Jonathan Leshnoff: *Starburst*

New Jersey-born Jonathan Leshnoff has already won an international reputation as one of America’s most gifted young composers. His works have seen dozens of performances around the United States in the past few years, and he has garnered commissions from several major orchestras, chamber groups, and choruses. He has three CDs on the Naxos label, including his orchestral works conducted by Michael Stern and the IRIS orchestra.

Leshnoff’s *Starburst* was completed in 2010 for a commission from the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Kansas City Symphony, and Fundación Orquesta de Extremadura in western Spain. Baltimore Symphony Orchestra annotator Janet E. Bedell, interviewed Leshnoff and provided the following note for the premiere:

“Leshnoff chose the name *Starburst* because ‘the word has a lot of energy to it and I like the image of light.’ He adds that the piece has ‘lots of orchestral shimmer’ with its emphasis on fast patterns in the upper woodwinds and strings. *Starburst* is structured in two parts. Two important motives are developed at the beginning: a running or ‘fleeting’ motive in the woodwinds and a rhythmically crisper, more detached idea in the strings. The music climbs to a big outburst, and then a clarinet cadenza in a much slower tempo leads to the second phase. The fleeting motive returns in a march-like, repetitive guise. From then on, the piece gets bigger and bigger until it explodes at the end—just like its name.”

Writing the next day in the Baltimore Sun, reviewer Tim Smith called Starburst “a curtain-raiser in the best sense of the word, full of energy and anticipation. The composer’s most distinctive talent may be for creating deeply lyrical themes, but here, his focus is on propulsion and creating a sense of almost frantic searching…”

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*Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto in e minor*

If Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto were a movie, what would you call it? Romantic, certainly. Comedy? Perhaps; in the finale there are many moments of lighthearted good humor. Drama? Action? Adventure? Any violinist who has negotiated the many treacherous technical pitfalls that lurk on every page would tell you “all of those.” It would certainly be hard to pigeonhole it for the Academy Awards – like any great music, Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto reflects many emotional states in its own original fashion.
But if the movie were about how the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto came to be written, it would definitely be a buddy movie. It might not provoke as many laughs as Laurel and Hardy, Hope and Crosby, or Gibson and Glover, but it would document a friendship that produced one of the greatest of all violin concertos.

In 1825, the 16-year old Felix Mendelssohn met the 15-year old violin virtuoso Ferdinand David (DAH-vid) in Berlin, where David was making his first concert appearances. The two young men became great friends and often played chamber music together. They kept in touch even as their careers led them in different directions.

Fast forward ten years: Mendelssohn, now living in Leipzig, becomes Music Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. He immediately contacts his old friend David and asks him to become the new Gewandhaus concertmaster. In 1843, when Mendelssohn assumed the directorship of the Leipzig Conservatory, he turned to David to become the head of the violin department.

Mendelssohn first refers to the concerto in a letter to his friend David from July 1838 where he writes “I’d like to write a violin concerto for you next winter; one in E minor sticks in my head, the beginning of which will not leave me in peace.” With the hectic pace of Mendelssohn’s career as composer, conductor and administrator, it was nearly six years before he had the time to devote his attention to finishing the concerto for David. The first performance took place on March 13, 1845 with David as soloist and Danish composer Niels Gade conducting the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto influenced the structure of the Romantic concerto for the rest of the century. We hear the first original touch in the opening bars of the work: Mendelssohn dispenses with the full orchestral introduction, and has the soloist enter with the yearning opening melody in the second bar.

The other structural innovation is the location of the cadenza. Instead of placing it before the coda, Mendelssohn moves it to a point of greater musical tension, between the development and the recapitulation. Mendelssohn also writes out the entire cadenza for the soloist to learn and memorize rather than trust to the soloist’s improvisatory skills (the common practice at the time). While it may have ruffled the feathers of some virtuosi, there is no denying that the quiet entrance of the woodwinds underneath the soloist’s delicate filigree of arpeggios at the cadenza’s end is a truly enchanting moment.

After the first movement’s final chords evaporate, we hear a lone bassoon sustaining a single note to link the first and second movements. This long B natural eventually rises a half step to establish the key of C major, the key for the concerto’s slow movement. This beautiful and guileless “song without words” sings sweetly and serenely, darkened only by the sinister central section, where the soloist plays both melody and accompaniment simultaneously. The darkness slowly brightens and the movement ends as serenely as it began.
To link the slow movement and the finale, Mendelssohn writes fourteen measures that function much like a recitative that precedes an opera aria. From that introduction, the finale springs to life from a quiet trumpet fanfare answered by insouciant flourishes from the soloist. The movement’s main theme is like a capricious sprite, skipping in quicksilver delicacy over the entire range of the instrument—a melody that could have easily been plucked from Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music. A sweetly lyrical theme provides contrast and counterpoint to the cavorting of the principal theme, and both soloist and orchestra take the opportunity to sing as well as dance. The final pages are a joyous *moto perpetuo* for the soloist, racing up and down the fingerboard in the heady rush to the final chords.

**Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D major**

“A symphony is like the world; it must embrace everything!” – Gustav Mahler in conversation with Finnish composer Jean Sibelius

For a young composer in the 19th-century, writing a symphony was a significant milestone in their career. With the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven as the symphonic litmus test, young composers often approached the task of composing a Symphony No. 1 with a certain amount of trepidation. Edvard Grieg was so dissatisfied with his lone attempt (a Symphony in C minor from 1865) he wrote on the front page of the manuscript: “Must never be performed.” (It has since been performed, recorded and published—it is unknown if Grieg’s ghost is haunting those responsible). Even a stalwart symphonist like Johannes Brahms proceeded with extreme caution before producing and publishing the work to which he gave the title Symphony No. 1. As he approached the age of 40, he vented his insecurities to a friend: “I shall never write a symphony! You have no idea what it’s like to feel the footsteps of that giant (i.e., Beethoven) striding behind you.” Brahms was 43 before he felt that he could release his First Symphony to the world.

For Gustav Mahler, the problem of writing a symphony became even more complicated. Where Brahms had followed in the footsteps of the Classical tradition of Mozart and Beethoven, other composers had infused the Romantic symphony with radical new visions of melody and harmony, stretching and twisting the traditional symphonic structures to suit their own musical and expressive ends. Taking Beethoven’s Sixth and Ninth Symphonies as their starting point, the more radical Romantic composers used the “symphony” to tell stories, paint pictures, and express very personal emotions. Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, his *Harold in Italy* (a “symphony for viola and orchestra”) and his “dramatic symphony” *Romeo and Juliet*, all have elements of traditional symphonic writing, but they also portray an extra-musical program in sound—a far cry from the more “objective” stylistic rigor of a Haydn or Mozart Symphony.

Young Gustav Mahler absorbed both traditions—the Classicism of Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, and the more modern developments of Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner. Mahler’s conducting career intertwined these two musical streams and Mahler’s creativity forged them into his own distinctive voice. Even so, arriving at the final version of the First Symphony required over a decade of tinkering, producing at least
six distinct versions of the work. Mahler’s reimagining of how he perceived the work truly explores the question “What exactly IS a symphony?”

At its first performance in Budapest in November 1889, the program announced the premiere of a “Symphonic Poem in Two Parts”. The day before the concert, the Budapest papers had printed a detailed program of the work, in all likelihood supplied by Mahler himself. After the work’s tepid initial reception in Budapest, Mahler set about revising the score. By January 1893, he had renamed it “Symphony in five movements and two parts” and added the subtitle “Titan,” a reference to a popular novel of the same name by Jean Paul. Between January and October of the same year, Mahler continued to vacillate between calling the work a programmatic symphonic poem or an abstract symphony. By the second performance in Hamburg in that month, Mahler settled on “TITAN, A Tone Poem in the Form of a Symphony.” After two more performances, Mahler evidently had a complete change of heart about the work. By the Berlin premiere in March of 1896, the detailed program and the “Titan” nickname were gone. Mahler called his work Symphony No. 1 in all subsequent performances and in the published score.

The original second movement, *Blumine* (“Flowers” or “Flowering”), also fell victim to Mahler’s editorial ax, eliminated after the 1894 Weimar performance. *Blumine*’s manuscript disappeared for nearly 70 years, resurfacing only in 1967. While some concerts and recordings include this movement, most conductors agree with Mahler’s final decision and perform the symphony as a four-movement work.

The symphony begins with an ethereal, magical texture: a single note, A, played *pppp* and spread across seven octaves of the string section. Out of this mysterious atmosphere, the sounds of nature emerge – the chirping of a cuckoo, distant hunting calls in the horns, fanfares from distant trumpets. The cuckoo’s call figures prominently, especially when the woodwinds repeat and extend it. This figure will serve as a unifying idea throughout the work, especially between the first and final movements.

At the end of this vast introduction, the cuckoo’s call becomes more insistent, the tempo increases, and the cuckoo’s two notes transform into the opening notes of the first movement’s main theme. This sunny, carefree melody turns out to be a quotation from one of Mahler’s own songs, “Ging heut’ Morgen über’s Feld” from his 1885 song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer). This *lied* provides much of the material in the first movement, which loosely follows Classical sonata structure (and is possibly one of the reasons Mahler ultimately decided to label the work a symphony and not a symphonic poem). The joyous atmosphere remains largely untroubled throughout, and concludes in a headlong rush of high spirits.

Mahler’s *scherzo* is a lusty peasant dance in the key of A major, a *Ländler* that follows the traditional A-B-A form of minuets and scherzos. The F major trio lends a touch of Viennese sophistication to the dance, with an elegant lilt to the melody enhanced by expressive *portamenti* (sliding up or down a string) from the string section. The boisterous opening returns and the movement concludes with chortling trills from woodwinds and trumpets.
The slow movement proved perplexing to the initial audiences, and it is not difficult to hear why. Mahler claimed inspiration for this movement from an engraving called “The Huntsman’s Funeral” in which forest animals lead a torchlight procession, carrying a hunter’s coffin to the grave. Mahler evokes this macabre atmosphere by quoting the German folksong “Bruder Martin,” which we know as “Frère Jacques,” but written in minor, not in major. To add to the grotesquerie, Mahler scores its opening presentation for solo double bass over a timpani ostinato. The cellos and tuba join in canon, answered irreverently by a very cheeky oboe. Eventually the entire orchestra takes up this bizarre canon, succeeded by suggestions of both klezmer and village band music. A rapturously beautiful interlude for muted strings and harp based on another lied from Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen restores a momentary calm, but as its final strains fade into silence, the funeral march resumes and its solemn tread concludes the movement.

The fourth movement explodes into the silence at the end of the funeral march; Mahler likened it to a sudden lightning bolt from a black and boiling sky. The entire orchestra shrieks in protest, with ominous fanfares from the brass. This epic movement builds to two climaxes, with the first being only a premonition to the second. Mahler brings us full circle by taking us all the way back to the opening nature music of the first movement, out of which the second magnificent peroration builds slowly and inevitably. This buildup gradually gathers unstoppable energy to its climax: a variant of the mysterious woodwind melody from the symphony’s introduction, now blazing in glorious triumph, with the horn section directed to play “bells up!” The final exuberant fanfares rush to the final cadence and Mahler’s final bit of humor: the symphony ends with the first-movement cuckoo call in unison from the entire orchestra!