

Susanna Sings Strauss

Saturday, May 4, 2019 • 7:30 p.m. • Mark C. Smith Concert Hall, Von Braun Center

SUSANNA PHILLIPS, soprano • **MATTHEW MCDONALD**, bassoon

GREGORY VAJDA, Music Director and Conductor • **HUNTSVILLE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**



CELEBRATING ALABAMA'S BICENTENNIAL

Carl Maria von Weber
(1786–1826)

Overture to Der Freischütz (The Marksman)

Bassoon Concerto, op. 75

I. Allegro ma non troppo

II. Adagio

III. Rondo: Allegro

Matthew McDonald, bassoon

Invitation to the Dance (Aufforderung zum Tanz)

op. 65, arr. Hector Berlioz

INTERMISSION

Gregory Vajda
(b. 1973)

The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes

U. S. premiere

Susanna Phillips, soprano

Matthew McDonald, bassoon

Richard Strauss
(1864–1949)

Four Last Songs (Vier Letzte Lieder), op. posth.

I. Springtime (Frühling)

II. September

III. Going to Sleep (Beim Schlafengehen)

IV. At Twilight (Im Abendrot)

Susanna Phillips, soprano

Richard Wagner
(1813–1883)

*Overture to Der fliegende Holländer
(The Flying Dutchman)*

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Program Notes

Weber

Overture to *Der Freischütz*

Young Max wants nothing more than to win the hand of Agathe, the forester's daughter. But first he must prove himself in a contest of marksmanship, and in a moment of weakness, he decides to enlist the help of supernatural forces to assure his victory.

Der Freischütz (*The Marksman*), Carl Maria von Weber's most successful opera, premiered at Berlin and was quickly heard throughout Europe between 1821-25. It is considered a cornerstone of the Romantic repertoire, its coming-of-age narrative recalling *The Magic Flute* while reveling in Faustian themes. The vivid, carefully crafted orchestration and attention to dramatic detail presage *The Ring of the Nibelung*; Wagner admired Weber's work and sought to emulate and expand on it in his own early efforts.

The compact and evocative overture is often heard in the concert hall. It is a magnificent musical set-piece, painting a woodland scene at once idyllic and ominous while also hinting that the audience can look forward to sunshine peeking through the canopy by the end of the twisted tale.

[ca. 9']

Bassoon Concerto, op. 75

Weber was a guest at the court of Munich in 1811, where he befriended musicians of the orchestra. These associations resulted in a number of *concertante* works for the clarinet as well as the F major Bassoon Concerto, composed for Georg Brandt. It has taken a place of prominence in the repertoire second only to Mozart's Bassoon Concerto in B-flat (1774).

The orchestral bassoon often dutifully anchors the bass, but in truth it is a versatile and sensitive instrument capable of a wide variety of characters. Weber makes good use of the bassoon's thespian bent. The two principal themes of the first movement form a study in contrasts, and the gorgeous second movement could easily be recast for a fine tenor. The bassoon can be quick and nimble, at home with rapid runs and acrobatic leaps—its lithe constitution is on display in the concerto's humorous, good-natured finale.

[ca. 20']

Invitation to the Dance, op. 65,

arr. Hector Berlioz

Weber made his bread and butter as a composer and conductor, but he was also a capable pianist. *Invitation to the Dance*, originally for the piano, was composed in 1819 as a gift for his wife Caroline. It is an early example of the "concert waltz." These are elaborate pieces intended more for listening than for dancing (despite the title in this case). Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Ravel, and many others would later follow Weber's lead, penning concert waltzes for solo instruments and ensembles of all kinds as this Austrian sensation swept the world in subsequent decades.

In 1841, the French composer Berlioz found himself consulted for a Paris production of *Der Freischütz*. Local custom dictated that every grand opera ought to contain a ballet, even if one was not present in the original score. Berlioz could not stomach the idea of some other composer's contribution—not even his own—imposing on Weber's masterpiece, so he arranged *Invitation to the Dance* for the purpose and pasted it right into the second act. [ca. 10']

Vajda

The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes

U. S. premiere

Gregory Vajda's gentle, pellucid setting of this poem by William Butler Yeats was premiered by soprano Eva Batori with the Hungarian Radio Symphony in 2016. It is dedicated to the memory of the composer's father, bassoonist Jozsef Vajda (1947–2016).

Yeats' narrator treats the character of Sorrow as a friend for whom a trio of gifts—one may recall here the three offerings of the Magi—is carefully prepared: a pretty cloak that all will admire, a boat for swift and smooth travels, and shoes of cloth to lighten the feet.

The transparent orchestration beautifully suits this mood, and is designed to complement the *Four Last Songs* of Strauss in performance.

[ca. 8']

Strauss

Four Last Songs, op. posth.

It is humbling to consider that the career of Richard Strauss began in the pre-electric 1880s and continued into the late 1940s, through both World Wars and the transition to an atomic age. The prodigy whose talents once held the attention

of Johannes Brahms lived to eighty-five, his last few years troubled by the devastation and aftermath of Nazi Germany and an image tarnished by reputed associations with the Party.

Strauss loved the soprano voice, and one soprano in particular: Pauline de Ahna, to whom he was married from 1894 until his death fifty-five years later. He wrote several stage roles for her prior to her retirement from performance in 1906; his 1924 opera *Intermezzo* openly parodies their married life.

The *Four Last Songs* (1948) were indeed the last music the composer would create—a fitting apotheosis not only to his own work but to the German Romantic corpus as a whole, beginning as it had with the brilliant drawing-room songs of Schubert a century and a half before.

The chosen texts by Hermann Hesse and Joseph von Eichendorff treat the subject of death in a variety of contexts, sometimes wistful and melancholic but never brooding. The horn is featured within the orchestra, as Strauss' father Josef had been a professional horn player. Considering the large forces employed, these settings are remarkable in their intimacy and highly personal expression. Strauss did not live to hear his swan-songs performed. The collective title was given posthumously by his publisher. They were premiered by Kirsten Flagstad at Royal Albert Hall, with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting, in 1950. [ca. 24']

Wagner Overture to *Der fliegende Holländer*

"It rose from the swamps and billows of my life, drawing me to it with irresistible might," Wagner would later recall. The story of a ghost ship tossed about the coast of Norway, *The Flying Dutchman* was written in the early 1840s, a turbulent period in the young composer's life. Saddled with financial debts he could not possibly pay, Wagner left his job in Latvia for Paris by way of a sea crossing to London. This maritime escape inspired the piece he considered his first real artistic success.

In part thanks to the influence of Meyerbeer, three of Wagner's operas—*Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Tannhäuser*—were staged to some acclaim at Dresden between 1842-45. Soon Wagner's politics would see him driven into exile, but not before Dresden gave him the experience he needed to conceive and execute the bold operatic experiments of later years.

With a nod to Weber, the stormy sea itself is portrayed as a character in the overture, churning beneath a hearty sailors' chorus; with this, Wagner christened his continuing habit of assigning distinct musical ideas, or *Leitmotifs*, to concepts or characters in his musical dramas.

[ca. 12']

GUEST ARTISTS

Susanna Phillips

- Recent Metropolitan Opera roles include Musetta (*La bohème*), Micaëla (*Carmen*), Fiordiligi (*Così fan tutte*), Rosalinde (*Die Fledermaus*); roles at Santa Fe opera include Pamina (*Die Zauberflöte*), Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*)
- Performances with Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Orchestra of St. Luke's, St. Louis Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Huntsville Symphony Orchestra, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Santa Fe Opera, Zürich Opera, Oper Frankfurt
- Concerts in Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, The Kennedy Center
- Co-founder, Twickenham Fest; appearances at Marlboro, Aspen, and *Bravo!* Vail Valley festivals

Matthew McDonald

- Principal Bassoon, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra; former Principal Bassoon, Louisiana Philharmonic
- Solo performances with Cleveland Orchestra, Curtis Symphony, Huntsville Symphony Orchestra, Schleswig-Holstein Symphony Orchestra
- Co-founder, Twickenham Fest; appearances at Tanglewood Music Center, International Double Reed Society

