Notes on the Music

Dvorak, Violin Concerto in A minor

Antonín Dvořák, one of the greatest Czech composers, was a man of humble origins. He was born in a small village north of Prague in September of 1841, and his father was the owner of a shop that served as both a butchery and a pub. Despite his father's aspiration to have him inherit the family business, the future that the young Dvořák had planned for himself could not have been more different. At the tender age of 16, he was studying at the Prague Organ School and playing the viola for the Provisional Theater Orchestra, which at the time was led by the Czech nationalist composer Bedřich Smetana. Just a few years later, he had secured a position as a violist in the National Theater in Prague and had begun to write his own music.

It was in the 1870’s that Dvořák’s popularity as a composer attained an international level. Johannes Brahms, who was a member of the jury that granted Dvořák three years of financial support from the Austrian State Stipendium, recognized the young composer’s talent and recommended that Dvořák publish his music with Simrock Musikverlagen of Berlin, the very company that Brahms himself published with. In 1878, Simrock published the first installment of Dvořák’s Slavonic Dances, which brought him acclaim around the world. Brahms continued to serve as a musical mentor and role model to Dvořák. Just six months after the famed Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim premiered Brahms’ own violin concerto, Joachim, whom Brahms had already introduced to Dvořák’s chamber music, encouraged Dvořák to compose the A Minor Violin Concerto, which Dvořák dutifully dedicated to Joachim. Nonetheless, Joachim was not entirely pleased with the piece, especially after Dvořák refused to lengthen the atypically short orchestral introduction at the beginning of the first movement. And in turn, Joachim refused to perform the concerto; the concerto was instead premiered by the young Czech violinist František Ondříček in Prague in October of 1883.

In its entirety, the A minor concerto presents a significant, albeit refreshing and original, departure from the classic form embodied by its Brahmsian model. There certainly is no proper orchestral exposition in the first movement. Rather, Dvořák dives right in with a dramatically dark opening motive, one that serves as the basis for the first theme of the movement. The solo violin responds antithetically, with a sweeping, rhapsodic melody that comes to supplement the first theme. This opening interaction between orchestra and solo violin occurs twice, after which the orchestra takes over once again and supplies a more substantive exposition that the solo violin seizes upon and develops. But the lack of typical structure that characterizes the opening of the first movement is not succeeded by any identifiable return to the standard sonata form. Indeed, Dvořák develops each and every one of his melodic motives to a great extent, and it is therefore difficult to appropriately set off any section of the first movement as a development section. Moreover, what might appear to be a cadenza in the first movement is interrupted by the French horns, and the movement lacks any definitive concluding statement; rather, Dvořák transitions without pause and with only a brief recapitulation of the solo violin’s first theme into the beautiful and lyrical second movement.

The second movement is more typical in its form; it begins with a mournful variant of the solo violin’s opening theme and expands into a heartfelt and expressive exploration of a new, ebullient melody, one that suggests that there is happiness to be found amidst the darkness established by the first movement. Yet this new melody is not the only one that is pursued in the second movement: Dvořák continues to intertwine a diverse array of beautiful themes, some of which evoke a sense of passion, others a sense of despondency. What links these disparate melodic lines together is that each is strongly supported by the orchestra, which, rather than serving the comparatively inconsequential role of accompaniment, is instead an integral component of Dvořák’s intricately stitched melodic quilt.

Although the finale of the concerto bears some resemblance to its Brahmsian counterpart, it is characterized by a simultaneously airy and excited tone, the roots of which lie in the folk music of Dvořák’s native Bohemia. In the words of the great musicologist Michael Steinberg, the third movement is “unashamedly Czech,” as its rhythmical structure is built out of two folk-dance rhythms that Dvořák had much experience with in composing the Slavonic Dances half a year earlier. The main theme, which is introduced immediately in both the orchestra and the solo violin, is based on an effervescent dance called the “fúranit,” while the middle section is in the form of a “dumka,” a dance with a gentle duple rhythm that can convey a range of emotions from the melancholic to the euphoric. The orchestra once more performs an ineffably important role in contributing to the finale’s folksy character: in light of the lively viola pizzicato in the opening theme, the occasional roll of the timpani, and the energetic tremolo of the strings, the solo violin merely takes on a leadership role in what is actually an entire congregation of Czech villagers dancing. As is the case with the first two movements, Dvořák cannot stop himself from exploring his melodies through different keys and in different sections of the orchestra, but he eventually manages to effectuate a recapitulation by having the flute reintroduce the opening theme exactly one half-step lower than its original A Major setting. This somewhat mysterious choice of key serves as a sort of reminder to the solo violin, which soon afterwards breaks out of its reverie of sixteenth notes, hints once more at the theme of the central dumka, and leads a rapid accelerando that concludes the movement with four grand and exuberant A Major chords from the orchestra.

Ashvin Swaminathan, ’17
Ludwig van Beethoven is perhaps the only composer in the history of the human musical tradition whose work is universally appreciated by people of all cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Born on December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany, Ludwig was introduced to the realm of classical music by his father Johann, a tenor singer in the court of the Elector of Cologne. Johann was more than aware of his son's outstanding musical abilities, and he set out to transform the young Ludwig into a new “Mozart.” But the Beethoven family's pitiable financial situation proved to be a significant hindrance in this regard: Ludwig was forced to drop out of elementary school, and he never received the excellent musical training that Mozart was so fortunate to have had. Realizing that opportunities were limited in his native city, Ludwig moved to Vienna at the age of seventeen in the hope of studying with Mozart, only to discover that the great Viennese master was too busy to teach. And when Ludwig's mother succumbed to consumption that same year, he was compelled to return to Bonn and look after his siblings, for his father had taken to alcohol and could no longer support the family. Ironically, it was only after his father's death five years later that Ludwig's musical career really took flight.

Beethoven made up for his fragmented education with his incomparable talent and unrelenting perseverance. In the 1790s, he excelled as a keyboard performer and improviser, and the turn of the nineteenth century ushered in a remarkably prolific period in Beethoven's career as a composer, even though he had already begun to suffer from hearing loss. Per his physician's recommendation, Beethoven retired from Vienna to the peaceful town of Heiligenstadt, a local suburb. It was here that he wrote the “Heiligenstadt Testament,” a series of despairing, and sometimes suicidal, letters that express Beethoven's immense sorrow over his deteriorating health. Fortunately, the relaxed atmosphere of Heiligenstadt had an invigorating effect on Beethoven's disposition, and he was able to return to Vienna after just a few months.

Perhaps what truly liberated Beethoven from his temporary depression was the process of composing his third symphony, known simply as the “Eroica.” It took Beethoven four years, from 1802 to 1805, to complete the symphony, which he himself referred to as “the biggest work he had written so far.” Although the Eroica is often regarded as the epitome of a classical-era symphony, the radical ideas that motivated Beethoven to write the third symphony were instrumental in shaping the piece. The decade preceding the composition of the Eroica was marked by the dramatic political transformations of the French Revolution. During these turbulent years, Beethoven was enthralled by Napoleon Bonaparte, whom he envisioned as a bastion of democracy. So when Beethoven began work on the Eroica, he chose to dedicate the symphony to Napoleon. But after he heard that Napoleon declared himself Emperor of France in 1804, Beethoven furiously scratched Napoleon's name out of the score – the cover page of the original score is still lacquered today – and instead opted to dedicate his new symphony to “the memory of a great man.”

The first movement, which is set in a brisk “allegro con brio,” is about life and the spectrum of emotions that come with it. Beethoven begins the first movement with two brilliant E-flat major chords that serve to seize the attention of the audience. The cells are the first to get the principal theme, which at first meanders peacefully around the tonic of E-flat but then falls down to a mysterious C-sharp. As a means of relieving the resulting tension, the first violins sneak in with a string of throbbing G's that allow the music to return to the home key. Beethoven subsequently introduces five additional themes, all of which resemble the principal melody in their combination of simplicity and emotional breadth. What makes the first movement so captivating, however, is not only that there are so many beautiful themes, but also that Beethoven makes a number of intricate variations upon them, thereby exhibiting his remarkable talent for improvisation.

The most dramatic moment in the entire symphony can be found in the first movement itself. The poignant dissonance of the repeated F-major seventh chords that occur at the movement's climax would have shocked audiences of Beethoven's time. But the shrill sound of these chords may be a rendition of the shrieking noises that Beethoven claimed to hear as he began to lose his hearing. In this light, the climax of the first movement is a sort of musical manifestation of the “Heiligenstadt Testament.”

The love of life that is evinced in the first movement is countered by the solemnity that pervades the second, which surprisingly takes the form of a lengthy funeral march. The death that Beethoven is suggesting with his “marcia funebre” is not that of any ordinary man, but that of a revolutionary hero whose passing simultaneously evokes a feeling of tragedy and a sense of grandeur. Beethoven employs shifts between the parallel keys of C minor and C major to sonically depict the interplay between sorrow and triumph that he associated with the death of a hero.

The third movement is a brief “scherzo” in which Beethoven loosens up in terms of his emotional gravity but nevertheless maintains an underlying sense of intensity. Like the second movement, the third movement brings with it a dramatic emotional shift, but this time from the funereal to the playful. The trio, which is marked by the entrance of the three French horns (an unusual instrumentation for a classical symphony), hearkens back to the heroic qualities that Beethoven idolized, and the fact that Beethoven took the melody of the trio from Austrian folk songs indicates his vision of a true hero as being of humble origins.

Oddly enough, the fourth and final movement was the first part of the symphony that Beethoven composed. It begins with a wild flourish in the strings, one that is reminiscent of the prefatory cadenzas that
Notes on the Music
Beethoven, Symphony No. 3 in Eb Major

Beethoven utilized in his piano improvisations to captivate his audiences. Immediately afterward, he introduces the simple theme that serves as the foundation for the entire symphony. This theme, which is first heard in the “pizzicato” strings, has its origin in the music of Beethoven’s rival Daniel Steibelt: Beethoven simply took the cello part of one of Steibelt’s works, turned it upside down, and banged out the first few notes that he saw! The rest of the finale follows a theme-and-variation pattern, in which each variation is a successive embellishment of the principal melody. In fact, the structure of theme-and-variation can be endowed to the symphony as a whole, because the principal melodies of the first three movements are just variations of the fourth movement’s theme. From this perspective, the finale is a kind of thematic summary of the entire symphony.

The Eroica stands alone in symphonic literature as one of the most profound and transformative symphonies ever composed. In commenting on the sheer magnitude of his symphony, Beethoven once said, “I think the heaven and earth must tremble beneath us when it is performed.” We certainly hope that our performance tonight will be as earth-shattering as Beethoven would have wished!

~Ashvin A. Swaminathan ’17

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Born on October 9th, 1813, in the quaint Italian hamlet of Le Roncole, the great operatic composer Giuseppe Verdi came from a peasant family that owned a few taverns and bits of land in the Po River valley. Verdi's musical beginnings lie in the work that he, a mere seven-year-old at the time, did as an aid to the local church organist. In just a few years' time, Verdi began to play the organ for his village's church services, and having detected his son's passion for music, Verdi's father sent his son to the nearby town of Busseto, where the talented little twelve-year-old pursued his first formal musical studies with the amateur organist Pietro Baisocchi. And within a year, Verdi embarked on his prolific career as a composer, having already written works for the church, theater, and concert hall. But in spite of being locally successful as a rising musician, the young peasant composer encountered numerous difficulties in his attempts to acquire a rigorous musical training. In 1832, with the financial support of his townspeople, Verdi left for Milan with the intent of studying counterpoint, but he was not accepted to the conservatory, because the instructors did not consider him to be talented enough for his age. Consequently, Verdi chose to study under Vincenzo Lavigna, a composer who also performed with La Scala, Milan's world-renowned opera house. It was through Lavigna that Verdi managed to burst onto Milan's conducting scene with incredible success. Lavigna had encouraged Verdi to attend rehearsals of Joseph Haydn's masterpiece The Creation, and during one rehearsal, when all three concertmasters of the three concertmasters of the orchestra had taken ill, the young Verdi ran up to the piano and took over as conductor. The orchestra was so amazed by Verdi's confidence and talent that they let him conduct the actual performance itself.

In 1836, Verdi returned to Busseto as maestro di capella, or conductor, of the local orchestra, and he began to give singing and piano lessons as well. Having fallen in love with his student Margherita Barezzi, Verdi married her that same year, and they soon had two children. Unfortunately for the young couple, both the children passed away in infancy. Although Verdi and his wife were distraught at the loss of their children, they chose to move ahead with life and focus on helping the young composer climb to greater heights still. The couple moved back to Milan in 1839, where Verdi produced his first opera, Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio. The opera was performed at La Scala itself and enjoyed considerable success — indeed, Verdi was subsequently commissioned to write more operas for La Scala. In spite of this commendable first step as an operatic composer, Verdi was dealt yet another blow by fate: his wife Margherita succumbed to encephalitis in 1840. A devastated Verdi resolved never to compose again — until, that is, he was presented with the libretto for an opera called Nabucco, which the composer found so compelling that he decided to write music again. This was a particularly good choice on Verdi's part, for it was Nabucco that shot Verdi to considerable fame. After the premiere of Nabucco in 1842, Verdi was considered to be the most respected composer in all of Italy. The period following the premiere of Nabucco was a remarkably prolific one for Verdi. The stirring melodies of his Lombardi alla prima crociata evoked powerful political undertones in the hearts of his fellow countrymen, who were struggling to find a national identity in the ongoing Italian Revolution, a historical period during which the various city-states that constituted Italy for centuries became unified.

Verdi called the late 1840s and early 1850s his "galley years," for he worked incredibly hard as an operatic composer during this time. In the 1850s, he produced three long-time favorites, Iago, II Trovatore, and La Traviata, among many other wonderful operas. And in 1859, Verdi married his longtime companion Giuseppina Strepponi, who took the role of Abigaille in the premiere of Nabucco nearly two decades earlier. The operas that Verdi wrote in the 1860s and 1870s were of an international flavor, in the sense that they were not premiered in Italy. Indeed, his La forza del destino (1862) was premiered in St. Petersburg, and both Macbeth (1865) and his monumental Don Carlos (1867) were premiered in Paris. To commemorate the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1871, Verdi wrote the famous opera Aida, which was first performed at the Cairo Opera House. Last but not least, his Requiem won him renown throughout all of Europe, for it was performed in cities as diverse as Milan, Paris, London, and Vienna from 1874 to 1875.

In spite of being extraordinarily busy as a composer, Verdi also made time for politics. In 1859, he became a representative of Busseto in the provincial parliament and later held a similar position in the national parliament. When King Victor Emmanuel made Verdi a "Senator" in 1874, the revered composer, who was always proud of his humble origins in Le Roncole, declared to the king, "I am a peasant," and politely refused the title. Although Verdi wanted to retire from the operatic scene early and "plant cabbages," his musical life nonetheless continued well into the autumn of his years. In 1896, he founded La Casa di Riposo, a nursing home for retired Milanese musicians. Verdi passed away in Milan on January 27, 1901, and he is buried with his wife Giuseppina at his own La Casa di Riposo.

Verdi was both patriotic and nationalistic, and he was especially proud of Italy's rich artistic culture. Two personalities who were of great significance to Verdi were Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868), the renowned operatic composer, and Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), a famed nationalist writer and author of I Promessi Sposi, one of the most famous novels ever written in Italian. When Rossini died in 1868, Verdi wanted to venerate him with a grandiose Requiem to be performed on the anniversary of Rossini's death, a monumental piece which he envisioned as being written by thirteen leading Italian composers, including himself. However, this project never came to fullfilment because of personal egotisms, a lack of funds, and musical politics.
During this time period, Verdi was also busy with his numerous international opera commissions, particularly Aida, which had to be ready for the opening of the Suez Canal. Consequently, he was unable to write an entire Requiem by himself at the time of Rossini's death. But, when Manzoni died in 1873, Verdi revived the idea of composing a Requiem—this time to honor Manzoni instead of Rossini. Utilizing the outlines of Dies Irae and Libera Me, which he had sketched out for Rossini years earlier, Verdi composed the Requiem by April of 1874. It was performed in Milan on May 22, 1874, the first anniversary of Manzoni's death.

Even though audiences across Europe responded to the Requiem with enthusiasm, some critics considered the piece to be bluntly histrionic. One such critic was Hans von Bülow, an assistant to the German composer Johannes Brahms. Although Bülow wrote a disparaging article about the Requiem, Brahms himself lauded the piece and asserted, "Only a genius could have written such a work." In response to the critics' complaints, Verdi's loving wife Giuseppina declared that "a man like Verdi ought to write like Verdi, that is, according to his way of feeling and interpreting the text. It is clear that the religious spirit and the works that express it ought to bear the imprint of the epoch and of the individual. Which means I would disown a mass by Verdi made according to recipe A, B, or C!!"

The Requiem is divided into seven movements: Requiem and Kyrie (Rest and God), Dies Irae (Day of Anger), Offertorio (a Eucharistic service), Sanctus (Sacred), Agnus Dei (Lamb of God), Lux Aeterna (Eternal Light), and Libera me (Free me). The first movement, Requiem and Kyrie, begins very softly with a mysteriously solemn melody that is first introduced by the cello and later taken on by the violins and violas. Although Verdi was not considered to be a master of counterpoint (he was not accepted to the conservatory as a young man), the beautiful four-part fugue centered on the words "Te decet hymnus" illustrate his incredible facility with this important compositional technique—Verdi's talent more than made up for his lack of formal training. The operatic nature of the Requiem is first unveiled, however, in the latter half of the first movement, which is characterized by an uplifting, glorious melody and is embellished by a remarkable breadth of dynamics.

The second movement, Dies Irae, comprises almost half the entire length of the Requiem. The music leaps into action with four powerful chords that resound throughout the orchestra, followed by a rising sequence of vigorous sixteen notes that culminate in the chorus' ultimate declaration of the words "Dies Irae." A musical depiction of the Day of Judgment, the Dies Irae is epic in scale and design. The middle of this movement is marked by a section called the tuba mirum, in which trumpet calls echo between the orchestra and four offstage trumpets that are situated in the corners of the concert hall (look out for them!). Verdi's setting of the words in the Dies Irae is nothing but passionate, as is evinced by the beautiful mezzo-soprano solo at the words "Liber scriptus" and by the Lacrymosa that follows the reprisal of the movement's thundering theme.

The third movement, Offertorio, is more liturgical in nature and serves as a display of Verdi's skill as an operatic composer. In the words of one critic, the Offertorio has many moments of "undiluted opera," all of which function to showcase the beautiful singing of the quartet of soloists. Some moments of interest include the incredibly challenging yet gorgeous cello solo that opens the movement and a playful pizzicato section, in which the second violins and violas converse spiritedly with each other.

The fourth and fifth movements, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, should be recognizable to any churchgoer as standard components of every Catholic service. Verdi utilizes the exhilarating Sanctus as yet another display of his talent for contrapuntal writing—the counterpoint consists of eight interlocking parts that pose quite a formidable task for the orchestra and chorus to play together. This polyphonic middle section of the Sanctus is sandwiched between a brilliant fanfare at the beginning and a joyous homophonic statement at the movement's end. The Agnus Dei comprises a sequence of conversations between the two female soloists and the chorus, who sing in octaves. While the movement begins with the austere simplicity of the soloists' singing, the orchestra soon joins in, and the music takes on a richer, more emotive quality. The sixth movement, Lux Aeterna, is a particularly short one that features the three lower voices of the solo quartet. In some performances of the Requiem, these three soloists sing unaccompanied by the orchestra and chorus, but in our performance today, the soloists will be supported by twinkling tremolos in the strings and more melodic lines in the winds.

Finally, the seventh movement, Libera me, resembles the Dies Irae in terms of its length and complexity. Because this movement was first drafted in honor of Rossini more than five years before the premiere of the Requiem, it contains a diverse collection of musical ideas, some of which Verdi employed in crafting the previous six movements of the work. Therefore, the Libera me serves as a sort of musical summary and fitting conclusion to the Requiem. This closing movement begins with the soprano singing these words in a spooky chant-like monotone: "Libera me Domine de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda coeli movendi sunt et terræ," which translates to "Free me, O God, from everlasting death on that day which must be feared, that day when the heavens and the earth will be shaken." With this supplication in the ears of the audience, Verdi goes on to restate the themes of the Requiem and Dies Irae, and the movement climaxes with a colossal choral fugue. After this climactic figure, the music progresses into yet another animated fugue, this time in the hands of the orchestra. Despite the power and sheer bombast that characterizes much of
the last movement, Verdi chose to provide his great masterpiece with a soft, touching ending, one that leaves the audience with not only a feeling of serenity, but also an intimation of Verdi's own fears regarding the verity of the church's assurance of salvation for one and all.

The Requiem is a work that is cosmic in its scope, for it has the power to inspire people from all cultures and backgrounds. In 1944, a chorus of 150 Jewish prisoners performed the Requiem at Terezin, a Nazi concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. They only had a broken piano and one score. Their audience was the rest of the camp prisoners and their jailors. One of the survivors proclaimed, "This is our way of fighting back — we have a vision of high art. The Verdi Requiem is the pinnacle of defiance."

-Ashvin Swaminathan, '17

I. Requiem
Chorus:
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine;
et lux perpetua luceat eis.
Te decret hymnus, Deus, in Sion,
et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem.
Exaudi orationem meam:
ad te omnis caro veniet.
Quartet and Chorus:
Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

II. Dies irae
Chorus:
Dies irae, dies illa,
solvit saeculum in favilla,
teste David cum Sibylla.
Quantus tremor est futurus,
quando judex est venturus,
cuncta stricte discussurus!
Tuba mirum spargens sororum,
per sepulcrum regionem,
cogent omnes ante thronum.

Bass:
Mors stupebit et natura,
cum resurget creatura,
judicanti responsura.
Mezzo-soprano and Chorus:
Liber scripturum profetetur,
in quo totum continetur,
unde mundus judicetur.
Judex ergo cum sedebit,
quidquid latet apparebit:
ril inultum remanerit.
Dies irae, dies illa,
solvit saeculum in favilla,
teste David cum Sibylla.

Soprano, Mezzo-soprano and Tenor:
Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?

I. Requiem
Chorus:
Grant them eternal rest, O Lord;
and may perpetual light shine upon them.
A hymn in Zion befits you, O God,
and a debt will be paid to you in Jerusalem.
Hear my prayer:
all earthly flesh will come to you.
Quartet and Chorus:
Lord, have mercy upon us.
Christ, have mercy upon us.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

II. Dies irae
Chorus:
The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes,
as David and the Sibyl prophesied.
How great will be the terror,
when the Judge comes
who will smash everything completely!
The trumpet, scattering a marvelous sound
through the tombs of every land,
will gather all before the throne.

Bass:
Death and Nature shall stand amazed,
when all Creation rises again
to answer to the Judge.
Mezzo-soprano and Chorus:
A written book will be brought forth,
which contains everything
for which the world will be judged.
Therefore when the Judge takes His seat,
whatever is hidden will be revealed:
nothing shall remain unavenged.
The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes,
as David and the Sibyl prophesied.

Soprano, Mezzo-soprano and Tenor:
What can a wretch like me say?