtail as a joke. His next job, as the music director of an orchestra in the household of a wealthy Count, disappeared into thin air when the Count was forced to face up to being not, in fact, quite wealthy enough for *that* kind of expenditure. His subsequent position, in the same role for the much richer Esterházy family, lasted for much longer-- but they, too, eventually moved to cut costs, drastically reducing the number of musicians employed and the amount the remaining few were paid.

Thus, in 1790, Haydn found himself with a much reduced income but in possession a towering reputation, many friends and admirers, and plenty of free time on his hands. It was the ideal moment for Johann Peter Salomon, a German violinist and conductor living and working in London, to convince Haydn to make a trip to his city. All of London was head over heels for Haydn, so it was a feather in Salomon's cap to be the one to bring him there, which he did by collecting Haydn from Vienna in person for them to travel together; the trip was the first time Haydn had seen the ocean.

Today, the set of symphonies that Haydn wrote during his time in London are most often referred to as the *London symphonies*, but also occasionally as the *Salomon symphonies*. There are twelve London symphonies in all, numbers 93 through 104 of Haydn's symphonic opus; and, although the 96th symphony is not numbered as such, it was actually the first symphony composed and performed during Haydn's first London trip.

The story behind the work's subtitle, *The Miracle*, provides a glimpse of the kind of enthusiastic reception that the 59-year-old composer received in London. The first symphonic premiere of the trip took place in the Hanover Square Rooms, a musical venue in Hanover Garden established twenty years earlier by Johann Christian Bach and by the late 1700s considered the trendiest venue in London. The room also contained a chandelier of the type commonly found in theatres of the day; theatre chandeliers needed to be hauled up and down from the ceiling using a hand-cranked pulley, and as a result had a reputation for being somewhat fickle. The public's enthusiasm for the

concert was enormous; attendee and music critic Charles Burney wrote in his diary, "Haydn himself presided at the pianoforte: and the sight of that renowned composer so electrified the audience, as to excite an attention and pleasure superior to any that had ever, to my knowledge, been caused by instrumental music in England." The public's desire to get close to the famous composer was so great, in fact, that they crowded up against the front of the stage-- meaning that when the chandelier in the centre of the room crashed to the ground, the audience escaped miraculously unscathed.

The *Miracle* symphony is in four movements: the slow opening typical of the London symphonies, attached to a first movement in sonata form, and ensuing slow second movement, third movement minuet, and quick finale. The second movement contains a special gift: it ends with an extended orchestral cadenza, beginning with an interplay between the two solo violins. The principal of those parts was played by Salomon; a thank-you from the composer to the friend who brought him on the adventure of a lifetime.

SHOSTAKOVICH/arr. Barshai Chamber Symphony in F major Op. 73a

"Cynical, pernicious grotesquerie," wrote Soviet music critic Israel Nestyev in 1946 of Dmitri Shostakovich's latest symphony, "[a] tone of relentless mockery and ridicule, emphasis on the ugliness and cruelty of life, the cold irony of stylization."

Most musicians and artists understand the sting of a negative review; few, however, have felt the horror that Shostakovich and his contemporaries in the Soviet artistic scene felt at a poor review from exactly the wrong reviewer-- Nestyev, for example, or even Stalin himself. In 1946, the year during which Shostakovich composed the 3rd string quartet which his student Rudolf Barshai later arranged into a chamber symphony, the tides of official opinion were turning perceptibly against him. His ninth symphony, premiered in late 1945, was officially censured for "ideological weakness," the first event in a downwards slide of governmental favour that would eventually culminate with his second official denunciation in 1948 and dismissal from the teaching post that had provided a large portion of his income.

The atmosphere into which the 3rd quartet was written and performed, then, was one of abject terror, which is reflected in the mystery surrounding its meaning and intention. The five-movement quartet originally came with programmatic subtitles, suggesting that Shostakovich intended the work to be a rumination on war: not the triumphant celebration of victory over the Nazi Germany that he originally promised (and failed to deliver) in the



Ninth symphony, but a more contemplative and sombre view of violence. The first movement depicted "Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm," the second "Rumblings of unrest and anticipation," the third "The forces of war are unleashed," the fourth "Homage to the dead," and the fifth "The eternal question: why and to what purpose?" Perhaps it is the title of the fifth movement, a questioning of the machinery and object of war itself, that gives a clue as to why Shostakovich removed the subtitles almost immediately: he no longer had the latitude to make statements that could be read as putting "emphasis on the ugliness and cruelty of life."

"I have a burdensome and horrifying memories of the events I witnessed," said Rudolf Barshai of the period of Shostakovich's censure, during which Barshai was a student at the Moscow Conservatory. For all that government officials and the ignorant public abandoned and ostracized Shostakovich, however, he never lost the respect of his students: "All the pupils always regarded Shostakovich as a God. His advice in composition class was so wonderful, so precise, and so precious." Barshai emigrated to Tel Aviv in 1977 to escape the constraints of anti-Semitism on his career in Russia, and his adoration for his friend and mentor "DD" (the students' nickname for "Dmitri Dmitrievich") is evident in his transcriptions of Shostakovich's string quartets. Barshai uses his experience both as orchestral musician and a conductor (including as music director of the Vancouver symphony from 1985-1988!) to expand Shostakovich's moody, intensely personal quartets into the declamatory and outwards-facing genre of the symphony; drawing his burdensome memories of totalitarianism out of the darkness and into the light.