

# Classical Series 5 - Program Notes

## Adam Schoenberg

November 15, 1980

### Finding Rothko

Adam speaks:

In February of 2006, I visited several museums in Manhattan seeking inspiration on which to base a new commission from the IRIS Chamber Orchestra. When I came across a few Rothko abstract expressionist paintings housed in the Museum of Modern Art, I had a very strong, visceral reaction to them and decided that Rothko's art would be the 'muse' for my piece. I felt I needed to see for myself each of the Rothko paintings I ultimately would be setting to music. Having neither the time nor the resources to travel around the world, I decided to choose among those works that would be the most readily accessible.

After spending a significant amount of time researching Rothko's entire catalog, I found four works that resonated with me: Orange, Yellow, Red and Wine. These four paintings appealed to me because of their distinct characteristics as well as their similarities, allowing me to create a narrative for the music.

With my journal in hand, I spent 1-2 hours with each work, jotting down my thoughts and reactions and allowing the experience to seep into my subconscious. Then, I sat down for hours at my piano to improvise, a process which reveals and releases my subconscious world and transforms it into unalloyed musical language and thematic material.

Finding Rothko explores the wonders of Mark Rothko's paintings. Each movement represents a different painting. The piece is played without pause. In order to make an aural distinction between movements, I created a theme, which I dubbed 'Rothko's theme,' a three-chord motive that appears at the beginning of each movement and announces the arrival of a new painting. In my mind, Orange represents a reflective moment yet to be fully realized, whereas Yellow is the realization of that moment. Therefore, it seemed natural to begin with Orange and follow it with Yellow. As the color palette of Yellow exhibits a streak of red, I instantly felt a transition into the third movement. The enormity and brilliance of Red struck me, and I knew this would be the musical climax of the entire composition. The music is violent, angular, and aggressive. Wine naturally became the last movement – the culmination of the rest of the paintings – both because I found it incredibly haunting and because my journey in 'finding' it – hence the name I chose for the composition – exemplified the spirit of the work. The music comprising Wine is 'Rothko's theme' organically developed. The indelible beauty of his work lies in its luminosity and ability to captivate the imagination. I hope I have managed to capture the essence and spirit of his work in this piece.



## Max Bruch

January 12, 1838 – October 20, 1920

### Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor

If genius is defined as the capacity to take great pains, then Max Bruch was a genius. He began to work on the concerto during 1864, and he did not finish it until 1868 – four years. But this lengthy period of gestation tells only part of the story.

Bruch described his creative process in a letter to a friend: "Writing a concerto for the violin is a damned difficult thing to do. Between 1864 and 1868 I rewrote it at least half a dozen times and conferred with X violinists before it took the final form."

Bruch's primary collaborator was Joseph Joachim, one of the most celebrated violinists of his day. The composer and soloist went back and forth with Joachim offering dozens of technical suggestions. Joachim's recommendations were so numerous that Bruch became concerned he would not get full credit for his composition if their extensive written correspondence became public. Bruch wrote that he feared that "the public would virtually believe that Joachim composed this concerto, and not I. The truth is that I gratefully used some of his suggestions, but not others."

The other famous virtuoso to whom Bruch turned for guidance was Ferdinand David. David was not only Mendelssohn's technical advisor on the latter's violin concerto, but also the soloist at its premiere in 1845. In 1866, Bruch wrote to a friend that "David now has it. The gods alone know what will come out of all this in the end. I no longer thank [a friend] for setting me to work on something to which I was not equal."

Equal or not, the fruit of Bruch's attention to detail is one of the great masterpieces of the genre. Joachim ranked Bruch's gem as the equal of the fabled violin concertos of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, calling Bruch's "the richest and most seductive" of the four.

A poll taken in 1996 named this concerto as the #1 favorite of British classical music devotees. Beethoven, Mozart,



Rachmaninoff, and all the rest bit Bruch's dust. Pretty heady company.

Bruch said the following about his compositional intentions: "I write music because it is only possible to express the ideas and emotions I wish to express through the medium of music. Music appeals to me because of its abstract quality. It is not necessarily tied to a story or a subject. That is why most of my works are orchestral or chamber music, and although I have written a certain amount of vocal music, for me the most worthwhile thoughts are to be expressed without words."

With this passage in mind, I won't say much about the music – because I don't have to. Bruch was correct. It speaks for itself. Suffice it to say that each section will burrow deeply into different parts of your heart and soul. J.A. Fuller Maitland, the top British critic of his day put it this way: "Bruch is one of those who uphold most worthily the dignity of the art. He has won the hearts of many thousands of hearers by his beautiful revelations."

You will be amazed at the virtuosity required of the soloist in the third movement.

At the request of his sister, the epitaph on Bruch's gravestone reads, "Music is the language of God." Yes, and Max Bruch was a faithful herald.

## Ludwig van Beethoven

December 16, 1770 – March 26, 1827

### Symphony No. 7 in A major

Ludwig van Beethoven landed on Earth in Bonn, Germany in 1770. The spirit of the Enlightenment was in full flower. It was the eve of great political, social, and cultural upheaval. As he grew to maturity, the Western World was tearing itself up by its roots and barreling into the turbulence of the modern era. Europe was liberating itself from centuries of superstition and inequity. The Ancient Regime, the old order, was disintegrating. Its kings and queens and aristocrats were being dethroned and beheaded by the people whom they had abused for centuries. Democracy was in the air.



Beethoven was 6 when the American Colonies bolted from the British Empire, declaring that "All men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" 18 when the United States was born; 19 when Parisians stormed the Bastille and ignited the French Revolution in the name of liberty, equality, and the brotherhood of mankind; and 35 when Napoleon and his armies entered Austria and crushed the remnants of the Holy Roman Empire. Beethoven's Europe had been set on fire by the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau who said, "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau's incendiary ideas sparked what we call today the "Romantic" movement: the rebellion in the arts of feeling against reason, of instinct against intellect, of emotional expression against conventional restraint, of democracy against aristocracy, of freedom against servitude, in short, the rebellion of the individualistic 19th Century against the old sclerotic 18th.

This context colors Beethoven's music – the politics, the new ideas, and the cultural and social revolution; but what is wonderful about Beethoven's art is that we don't have to know any of this background to love it. His timeless music transcends its immediate inspiration and stands solidly on its own. But the more we do know about this genius and his life and times and what he put of himself into his music, the more it comes alive and speaks to us in new and glorious ways.

Beethoven constantly defies our musical expectations with the unexpected -- with far out excursions into unusual keys, with compelling syncopated rhythms, with whimsy, with suspense, and with dramatic gestures and dynamics, all presented with a fiery energy and vitality never heard before in music until Beethoven, and rarely heard since. He grabs you by the scruff of your neck and takes you on a musical journey through a fun house, the equal of any roller coaster anywhere in the world.

None of Beethoven's symphonies illustrates Beethoven's trick musical plays and rhythmic energy better than his Seventh. Beethoven's first trick is the entire three minute introduction that leads us down one seemingly musical dead end after another, building our musical expectations only not to fulfill them. The first time I heard the lengthy introduction, I wondered, "What is this all about? Is he just goofing around, or is there a method to this madness?" I knew everything Beethoven does has a purpose, but his purpose is well disguised in the Introduction and doesn't become clear until the Exposition that follows. Upon hearing it, one of his contemporaries remarked that Beethoven "was ripe for the madhouse."

The Symphony is in A Major, and the Introduction starts with a series of ascending A Major scales into a theme in the completely unrelated key of C, leaving us mildly unsettled. Then, more ascending scales sounding like they are going somewhere to make an important statement, only to end up in another unexpected and unrelated key, F Major – with the same theme we just heard in C. Now, we're not sure where we are. Even if we cannot name the key changes, we do sense them. What in the world is Beethoven doing? Then, the music struggles in F, but all of a sudden it drops abruptly to E Major, which is related to A. Then, Beethoven teases us with 61 "E's" as though the music is trying to find itself, and then, wham, a structural downbeat, and we're into the first theme of the Exposition and finally A Major.

Note that the introduction is in 4/4 time, but the Exposition explodes into 6/8. The contrast set up by the slower 4/4 introduction is fantastic. It's like a prison break. Free, free at last! And, the mysterious theme we heard in C and F turns out to be the genetic source of the themes in the rest of the movement. Genius, pure genius.

The second movement, built over a compelling rhythmic pulse, has been called "a procession in the catacombs." It stands as a splendid contrast to the energetic and kaleidoscopic scherzo, or "joke," that follows. The whirlwind finale, which Richard Wagner called The Apotheosis of the Dance, explodes in physical energy and leaves our worldly concerns in the dust. One would never know that when Beethoven wrote this masterpiece, his personal life was a mess, his love life unfulfilled, and his hearing slowly being invaded by tinnitus. What a giant! What an inspiration!