

# Oktoberfest at the Symphony

(October 12, 2024)

## Program Notes by William Cowdery

### Beethoven: *Fidelio* Overture, op. 72c

Beethoven's only opera *Fidelio*—at first titled *Leonore*—was his most heavily and repeatedly revised work. “This child of mine,” he quipped, “has cost me more pain than all the others.” He further owned that “this opera will earn me a martyr's crown” due to its revolutionary apotheosis of political liberty and human love. For this extraordinary drama Beethoven created no fewer than four overtures, corresponding to four successive stagings in 1805, 1806, 1809, and 1814.

The opera's first three overtures are known as *Leonore No. 2*, *No. 3*, and *No. 1*—numbered by the order of publication, not of composition. They are all in C major and create mighty bookends for the opera, balancing its weighty C-major Finale at the end. However, their great power and length—nearly 15 minutes—proved a disadvantage, overshadowing the opera itself, especially its lightweight opening scenes. They are nowadays played almost exclusively as concert pieces.

At last, in 1814 Beethoven created a perfect opening number, the so-called *Fidelio Overture*, which he himself sanctioned for all later performances. He cast this brilliant curtain-raiser in E major, an exceptionally bright key for strings that leads seamlessly into the first scene of the opera (in A major). While less than half the length of the “Leonore” overtures, the *Fidelio Overture* captures the opera's spirit of triumph even more succinctly and forcefully. It encapsulates not only the opera's message of hope and optimism, but indeed the essence of Beethoven's own triumph over physical, political, and personal hardships that so plentifully attended the birth of *Fidelio*.

### Johannes Brahms: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major, op. 77

Brahms spent the summer of 1878 at his favorite resort town, Pörschach am Wörthersee, a charming lakeside village in the Austrian Alps. Having reached the age of 45, he could bask in the recent success of his first two symphonies. His first, in C minor, was hailed as a worthy successor to Beethoven's monumental fifth symphony, and his idyllic second was similarly lauded as an equal to Beethoven's “pastoral” sixth symphony. Hans von Bülow, a noted conductor of the day, had just coined the moniker of the “Thee B's” – Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms – to denote the cream of serious classical composers. Brahms reacted to this flush of fame in a typically self-effacing way, by growing an enormous beard that he would keep for the rest of his life.

His main project that summer, however, took him far from his comfort zone. He determined to create a violin concerto for his long-standing friend and collaborator, Joseph Joachim. Brahms and Joachim were nearly the same age, and they had played concerts together from their early twenties. Brahms was first and foremost a pianist with essentially no skill as a string player. Joachim, on the other hand, was a violinist of high international reputation, who actively composed concertos and other string works for his own use. Brahms, ever the self-critic, had chosen wisely to distance himself from the realm of virtuosic violin composition considering his friend's outstanding achievements.

Against this background, in mid-1878 Brahms sent Joachim a note requesting him to critique “a few violin passages.” What followed was an entire first movement of a forthcoming concerto conceived in gigantic symphonic terms – originally in four movements instead of three. Joachim soldiered bravely into editing Brahms’ inexperienced string writing, providing him with reams of alternate passagework to consider. Brahms did indeed consider it, but then went on to create new material, not copying but building upon Joachim’s ideas. Their collaboration resulted in a blend of technical virtuosity and symphonic intensity quite unmatched in the violin-concerto repertory.

The first movement, at well over 20 minutes, is nearly a concert-length work by itself. Brahms casts it in D major, like his second symphony, and in his beloved meter of 3/4. A long orchestral introduction sets the stage: the solo violin enters over a timpani-roll with a dramatic, extended cadenza. Then three themes, all intensely melodic, arise in succession: a peaceful opening ballad in D major, a meltingly lovely waltz theme in A major, and a dark mazurka motif in A minor. These ideas proceed to play out in many keys, major and minor, through the middle of the movement. This leads to a brilliant final return of the opening D major passage with heightened vigor, the other themes following in due course. Brahms let Joachim insert a cadenza toward the end of the movement, and this cadenza is now used almost universally.

Brahms brusquely scrapped his original four-movement scenario, writing to Joachim: “The middle movements are bust—naturally they were the best ones! I’m writing a poor little Adagio instead.” Contrary to Brahms’ judgement, this “little” Adagio is a 9-minute gem. It opens and closes with wind music only, its melody concentrated in the oboe— a perfect foil to the solo violin, whose role is distilled to a silvery filagree floating above the rest of the orchestra.

The last, and shortest movement pays homage to Joachim’s eastern European heritage; it is a proud cousin of Brahms’ well-known Hungarian Dances (Joachim was of Jewish Hungarian background). Its main theme runs in energetic double-stops for the solo violin. In the final pages, its foot-stomping 2/4 rhythm turns playfully into a triple-time jig and feints at a fade-out before a high-spirited end.

## **The Strauss Musical Dynasty**

From 1825 to 1900 the world of dance music was ruled mainly by the Strauss family of Vienna, including Johann Strauss Sr. and his three sons: Johann Jr., Josef, and Eduard. The father rose to fame during the 1820s in collaboration—and friendly competition—with composer Joseph Lanner. Together Strauss and Lanner popularized the waltz and polka, folk dances in 3/4 and 2/4 respectively, that were quickly finding their way into upper-class ballrooms, salons, and bandstands. They composed hundreds of dance tunes and employed increasingly large orchestras to play them.

Johann Strauss Sr. led an ambitious touring career throughout Europe, even taking him to England for the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838. He had misgivings about passing his stressful trade on to his sons, but their talents soon proved strong enough to carry the banner. Indeed Johann Jr., the “Waltz King,” would raise Viennese dance music to its greatest height and would become an international symbol of musical fame in the late 1800s.

### **Johann Strauss, Jr.: Overture to The Gypsy Baron**

Besides dance music, Johann Strauss Jr. wrote some 18 operettas, of which *Die Fledermaus*, *A Night in Venice*, and *The Gypsy Baron* are best known. The overture to *The Gypsy Baron* sets the stage for comedy and romance in a tale of fortune-telling, hidden treasure, and valiant heroism.

### **Johann Strauss, Jr.: Annen Polka (“St. Anne’s Day”)**

Strauss composed this polka in 1852 for Vienna’s yearly Festival of St. Anne (July 26). It was performed outdoors in the Prater, a large park near the Danube, where music was heard from numerous bandstands. It is a “polka français,” a fashionable new dance refined from the rough-hewn Bavarian polka. This work was to become the young bandleader’s first great success.

### **Josef Strauss: Frauenherz Polka (“Woman’s Heart”)**

Johann Strauss Jr. said of his younger brother, “Josef is the more gifted of us two; I am merely the more popular.” Josef’s *Frauenherz Polka* was written in 1865, just five years before his early death at age 43. It was first played in Vienna’s Volksgarten near the magnificent Hofburg Palace. It is a “polka-mazurka” in 3/4 time, much like Chopin’s mazurkas that accent the second beat of each bar.

### **Johann Strauss, Jr.: Leichtes Blut Polka (“Light of Heart”)**

Of Vienna’s many dances, the most headstrong is the galop or “polka schnell” (fast polka), which apes the heart-stopping pace of a horse race. *Leichtes Blut*, a favorite galop, was first heard in the Volksgarten in 1867.

### **Johann Strauss, Jr.: An der schönen blauen Donau (“On the Beautiful Blue Danube”)**

Far and away the best-known Strauss work, the “Blue Danube” was written in 1866 and first performed at a carnival concert in early 1867 with words sung by a choral ensemble. This vocal version had a cool reception, but Strauss’ orchestral version won high acclaim later that summer at the Paris World’s Fair, and shortly afterward in New York and London. It has attained the stature of an unofficial national anthem of Austria.

### **Johann Strauss, Sr.: Radetzky March**

This rousing march-polka is a signature work of the Strauss patriarch, Johann Sr., who composed it just a year before his death in 1849. It includes a tune sung by soldiers under Field Marshall Joseph Radetzky upon returning from victory in the Battle of Custoza, 1848, which secured Austria’s rule in Venice and northern Italy. At its first performance Austrian officers clapped along mightily, setting a tradition that has stayed with it down to our day.



*Johann Strauss, Jr. and Johannes Brahms. From worldhistory.org*