Joseph Schwantner: *Chasing Light...*

Joseph Schwantner has this to say about his own *Chasing Light...*

One of the special pleasures of living in rural New Hampshire is experiencing the often brilliant and intense early morning sunrises, reminding one of Thoreau’s words, “Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me” (Walden). *Chasing Light...*, like my earlier work *Morning’s Embrace*, also draws inspiration from the celebration of vibrant colors and light that penetrate the morning mist as it wafts through the trees in the high New England hills. Like a delicate dance, those images intersected with a brief original poem:

*Chasing Light...*

Beneath the sickle moon,
sunrise ignites daybreak’s veil.

Calliope’s rainbowed song
cradles heaven’s arc.

piercing shadowy pines,
a kaleidoscope blooms

morning’s embrace
confronts the dawn.

The work, approximately twenty minutes in duration, is scored for two flutes (second doubles on piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, one trombone, piano (amplified), one percussion, timpani and strings. It proceeds from one movement to the next without pause. Each movement’s subtitle is associated with a pair of lines from the poem. *Chasing Light...* received its premiere performance Saturday, 20th September, 2008, by the Reno Chamber Orchestra conducted by Music Director Theodore Kuchar in Nightingale Concert Hall, Reno Nevada.

Mvt. I: “Sunrise Ignites Daybreak’s Veil” (*Con forza, feroce con bravura*) opens with an introduction containing three forceful and diverse ideas presented by full orchestra: (1) a low rhythmic and percussive pedal point on “F” followed by (2) a three-note triplet figure in the brass overlaid by (3) a rapid swirling cascade of arch-like upper woodwind phrases cast in a strettto-like texture. These primary elements form the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic materials developed in the work. Following the introduction, the strings present a theme derived from the pedal point rhythmic gesture and the brass three-note figure, leading to an extended series of upward-thrusting six-note sonorities and a long increasing assertive line (first brass, then later strings and woodwinds) partitioned into two parts. The
movement ends with a return to the introductory material and a sustained pitch on “G,” providing a link to the next movement.

Mvt. II: “Calliope’s Rainbowed Song” (lontano) The rapid arched woodwind phrases in the introduction to the first movement occur in a variety of divergent contexts throughout the work, not only as small-scale gestures but in larger, more extended designs. Cast in a major arch-like palindrome form, this movement begins softly, first with solo clarinet followed by a repeated piano sonority that forms the structure of a theme played by solo flute. Gradually, this theme builds to an exuberant midpoint, followed by sections that appear in reverse order, finally ending quietly and gently with solo clarinet and a high ethereal violin harmonic on “A” that carries over to the third movement.

Mvt. III: “A Kaleidoscope Blooms” (lacrimoso), a slow, expressive and elegiac movement for oboe (written for Andrea Lenz, principal oboe of the Reno Chamber Orchestra), opens with a low, dark repeated pedal played by piano, contrabass and tam-tam. Sudden rapid woodwind gestures contrast and frame a succession of gradually ascending oboe phrases that accumulate ever-greater urgency as the music approaches its maximum intensity at the end.

Mvt. IV: “Morning’s Embrace Confronts the Dawn” (lontano...leggiero) The rapid and aggressive woodwind phrases in the first movement now emerge in delicate and shimmering string textures. These earlier elements prepare for a stately but urgent chorale theme that builds forcefully to the palindromic music of the second movement and the introductory materials of the first, then proceeds to a final climactic conclusion.

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-- Joseph Schwantner, 2008

Sir Edward Elgar: Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in E minor, Op. 85

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages,
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.
-- Philip Larkin, MCMXIV

Every composer has their own story about how they came to write music. The question that’s asked far less often is: why does a composer stop writing music? In the case of Gioacchino Rossini, the answer is simple: at the age of 35, after the stunning success of William Tell, Rossini decided he had had enough of opera-house politics and retired to Paris, where his salon was a mecca for musicians, writers, and artists. For the rest of his life he wrote only small art songs and piano pieces (later published in a collection
called *Sins of My Old Age*). He also developed a reputation as a gourmand – he is credited with creating (or at least inspiring) *Tournedos Rossini*, filet mignon topped with seared *foie gras* and garnished with black truffle and Madeira demi-glace.

For other composers, the sudden loss of their muse is less straightforward. The great Finnish composer Jean Sibelius produced his symphonic poem *Tapiola* in 1926 and the musical world expected even greater accomplishments from him. For the next three decades almost nothing came from his pen, though there were tantalizing hints of sketches for an Eighth Symphony which the composer allegedly burned shortly before his death. While some have cited Sibelius’s depression and alcoholism as the cause of his silence, the composer himself gave no cause.

For Sir Edward Elgar, his wish to lay down his pen can be traced to several events. As with most of the population of Europe, the First World War left Elgar devastated and pessimistic. The Victorian/Edwardian world in which he rose to musical prominence had been swept away by the brutal carnage of the Somme and the Ardennes. Many of Elgar’s younger friends and colleagues had marched off to the battlefields of France and had never returned. By 1918, the musical world that had opened its ears to Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* had left Elgar behind, and he was painfully aware that he was little more than a monument to the days of *Pomp and Circumstance*. While he briefly found his muse through the composition of three chamber works (a string quartet, a piano quintet and a violin sonata), the music flowing from his pen slowed to a trickle.

After a procedure to remove an infected tonsil in March of 1918, Elgar asked for pencil and paper to jot down a melody. This wistful, melancholy tune became the central theme of the first movement of Elgar’s Cello Concerto. Elgar worked on the Cello Concerto throughout the summer of 1919 at Brinkwells, the quaint cottage that Elgar and his wife Alice rented in Sussex. He frequently entertained Felix Salmond, the cellist engaged for the first performance, plying him with questions about technical aspects of the cello and drawing inspiration from his playing.

At the same time, Elgar watched helplessly as Alice Elgar slowly succumbed to the lung cancer that would claim her life in the month following the Cello Concerto’s world premiere. He wrote that she became “mysteriously smaller and more fragile. She seemed to be fading away before one’s very eyes.” Elgar would write almost nothing for the final 15 years of his life, devoting himself largely to conducting and recording.

The Cello Concerto’s premiere was far from auspicious. Elgar conducted his own work, but shared the podium with Albert Coates, who frittered away the bulk of the rehearsal time perfecting his performances of Borodin’s Second Symphony and Scriabin’s *Poem of Ecstasy*. The near-disaster of the first performance along with the very sparse textures of the concerto left audiences and critics bewildered. A few perceptive listeners found the lasting values in the concerto despite the rough first performance.
The concerto opens with a bold but sorrowful recitative from the soloist. In the movement that follows, the haunting 9/8 tune that Elgar penned in his convalescence predominates, beginning meditatively in the violas, but rising to an impassioned climax from both the soloist and the orchestra. A more capricious central section does little to dispel the overall melancholy of the movement which eventually subsides to a low E in the orchestra.

The second movement, following without pause, begins again with a cello recitative, but what follows is a quicksilver scherzo, light on its feet and rarely rising above a piano dynamic. The soloist’s final pizzicati are like a water sprite suddenly vanishing into thin air.

The Adagio is a song from the heart, perhaps a meditation on all that Elgar (and Europe) had lost during the war. The mood is one of understated sorrow, of emotions almost unable to be expressed, but in this case expressed by the simple eloquence of the solo line.

The ominous march that ushers in the finale is interrupted by a cello recitative, which sets the stage for the movement that follows. The soloist takes up the orchestra’s march and this serves as much of the melodic material for the movement. At the end, the soloist achingly recalls the Adagio, and the final pages of the work share this sorrow, until the opening recitative returns, and soloist and orchestra abruptly end the work with a final brusque fragment of the march.

**Beethoven: Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92**

"The Symphony is the Apotheosis of the Dance itself: it is Dance in its highest aspect, the loftiest deed of bodily motion, incorporated into an ideal mold of tone." – Richard Wagner on Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7

"What can you do with it? It's like a lot of yaks jumping about." – British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham on the last movement of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7

For most listeners, Beethoven and his music might be imagined as a storm cloud hovering over a scowl. The most popular of his works tend to be the most dramatic and contain the most extreme contrasts, not to mention that most of them are in minor keys: the Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, the Pathétique Sonata, etc. Even works like the Eroica Symphony and the Hammerclavier Sonata are overwhelming in their breadth and depth of musical expression. From the human perspective, we remember Beethoven dumping a plate of meatballs over a waiter’s head, and proudly asserting his independence to one of his patron “Prince, you are what you are by accident of birth; I am what I am because of what I have made of myself. There always will be hundreds of kings and princes; there is only one Beethoven." As listeners, this is the Beethoven with which we are most familiar: the heaven-storming champion of the rights of man, boldly slinging musical thunderbolts in the name of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

Yet Beethoven had another side, one that delighted in slightly coarse humor and the occasional drink with friends. Beethoven himself described this condition (applied to himself and his music) as
“Aufgeknöpft (unbuttoned),” a state of high joy free from the cares of everyday life. It can be seen in delightful pieces like his “Rage Over a Lost Penny,” an exuberant rondo for piano.

His Symphony No. 7 in A major is a perfect example of aufgeknöpft, full of boundless energy and high spirits. Written in 1811 and 1812 while the composer was recuperating at the Bohemian spa at Teplitz, the Seventh Symphony marked Beethoven’s return to symphonic writing after a hiatus of several years. It was first performed in Vienna on December 8, 1813 at a benefit concert for Austrian veterans from the Battle of Hanau in 1813. The orchestra for the event was an all-star group, from Ignaz Schuppanzigh (Beethoven’s favorite quartet interpreter) as the concertmaster to composers Antonio Salieri, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Mauro Giuliani playing in the orchestra. The great Italian bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti (whom Beethoven had consulted on the bass parts of the Pastorale Symphony) led the bass section.

The symphony opens with the longest introduction of any Beethoven symphony. The material explored doesn’t seem to be much more than chorale-like chords and scale patterns, but it is important to note that this lengthy introduction explores the keys of C major and F major in addition to the main key of A major, keys that are very important throughout the entire structure of the work (the third movement is based in F major). For all its hearty energy, the introduction eventually lands upon the note E, which gets tossed back and forth between flutes and oboes, almost as though no one wants to continue the movement. The oboes finally take the lead and turn it into the long-short-long rhythm that sneaks us into the Vivace and gives us the perky and lilting first theme, quietly at first and then unleashed in a full-throated roar in the entire orchestra, led by the horns. This entire movement is an exploration of this galloping initial rhythm, from the oboe’s graceful segue to the triumphant coda.

The A minor second movement is not really a slow movement. The Allegretto tempo gives the impression of a solemn ritual or perhaps a stately dance like a pavane. This immediately memorable movement is made up largely of an extremely simple repeated melodic pattern (long-short-short-long-long) which has a very narrow melodic range.

The third-movement Scherzo follows the model of the Sixth Symphony for a five-part scherzo (A-B-A-B-A). The scherzo sections contrast a leaping and capricious opening with quietly bustling string and woodwind figures. The trio sections are more hymnlike, starting quietly in the woodwinds and breaking forth majestically in the full orchestra.

The whirlwind finale is a high-octane joyride from start to finish. From the initial fanfares, the movement glows with energy and enthusiasm, even when the melodic lines turn briefly more lyrical. The repetitive nature of the melodic lines gives Beethoven ample room to build tension throughout the movement. Even though the dynamic occasionally drops to piano and the texture sometimes lightens to just a few parts, it is the relentless energy of the movement has the final say, dancing joyfully all the way to the exuberant final chords.