

The Terpsichorean muse was surely working overtime during the composition of tonight's three works. I think I can guarantee that, if you are not actually dancing your way out of the concert venue, you will at least be humming, tapping a foot, or simply reveling in the rhythms and melodies you just heard. By some measures our program is eclectic: music spanning three centuries (yes!), two languages, and two continents. But, although the cultures of the composers might be totally different, they are rooted in one thing: music—with an emphasis on color, melody and, especially, rhythm.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70 (1884-5)

Allegro maestoso; Poco adagio; Scherzo: Vivace–poco meno mosso; Finale: Allegro

The route to a career in composition must be full of hurdles waiting to trip the aspirant from his chosen path. Some find themselves in a musical family or even, like Mozart or the Bach sons, that of an actual composer. For these, at least some of the obstacles would be absent. Others are born, if not to musical parents, at least to financially comfortable families such as Mendelssohn or Tchaikovsky. At the opposite end of the scale are the peasant children of butchers, innkeepers and the like: Mahler, Verdi, Beethoven—and Dvořák. These were of necessity precocious musicians at a very early age: essential to get noticed and escape their peasant upbringing. But of these, Dvořák's ultimate success is perhaps the most surprising: while certainly a prodigy as a young boy, his father needed him to help him in the butcher shop. Only the unlikeliest of fortunate circumstances let him find his way to study at the Prague Conservatory. But he made very little impression there. His skill as a violist saved him from returning to the Inn at Zlonice to wield the cleaver.

While it is said (and I can attest to it) that music seems to “flow in the blood” of the Central Europeans, and given that Dvořák clearly had more than his fair share of musical genes, yet there was no outstanding teacher of composition for him at the conservatory. To a large extent, his skills as a composer were earned the hard way: personal study, trial and error. He had written many works, including two symphonies, before ever one was performed, let alone published. But, through hard work, including teaching and playing in orchestras, he was ultimately able to match his writing skills to his innate musicianship and begin to get noticed. Perhaps his most important break came in 1878 (at the age of 37) when he, for the fourth time, entered a composition for a prize offered to musicians of the Western half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of the panelists, a certain Johannes Brahms, was so impressed that he prevailed upon Simrock to publish one of his works: the Moravian Duets. Brahms was right—the piece proved so popular that a commission for the first set of Slavonic dances quickly followed. By 1884, Dvořák's international fame was growing rapidly and he was invited to London in March and gave a series of extraordinarily successful concerts, including his sixth symphony. The Philharmonic Society made him an honorary member and in return he promised them a new symphony. This turned out to be the first of nine visits to England where he traveled throughout the country, no doubt enjoying riding on what was then the world's best rail system (he was, like your present author, a train enthusiast). As promised, he gave the premier of his Seventh symphony (D minor), known at the time—due to the fact that his publisher Simrock had not yet published any of his first five symphonies—as his Second symphony. And, while some of his earlier symphonies had tried to follow in the footsteps of Beethoven and Brahms, the seventh—his culmination of that style—was somewhat more formal in structure and impeccably crafted. So, although Dvořák's ninth symphony (“From the New World”) and his eighth are rather more popular, the seventh is considered by some musicologists to be his best.

At the time of the first London trip, however, he was still struggling financially and there were even some inner demons to resolve. Added to his personal struggles was the ongoing unrest among Czechs within Austro-Hungary, the flames of which had never really gone out after the uprisings of 1848. His plan therefore was to write something with a little more conflict and darkness in it. The dark opening and theme, in D minor, definitely has that sense of foreboding (the same key was also chosen by Mozart to open his requiem).

But the ever-cheerful Dvořák simply couldn't sustain it! Witness for example the immediate repeat of the theme in the clarinets—with its element of harmony (they are in "thirds"). And, similarly, the second main theme (introduced by horn and oboe) is in the more uplifting key of Bb major and again, later in the development section, the soaring violins' answer to that opening phrase, and the birdsong-like chirping in the upper woodwinds. Indeed, the first movement, with the one exception, is just one glorious melody after another.

But a more sombre mood does reappear in the second movement set in the relative major key of F. It opens with a gentle but intensely personal "folk" hymn scored, as for four SATB voices: for clarinet, (2nd) oboe and two bassoons. In the usual style of slow movements, it follows the course of a theme and variations which develops into a climactic full court press. The oboe returns with the original theme but to a very different accompaniment. The score of this beautiful movement bore the composer's own footnote: "from the sad years", referring to his mother's death and those of three of his very young children. He later wrote to a friend "What is in my mind is Love, God and the Fatherland."

After these somewhat Brahmsian movements, Dvořák jumps right back over the frontier with a scherzo based on one of the most popular Bohemia dances: the *furiant*, which mixes triple time with duple time in a manner which would soon make you dizzy if you tried to analyze it too closely. But from the very start the violins are playing a kind of Morse code figure in triple time while the lower instruments play a counter-melody in duple time. This all works because each bar has six quarter-notes which can so easily be divided two or three ways. This gem of a movement has been favorably compared to that most quintessential of scherzos: that of the *Eroica*. Keeping to the classical style, however, we transition into a lyrical "trio" section at a slightly slower tempo and a different key. At the conclusion of this section and after a quick acceleration, we are right back at the "da capo" (from the top) although in this case not literally. The music, while superficially the same, is actually quite different.

The finale, returning to D minor, builds the emotional pressure right back on the instant. But we are still very much still in the Czech national style with its rhythms and strange—compared to pure "Western" music—harmonies. As the music builds towards the final chords, the brass reenter to add a sense of depth and finality—by now solidly in the key of D *major*.

Óscar Navarro

II Concerto for Clarinet and Symphony Orchestra

Óscar Navarro was born near Alicante in the Region of Valencia, Spain and has quickly established himself as one of the foremost composers of his generation. He studied music at Alicante, then Valencia, after which he attended the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music to study Scoring for Motion Pictures and Television. He has worked with many orchestras throughout the world and garnered many prizes—both for films and concert works.

This, his second clarinet concerto was commissioned by the Valencia Music Institute and is dedicated to Jose Franch-Ballester and was written at the end of 2011 and into 2012. There are three “movements” (referred to below in the composer’s own notes as sections) but they follow on directly from each other so as to form one continuous sound picture.

For most of the piece, the musical language is tonal with much coloration and a very rich orchestration. The work exploits most of the technical possibilities of the clarinet while in parts, the soloist is treated like the instrument par excellence in all of us: the voice. The first section is divided into two parts, one *cantabile* tinged with an ethnic/new age style; the contrasting second based on the typical flamenco music of Spanish folklore. Here the accompaniment includes one of the traditional flamenco instruments: the palmas. This dance section, with its clappers, takes us into the Adagio. This section, with a minimalist touch, exploits the dynamic possibilities of expression in the clarinet, becoming at times very close to the human voice. The pianissimo and high level of expression come to hypnotize the listener until the climax, when the orchestra takes over in a rush of energy, which in turn gives way to an ethereal, floating image painted by impressionist brush strokes. The spell is broken immediately by the presto, a virtuoso showcase for the soloist, yet built on a dialog with the orchestra.

The music is every bit as full of Spanish flavor and lyricism as you would find in, for example, Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* which we performed a few years ago. But here, especially in the Adagio, we have that added bonus of the movie soundtrack style—that’s to say lots of French Horns! The finale is a whirlwind of notes, though still mostly melodic. Fasten your seatbelts as the music transitions into the section marked “Wild” and beyond!

Arturo Márquez b. 1950

Danzón No. 2

Márquez was born in the Sonora region of Mexico but since his late childhood has lived both in the United States and in Mexico. He studied at Mexico’s Conservatorio Nacional, then in Paris and subsequently at the California Institute of the Arts. He currently teaches at the Music School of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. In the early part of his career he was known for his experimentation with different sounds and for some film scores. But all that changed with his series of Danzones, a set of five more traditionally scored pieces based on the major Cuban art form of the Danzón. The Danzón is a formal dance which derives from the Habanera and which which is also popular in Mexico, especially in the Veracruz (Caribbean) region. The first two are for full orchestra, the other three for smaller ensembles, including Number 5 which is scored for saxophone (or clarinet) quartet.

The composer’s music became known to a much wider audience when Gustavo Dudamel put the second Danzón in the program for the Simón Bolívar Orchestra’s 2007 tour of Europe and America. With its languid Latin melodies and driving rhythms, it is one of those pieces that inspires love at first sight—or rather—at first hearing. If you have a musical bone in your body, you’re going to find it quite irresistible!