

Symphony No. 1 Concert Lecture

Ladies and Gentlemen: Thank you for coming to today's concert. For those who came specifically just to hear my piece, I'd like to offer very special thanks. This is a momentous occasion for me personally, and I appreciate your coming to share it with me. I was delighted when Ron invited me to say a few words, as there is a good bit more that I wanted to tell you about the piece that's not in the program notes. Before I get started, if you're interested in learning more about my music or me, please visit my web site at www.tarrh.com. Everything is there: my bio, program notes, musical scores, and recordings – even this lecture is available online.

First, I want to thank Ronald Knudsen and Adrienne Hartzell. The sincerest and most tangible form of thanks that I could possibly give them was to dedicate this piece to them. As I mention in the program notes, their commitment to bringing music to the community is truly extraordinary. As co-chairman of the board of trustees of this orchestra, I have discovered the true depth of their commitment and the unbelievable amount of hard work that they both do to ensure this orchestra's success. You have no idea. But beyond this commitment and hard work, without them I wouldn't be where I am today musically, and this piece would not exist. Without the commission and the commitment to perform the piece, I can't imagine that I could possibly have undertaken the enormous amount of work required to create it.

One of the things that you may not realize is how much of a musical work is not contained in the notes and instructions that the composer writes on the page. So much of a musical performance is the detailed interpretation that the conductor brings. I want to thank Ron for taking what I wrote and turning it into what you're about to hear, and for getting the best possible performance of my piece from this group.

Second, I want to expand on what Bruce Falby told you about my answer to his daughter's question, "How do you write a symphony?" I gave her a very glib answer, "One note at a time." This was just a joke because, while it sounds plausible, this is definitely not how you write a symphony. I thought you all might be interested in how this piece was composed, so that you could understand more about the process. How do you write a symphony?

The short answer is – if you want to accomplish anything in life, you must have a plan. I had 10 months from when I was given the commission to when I had to deliver the music. The only guideline that Ron gave me was that the piece could be anywhere from 12 to 20 min in length. I knew immediately that I would take the full 20 min and that I wanted to write a symphony. I spent half of my total allotted time developing a plan for the piece – figuring out how many movements, how they should relate to each other, and what the symphony would be all about. Before beginning to compose in earnest, I knew that I would have a slow second movement and a fast third movement, that the first movement would introduce the thematic materials of the second and third movements, and that the fourth movement would illuminate these thematic connections. I did some sketching and worked out the principal themes for the second and third movements.

I had a very clear idea of what the third movement, the *Scherzo*, would be. It was inspired by the *Scherzo* of the Sibelius First Symphony with timpani stating the first theme and playing a major role throughout. Further, the form of my *Scherzo* follows Sibelius closely. Unlike Sibelius, in my recap the music is transformed through a reinterpretation of the original meter so that the music is recognizable but, in some fundamental way, quite different. My original conception of the opening theme included the possibility of, and the plan for, this metric transformation. So the *Scherzo* was the movement that I wrote first.

With the plan I had in place for the overall piece, I needed to write the second movement next before the first or last, in order to fully define the two middle movements. While I was composing the third movement, I had been studying Mahler's symphonies. What I discovered was that the early Mahler symphonies are full of Mahler's songs. In fact, if you attended our last subscription concert, you heard

Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer." His First Symphony is full of these songs. While there are no singers in his First Symphony, the musical reference to a text adds meaning to the music. I love this about Mahler's early symphonies because, to me, it enhances the power and expressiveness of the music.

I already had a theme sketched for my second movement and knew the kind of emotional content I wanted to convey: something like the famous *Adagio* by Samuel Barber (but somehow more optimistic) and the *Adagietto* of Mahler's Fifth Symphony (the one that was supposedly intended as a love letter to his beloved Alma but everyone interprets more as a funeral dirge). I had the flash of inspiration that I should do the same thing Mahler had done. I tossed out the theme I had sketched, and orchestrated a song I had written: *With rue my heart is laden*, setting a poem of A. E. Housman from *A Shropshire Lad* (LIV). This was perfect because it contained what I wanted to convey musically. Here's the text:

With rue my heart is laden

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.

By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid;
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.

My composition teacher, Michael Gandolfi, suggested variations on my original setting as a form, and the three variations were thus conceived: the first most like the original song, the second a brass chorale, and the third a somewhat lighter version. By scoring the opening for strings and harp (just like Mahler's *Adagietto*) and, given the tempo that I wanted (which is at the fast end of the *adagio* tempo range), calling this an *Adagietto* was perfectly fitting. My homage to Mahler was complete.

So, I wrote the second movement second. Then I wrote the first movement, which went quickly as I knew what I wanted to accomplish and it was straightforward to modify the thematic materials of the second and third movements for the first movement. The finale also went quickly as I was able to show the thematic connections using only two major sections. I then had the opening section return (this is called a rounded binary form) but with the opening material metrically transformed. And there you have it. This is how my symphony was actually written.

Third, and most importantly, I want to publicly acknowledge and thank my wife and family for all they have done to make this possible. I so appreciate their patience, tolerance, and support for this major undertaking, which meant that I was basically absent for five months while completely obsessed with composing this piece and meeting an unforgiving deadline, which I was able to do with just a few weeks to spare. Thank you.

In closing, if you enjoy today's concert, if you like what you hear, and especially if you like my piece, please do me a very big favor. Make a donation to the NPO (even if you've already donated this year). Ticket sales cover only a third of our costs and, like all arts organizations, it's always a financial struggle. You can give us a check, or donate online with a credit card. It's all tax deductible and will be very much appreciated. And – you'll be helping to support the NPO's mission of music for all.

I hope you enjoy my piece. Thank you.

John M. Tarrh