Mahler’s “Titan” Symphony

MATT BROWNE (b. 1988)  
Barnstorming Season (2015)

Some fighter pilots returning to the States after World War I weren’t ready to give up flying or adventure. They became barnstormers, flying stunts over (mostly) rural communities and collecting money in exchange for their daredevilry. Barnstorming was dangerous—often fatal—work, carried out mostly in rickety, aging surplus Curtiss “Jenny” trainers.

Matt Browne, the Eugene Symphony’s 2019/20 Composer-in-Residence, found the juxtaposition of tragic death and giddy aerial stunts fascinating. He sought to capture it in musical gestures as dizzying as the barrel rolls, loop-de-loops and screaming power dives of the fliers. He wove in bits of Euday Bowman’s “12th Street Rag” (1915), as crazed a piece of popular music as ever existed, for period authenticity and to underscore the circus atmosphere.

Browne’s music recalls the neck-jerking, illustrative cartoon music of Carl Stallings (Warner Bros. Looney Tunes) and Scott Bradley (MGM, Tom & Jerry). It’s all great fun, until a plane goes down in flames. Barnstormers couldn’t spring back to life and order a fresh one from ACME Corp.

SCORED: For two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, and strings.

HISTORY: This is the first Eugene Symphony performance.

DURATION: Approximately seven minutes.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)  
Concerto in E Major for Two Pianos (1823)

Felix Mendelssohn, one of the most gifted prodigies in the history of music, wrote tonight’s Concerto for Two Pianos at age 14.

Never mind. This 32-minute, three-movement work represents a mature musical mind and astonishing craftsmanship in its mastery of orchestration; virtuoso piano writing (in an age when piano technique and design advanced almost daily); subtle emotional shadings, especially in a tender second movement that foreshadows Chopin; and brilliant outbursts of counterpoint. The harmonies are advanced for the time, and even at 14, Mendelssohn was bending Classical forms to his budding Romantic will.

Mendelssohn wrote the piece as a birthday gift for his vastly talented and adored older sister, Fanny. She surely played a role in the development of the concerto, as the siblings routinely sought each other’s advice and criticism on matters musical. Fanny joined her brother in the first performance, at one of the elaborate musicales presented at the Mendelssohn family home, on her birthday, Nov. 14, 1824.

LOOK FOR a great deal of eye contact between piano soloists (and twin sisters) Christina and Michelle Naughton as they coordinate their parts in Mendelssohn’s Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra.

Legendary pianist Ignaz Moscheles joined Felix in the public premiere in London, in 1829. Moscheles, who still had his old score 13 years after Mendelssohn’s death, oversaw an informal performance by his students at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1860.

After that, the concerto disappeared for almost 100 years. Like many of Mendelssohn’s juvenile works, it was not published in his lifetime, and manuscripts in Leipzig had a way of getting buried in library stacks behind the East German Iron Curtain. The Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra unearthed and revived it in 1959. In doing so, the orchestra restored a half-hour of wit, charm, and sparkle to the world.

SCORED: In addition to the two solo pianos, scored for one flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

HISTORY: This is the first Eugene Symphony performance.

DURATION: Approximately 28 minutes.

“This program kicks off our four-year long First Symphony Project that will culminate in the creation of four new major symphonic works. Matt Browne is our Composer-in-Residence this season and as part of his first introductory visit, we are performing one of my favorite pieces of Matt’s—Barnstorming Season, which is a wild and joyful throwback to the air shows of the 1920s. More fun awaits in Mendelssohn’s Two Piano Concerto written by the teenage composer for him and his sister to perform—and performed this evening by another pair of siblings, Christina and Michelle.
GUSTAV MAHLER (1860–1911)
Symphony No. 1 ("The Titan") (1889–1898)

The Romantic novel, with its ability to probe both the fevered inner lives of its characters and their encounters with a rapidly changing Europe, was the perfect vehicle for expressing the age. Novels could sprawl. Characters could grow and take up the vital philosophical, moral, political, and theological issues of the day. Heroes could come of age, face challenges, suffer doubts, fail, and finally find the right path.

The Romantic symphony, in many ways, reflects novelistic thinking. An introduction sets the stage: Here is the world, how things are. We meet our passionate hero—that is, the principal theme, likely to be cheerfully naïve, at first. The hero meets the second theme, perhaps a sidekick, perhaps the beloved ideal. A third theme launches the hero on his quest through distant lands. Recollections of home might haunt him, as themes recur, evolve, combine, or conflict. After extensive adventures, our hero and his companions return home, but transformed by experience.

The narrative can stretch beyond the opening movement, to overarch the passionate love songs of slow movements, dance movements rich with dramatic implications, and finales haunted by previous themes.

Mahler checked off all the novelistic boxes in his Symphony No. 1. As his composition progressed, he told friends that Jean Paul Richter’s 1862 novel, The Titan, would be the basis of his first symphony. It was, very much so, in the original, 1889 version, "A Symphonic Poem in Two Sections.” Mahler mined his own songs and works by Liszt and Wagner for thematic material. He also drew on the familiar children’s tune, "Bruder Martin" ("Are You Sleeping, Brother John?” or in French "Frère Jacques"), which remained in the final version.

We never hear the 1889 version these days, but surely Mahler attempted to represent characters in the novel, all of who in turn represent philosophical ideas of great urgency among the German intelligentsia c.1800. Lofty in ambition as that version might have been, the audience and critics hated it at the premiere, in Budapest.

Naughton. And we finish with Mahler’s mighty First Symphony—a brilliant and daring work from a young composer who was just on the cusp of taking the music world by storm.”

— Francesco Lecce-Chong
Mahler’s “Titan” Symphony

Mahler shelved it for three years, then started performing major surgery. By 1896, he had eliminated overt reference to the novel (though the nickname stuck), re-organized the piece into four movements, and changed the title to Symphony No. 1 in D. It became more like “pure” music and less like a sonic illustration of a literary source. At about 55 minutes, it's long for a symphony, but short for Mahler.

LISTEN FOR a haunting solo played by new Principal Bass Keith Wymer, based on the familiar song “Frère Jacques,” which begins the third movement of Mahler’s Symphony No. 1.

In the first movement, we meet our cheerfully naïve hero as he hikes through a forest full of chirping birds. (This tune comes from Mahler’s Songs of a Wayfarer.) In the second, he visits a rustic pub, where the locals engage in roughshod dancing. (Good cheer, yes, but also ominous drunkenness.)

In the third movement, that cheery forest takes a dark turn, as animals hold a mock funeral procession for a dead hunter. The tunes? A minor-key treatment of “Are You Sleeping, Brother John?” and a wild, celebratory klezmer interlude. A sentimental love song—Mahler’s own “The Two Blue Eyes of My Beloved”—comes out of nowhere before the funeral march returns, now blended with the klezmer material.

An earthquake shakes the world as the finale begins. Aftershocks continue for nearly 20 minutes, as Mahler wheels around the major and minor circles of fifths on his way from the inferno to paradise. Mahler put it this way:

“The last movement, which follows the preceding one without a break, begins with a horrible outcry. Our hero is completely abandoned, engaged in a most dreadful battle with all the sorrow of this world. Time and again he and the victorious motif with him are dealt a blow by fate whenever he rises above it and seems to get hold of it, and only in death, when he has become victorious over himself, does he gain victory. Then the wonderful allusion to his youth rings out once again with the theme of the first movement.”

For Music Director Francesco Lecce-Chong, the hero in a performance of this symphony is the orchestra itself:

“At the time of the First Symphony, Mahler was taking the music world by force—through both immense talent as a conductor and crafty politics, he was working his way up the opera houses eventually to land the most prestigious position in the world, in Vienna. Stubborn to a fault and an absolute dictator on the podium, Mahler singlehandedly did battle with what he perceived as lacking artistic standards around him. Even his harshest critics could only marvel at the spellbinding performances he inspired from orchestras.

“On every page of his first symphony, Mahler hurls directions at the conductor and musicians: ‘Don’t rush!’ ‘Don’t slow down!’ ‘Faster, but quiet!’ He implores us to heroically rise to his daunting expectations. It’s no wonder that performing Mahler is one of the most challenging, but gratifying experiences for any musician!”

SCORED: For four flutes, three piccolos, four oboes, English horn, four clarinets including bass clarinet and two E-flat clarinets, three bassoons, contra bassoon, seven horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two sets of timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

HISTORY: First performed by the Eugene Symphony in April 1973 under the direction of Lawrence Maves, and last performed in May 2010 under the direction of Danail Rachev.

DURATION: Approximately 55 minutes.