Christopher Rouse: *The Infernal Machine*

Christopher Rouse has supplied this program note for performances of *The Infernal Machine*:

*The Infernal Machine* was composed for the University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra's European tour performances of 1981 and was completed in Ann Arbor, Michigan on March 21 of that year. Dedicated to my friend, Leslie Bassett, it was first performed at the Evian Festival (France) on May 9, 1981 by the above-named orchestra under the direction of Gustav Meier. Since that time it has been programmed by numerous orchestras, including the Berlin, Stockholm, New York, Buffalo, and Rochester Philharmonics, the Minnesota, Cleveland, and Louisville Orchestras, and the Chicago, Boston, Pittsburgh, Saint Louis, Detroit, Baltimore, Houston, Cincinnati, National, and Milwaukee Symphonies.

The work takes its title from the eponymous play by Jean Cocteau, though that drama's retelling of the Oedipus myth had no influence on the piece. Rather it was my intention to compose a brief orchestral showpiece inspired by the vision of a great self-sufficient machine eternally in motion for no particular purpose. But while this machine is not specifically satanic, it *is* more than a little sinister. The score is a *perpetuum mobile* wherein the monster sometimes whirs along in mercurially unconcerned fashion, while at others it sputters or throws off slightly hellish sparks, occasionally grinding as it changes gears.

Christopher Rouse  
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Jean Sibelius: *Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47*

Let’s face it: we all have delusions of grandeur. We fantasize about throwing the game-winning touchdown in the Super Bowl, winning the Powerball, curing cancer, writing that Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, throwing a no-hitter in the World Series, or finally catching the Roadrunner. Whether we admit it or not, a Walter Mitty lives inside all of us, at least in our youth. Through the course of our lives, the Universe conspires to beat us down and force us to admit that we are far less than dreams are made of. Most of us regretfully put aside these daydreams and get on with life.

Yet sometimes those unrealistic dreams yield rewards that we never anticipate. Consider the case of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, who decided at the age of 14 that he would devote his life to becoming a virtuoso violinist. Hampered by his late start on the instrument and by the lack of truly professional instruction in his native Finland, he still managed to gain a seat in the orchestra of the Vienna Conservatory during his time there. Upon graduation, Sibelius met his violin Armageddon when he auditioned for the Vienna Philharmonic and was not accepted into the orchestra. Sibelius was forced to
confront the grim reality that he would not be a globe-trotting violin virtuoso and devoted himself to composition from that point onwards.

While Sibelius never realized his youthful dream, he lived vicariously through the violinists who performed the extensive body of literature he wrote for the instrument. It might surprise some concertgoers that Sibelius wrote two Serenades and six Humoresques for violin and orchestra, an early Violin Sonata and a mature Violin Sonatina in addition to a sizeable number of miscellaneous pieces for violin and piano that span his career from his student days until the very end of his career in the 1920s, before he closed himself off to the world and began over thirty years of artistic silence.

Towering over all of these works is the Violin Concerto, Sibelius’ ultimate tribute to the instrument he loved. It is his only complete concerto for any instrument, and one of the cornerstones of the violin concerto repertoire. First mentioned in Sibelius’ correspondence as early as 1899, it wasn’t until 1903 that he worked on the concerto in earnest in preparation for a premiere in early 1904.

Sibelius announced that he would dedicate his new concerto to Willy Burmester, a student of Joseph Joachim (dedicatee of the Brahms concerto). Burmester served as concertmaster in Helsingfors (now Helsinki) in the 1890s and had embarked upon a solo career based in Berlin. Burmester responded warmly when Sibelius sent him a copy of the score, asserting that the new work was the equal of Tchaikovsky’s violin concerto. It seemed that the success of the premiere was assured.

Yet Sibelius behaved very unprofessionally towards Burmester, for reasons unknown (though the composer’s burgeoning alcoholism may have been partly to blame). Sibelius scheduled the premiere for a date where Burmester was unavailable, so the first performance in November 1904, conducted by the composer, was given to Viktor Nováček, the violin professor at the Helsinki Conservatory. Nováček was not up to the virtuoso demands of the concerto, and the first performance failed to make a positive impression.

Burmester graciously offered to learn and promote Sibelius’ concerto, but the composer withdrew the work from public performance, announcing that he would revise the work before it was performed again. When the revised concerto was finished in 1905, Sibelius inexplicably snubbed Burmester for the premiere in Berlin, instead calling upon Karl Haliř, the Philharmonic’s concertmaster, to be the soloist. Burmester’s patience finally ran out; he took offense at this latest affront, and never performed the concerto.

The revised version of the work largely concentrated on shoring up the proportions of the first movement and making slight changes to the slow movement and the finale. It is a unique work in that it highlights the contrasts between the soloist and the orchestra, rather than a dialogue between the two. In all three movements, the bulk of the melodic material is proprietary to either the soloist or the orchestra, and there is rarely any overt cross-pollination. This permits Sibelius to both write freely and virtuosically for the soloist, while keeping his characteristically dark orchestration. The result is a virtuoso concerto that paradoxically emphasizes its musical values; as such, it is a worthy successor to the concertos of Beethoven and Brahms.
The work opens with icy murmurings in the strings, over which the soloist spins a yearning melody, answered briefly by the clarinet, but musing rhapsodically like an ancient bard spinning a tale of times long past. The rhapsodic quality pervades most of the movement, both in the soloist and the orchestra. Instead of a cadenza to conclude the movement, Sibelius, like Mendelssohn, uses it as a bridge between the brief development section and the recapitulation.

The slow movement unfolds from the opening sighs of the woodwinds to a warm, long-breathed hymn from the soloist, gradually gaining in passionate intensity, singing with utmost ardor over the discreet orchestral accompaniment. One of the most fascinating moments in the movement is where the soloist and the accompaniment are played in opposing rhythmic patterns (3 beats vs. 2 beats).

Donald Francis Tovey described the finale as “a polonaise for polar bears,” though he did not mean it in a derogatory way. Over a relentless ostinato figure in the strings, the soloist dances ferociously, pulling out all the virtuoso stops in a non-stop display of trills, runs, harmonics, and hair-raising double-stops. In the coda, the soloist charges up a final set of arpeggios, silenced only by the abrupt final chord.

**Johannes Brahms: Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68**

Imagine yourself as Edward Everett, the orator who gave a two-hour speech at the Gettysburg battlefield on November 19, 1863, as you listened to Abraham Lincoln’s immortal 272-word address, given immediately after yours. Or put yourself in the place of utility infielder Babe Dahlgren, summoned by Yankee manager Joe McCarthy on May 2, 1939 to start in place of Lou Gehrig at first base, ending the Iron Horse’s streak of 2,130 consecutive games. “Intimidating” wouldn’t even begin to describe the experience.

Many of the composers who followed in the symphonic footsteps of Ludwig van Beethoven must have felt much like Everett and Dahlgren. In the course of composing his nine symphonies between 1800 and 1825, Beethoven stretched, twisted and broke the parameters of the Classical symphony, with repercussions that would resonate through the rest of the nineteenth century. The question all nineteenth-century composers had to confront was: After Beethoven, what exactly IS a symphony?

Johannes Brahms was one of those composers who took time to come to grips with his own response to Beethoven’s legacy, remaining true to the more Classical ideals of Schubert and Mendelssohn. “I shall never write a symphony!” Brahms wrote to his friend, conductor Hermann Levi, in 1873. “You have no idea what it’s like to hear the footsteps of a giant like that behind you,” the giant in question being Beethoven. Even his publisher Simrock chided him about his continued procrastination in producing a symphony, pleading, "Aren't you doing anything more? Am I not to have a symphony from you in '73 either?" As a composer considered to have inherited Beethoven’s mantle, pressures to create a symphony worthy to stand with Beethoven’s Ninth came both from within and from without.

While Brahms had originally sketched out ideas for a symphony in the 1850s, it took him twenty years of working out the details to finish his First Symphony in 1876. While he was perfectly comfortable writing for orchestra (as witnessed by the delightful Serenade No. 1 from 1858), Brahms proceeded with great deliberation before daring to label any of his early attempts as a symphony. An initial prototype of a
D minor symphony was recast as the First Piano Concerto. A second attempt at a symphony turned into a work for two pianos and then into the Piano Quintet. A third symphonic work became the Haydn Variations. After this extraordinary period of gestation, Brahms’ First Symphony was given in Baden in 1876.

If Brahms’ paranoia about living up to Beethoven’s legacy weren’t enough, the conductor of the premiere, Hans von Bülow, dubbed the work “Beethoven’s Tenth,” to Brahms’ great dismay. Some critics and listeners found similarities between Brahms’ First and Beethoven’s Fifth, both of which begin in “tragic” C minor and end in “triumphant” C major. Others noted that the noble tune that begins the Allegro non troppo, ma con brio section of Brahms’ finale resembled the “Ode to Joy” theme from Beethoven’s Ninth (to which Brahms groused “Any ass can see that!”). Rather than exorcising the specter of Beethoven, Brahms’ First Symphony gave it new life, much to the composer’s chagrin.

While the comparisons to Beethoven’s Ninth are certainly appropriate, it is the resonance with Beethoven’s Fifth that is revealed upon closer examination. Beyond the obvious influences listed above, the pervasive presence of the material from the first movement’s introduction appearing in the finale points up the organic level of organization common to both symphonies, showing Brahms not only to have learned from Beethoven on an emotional level, but a technical one as well.

Portentous timpani strokes open the first movement, pounding out a relentless tread beneath chromatic melodic lines in the strings. The main part of the subsequent Allegro incorporates the elements of the introduction in a dramatic sonata-allegro form. The far-reaching development section reaches a roaring climax with both the chromatic lines and pounding timpani from the introduction, before emphatically bringing in the recapitulation. In the final eerie coda, both of these elements return to bring the movement to a quiet but uneasy close.

Hermann Levi felt that the two middle movements were not really symphonic in nature, being more in the character of a lighter work like a serenade or a suite. Thankfully, history has contradicted his judgment, and the two central movements provide welcome breathing space between the titanic outer movements. The second movement sings with a wistful nostalgia, and features a sublimely beautiful melody first heard in the oboe and given to the solo violin in the movement’s final pages. The third movement, rather than being a Classical minuet or scherzo, is more in the character of a gentle intermezzo, its undulating opening clarinet melody creating an air of sweet calm which pervades the entire movement.

The finale’s lengthy introduction does bear resemblance to Beethoven’s Ninth in its reworking of the ideas from the first movement introduction, but the soaring horn solo that follows clears away the gloomy solemnity of the opening. The horn’s melody is heard in canon with the flute, leading to a solemn chorale intoned by the trombones and contrabassoon. A subsequent horn-led climax subsides and leads into the noble string tune of the subsequent Allegro non troppo, ma con brio, with the key now brightening to C major. The finale’s triumph is not free from struggle; the ferocious contrapuntal dialogue of the bulk of the Allegro leaves the issue in doubt until the very end, where the tempo surges headlong into the triumphant coda, driven by an energetic ostinato figure in strings and timpani. The solemn trombone chorale returns in a triumphant blaze in the full orchestra before the final joyful push to the final cadence.