

PROGRAM NOTES: SEPTEMBER 27, 2020

Program notes by Robert Markow

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN: GROSSE FUGE, OP. 133

(1770-1827)

Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* is a work with no superiors and few peers. "Grosse Fuge" translates as "Great Fugue" or "Grand Fugue," and so it is. But Beethoven's title appeared in French: *Grande Fugue*. He wrote it late 1825 as the final movement of his String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130. The prospective publisher, Matthias Artaria, feared for sales with such a daunting, long (about seventeen minutes), difficult finale, and sent an emissary to the composer to request an alternate finale. Beethoven complied, and even himself seems to have understood that the *Grosse Fuge* worked better as a separate entity. Artaria published the *Grosse Fuge* separately in May of 1827 as Op. 133. Beginning probably with conductor Felix Weingartner early in the twentieth century, the *Grosse Fuge* has also been performed on occasion by the string section of a symphony orchestra.

GUSTAV MAHLER: LIEDER EINES FAHRENDEN GESELLEN

(Songs of a Wayfarer)

(1860-1911)

**Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht
Ging heut' morgen über's Feld
Ich hab' ein glühend Messer
Die zwei blauen Augen**

The latter part of the year 1883 was not a particularly joyous time for the 23-year-old Gustav Mahler. Both his parents were ailing, the new conducting position he had secured at the court theater in Kassel turned out to be artistically very limiting, and his love affair with actress and opera singer Johanna Richter came to an abrupt and unhappy end. *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer) may thus be viewed as Mahler's artistic response to autobiographical events, especially to being jilted. The overall tone of the texts (Mahler's own) closely parallels the composer's own grief and heartache. In the opening song, the wayfarer describes how he will feel when his former sweetheart eventually marries another man. For most of its length, the second song portrays joy in the beauties of nature (a theme dear to Mahler), but the ending returns to a grief-stricken mood. The listener is jolted by passionate outcries in the third song, in which the wayfarer imagines a knife in his breast, so intense is his sorrow. He wistfully recalls the blissful days of happiness, now gone. The final song, set to a funereal tread, is the wayfarer's farewell to his sweetheart, to happiness, and, it would seem, to life itself. Mahler originally wrote his *Wayfarer* songs with piano accompaniment in 1883-1884, and later orchestrated them. Listeners familiar with Mahler's First Symphony will recognize themes from the second and fourth *Wayfarer* songs that were incorporated into the first and third movements of this symphony.

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG: TRANSFIGURED NIGHT. OP. 4
(Verklärte Nacht)
(1874-1951)

Drenched in romanticism and hyperemotional expressivity, Schoenberg's tone poem *Transfigured Night* (1899) remains his most popular work. It is the direct descendent of Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, both in its musical language and its subject matter. This was Schoenberg's first major score and his first mature music, originally composed as a sextet for pairs of violins, violas and cellos. In 1917, Schoenberg expanded the scoring for string orchestra, in which form he himself conducted the first performance in Vienna two years later. Then, in 1943, he revised the string orchestra version into the form we usually hear today. Most listeners agree that the fuller sonorities of a string orchestra heighten the emotional intensity of the music.

Transfigured Night is one of the very few examples of chamber music to incorporate programmatic elements. It is a musical depiction of the poem "Zwei Menschen" (Two People) by Richard Dehmel (1863-1920), a leading German poet and playwright of his day. The story line involves a pair of lovers walking through the woods in the cold moonlight. The woman has a terrible confession to make: she is with child, but not by him. The man she now walks with assures her the child will be no burden; his true and deep love for the woman will make the child as his own. A strange radiance fills the night air while the warmth of the couple's love transforms the child from "hers" into "theirs." The two continue walking in the exalted brightness of the transfigured night.