ST. OLAF ORCHESTRA

Fall Tour 2008

PROGRAM

SLAVONIC DANCES, Op. 46
Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)
I. Presto
VII. Allegro assai
VIII. Presto

*CONCERTO FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA, Op. 14
Samuel Barber (1919–81)
I. Allegro
HANNAH REITZ · VIOLIN

*CONCERTO FOR BASS TUBA IN G MINOR, Op. 26
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)
II. Romanza - Andante sostenuto
DAN LARSON · TUBA

RUSSIAN EASTER OVERTURE, Op. 36
Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908)

· INTERMISSION ·

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN D MAJOR, Op. 73
Johannes Brahms (1833–97)
I. Allegro non troppo
II. Adagio non troppo
III. Allegretto grazioso (Quasi Andantino)
IV. Allegro con spirito

*Student soloists will alternate throughout the tour*
Antonín Dvořák’s *Slavonské tance* (Slavonic Dances), opus 46, was commissioned by the Berlin music publisher Franz Simrock on the recommendation of Johannes Brahms. Conceived for piano four-hands and published simultaneously with the orchestral arrangement, the dances’ arrival in music stores across Europe made the composer’s name commonplace “in the course of a day,” according to Berlin National-Zeitung critic Louis Ehlert. Within a few months of their December 1878 orchestral premiere, Dvořák’s dances were being performed in major concert halls throughout the continent.

Dvořák modeled his *Slavonic Dances* after traditional Czech songs, although the melodies are all original. The first and eighth dances are both furianty. The furiant is characterized by its metric arrangement — while the entire dance is in a triple meter, it opens with two bars of hemiola (duple articulation in triple meter), followed by two bars of ordinary triple. This alternation of hemiola and straight triple continues through the dance. In the Czech language, furiant means “a proud, swaggering, conceited man.” They were traditionally a couple’s dance in which the man danced alone during the opening figures while his partner kept time. The seventh dance is of a variety known as the skočná (translated as “leaping”), and its primary characteristic is a fast duple time. “Leaping” figures, from which the dance gets its name, are highly prominent in Dvořák’s adaptation of this form.

— Notes by Isaac Chaput ’10

Samuel Barber’s *Violin Concerto* was commissioned by Samuel Fels, a Philadelphia industrialist, for his adopted son Iso Briselli, a graduate of the Curtis Institute. Briselli later rejected the work, claiming that the third movement was “unplayable.” Albert Spalding and the Philadelphia Orchestra premiered the concerto in February 1941.

Hilary Hahn, the world-renowned violinist, has referred to the first movement as “supremely lyrical.” It is a feat of musicality and technique for both soloist and orchestra, and one of the most well known violin concerti of the 20th century repertoire.

— I.C.

Ralph Vaughan Williams’ *Concerto for Bass Tuba* was composed in 1954 to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the London Symphony Orchestra. The second movement, “Romanza,” betrays the work’s debt to its English origins in its pastoral mood. Exploring the lyrical capabilities of the tuba, a serene melody weaves its way through the movement and is gradually developed in a way that also allows for the soloist to display his or her technical prowess. Vaughan Williams’ slow movements are often characterized by an other worldly calm, and this sonorous aria counts among his finest.

— Notes by Erik Radio ’09

* Tour performances of Barber’s *Violin Concerto* will alternate with Vaughan Williams’ *Concerto for Bass Tuba*. 
Mikhail Glinka changed the face of Russian music forever when he burst onto the European operatic scene in 1836 with his drama A Life for the Czar, at once reawakening and reinvigorating the arts in a country where they had long lay dormant. Inspired by his achievements in creating a new musical voice in a country that had been artistically considered “backwater,” a group of five amateur composers set out to build a new nationalist school of composition based upon a rich and diverse heritage of folk music. Originally a naval cadet, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov quickly became a prominent member of the group known as “The Mighty Handful” and soon distinguished himself through his masterful skills of orchestration, and, to the chagrin of historians today, his habit of reworking and “correcting” his colleagues’ compositions.

Composed in 1888, Rimsky-Korsakov’s Russian Easter Festival Overture is an excellent example of Russian nationalism at its finest. The work is saturated with melodies drawn from the obikhod (a collection of the most commonly used canticles in the Russian Orthodox Church), all of which are brilliantly harmonized and reworked so as to emphasize their mystical qualities. Tracing a clear path from darkness to light, the work begins with a somber opening that, according to the composer, was inspired by the prophet Isaiah’s words concerning the future resurrection of the Messiah. Slowly the fog clears and develops into what can only be described as an ecstasy of religious experience. Bells toll, birds sing, and chants ring out from every corner of the orchestra, all culminating in a grand apotheosis of extreme emotion. Though the composer considered adding passages from the Bible to be read during the performance, he decided against it, thinking — rightly so — that the tones would “speak for him.”

— E.R.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73

Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

I. Allegro non troppo II. Adagio non troppo III. Allegretto grazioso (Quasi Andantino) IV. Allegro con spirito

To say that Romantic composers were apprehensive about writing symphonies would be a remarkable understatement. The electrifying impact that Ludwig van Beethoven’s nine symphonies had in the opening decades of the 19th century caused subsequent composers to deal with what was a very real and far-reaching crisis: what, if anything, was there left to say in the genre? Different personalities found different solutions, but the problem remained particularly acute for Johannes Brahms. In what was to be roughly 20 exhausting years of reworking, rejecting, and revising, the then middle-aged composer finally emerged in 1876 with what was his fiery and tempestuous First Symphony. Though not enthusiastically embraced, the respect that the work won was enough of a confidence booster for the composer to push him on to completing his Second Symphony less than a year later.

Composed in the sunny key of D major, the symphony has often been noted for its pastoral qualities, and particularly in the opening Allegro non troppo. The movement seems to take its time, unfolding only incrementally. Horn calls over long drones in the low strings slowly develop into longer phrases and eventually culminate in some of Brahms’s most inspired melodies. While this is certainly a dramatic movement, it is the absence of the nervous tension found in the First Symphony that lends this work its bucolic atmosphere.

The achingly beautiful Adagio non troppo that follows is truly the heart of the symphony. A passionate, autumnal melody in the cellos heard in the beginning is subsequently developed throughout the entire movement only to be interrupted by an agonizingly distressed middle section in B minor. Though the opening melody does return, it seems fundamentally changed by all that has come before, creating an ending that is more resigned than it is conclusive.

The folk-like Allegretto grazioso provides much-needed relief from the drama that precedes it, and it serves as an effective segue into the nervous energy of the final Allegro con spirito. Beginning sotto voce, the hushed (and deceptively potent) murmurs of the strings only works to make the eventual joyous outburst all the more thrilling. Shadows are fleeting in this exasperatingly euphoric movement, leading the critic Eduard Hanslick to comment that “Mozartian blood flows in its veins” — an excellent observation of one of Brahms’s most ebullient works.

— E.R.