

***Overture to "Semiramide"***

**Gioacchino Rossini (1792–1868)**

Written: 1823

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Twelve minutes

Gioacchino Rossini was seventeen when he wrote his first opera. During the next twenty years, he wrote nearly forty more operas and then, at the ripe old age of thirty-seven, he retired—fabulously wealthy. Considering that operas generally last several hours, how did Rossini write such a vast amount of material in such a short time?

[I] wait until the evening before the opening night. Nothing primes inspiration more than necessity, whether it be the presence of a copyist waiting for your work, or the prodding of an impresario tearing his hair. In my time, all the impresarios of Italy were bald at thirty.

The primary reason that Rossini could compose so quickly is that he composed according to a set formula. Deep thought or music challenging to the listener was not the point. "Delight must be the aim of this art. Simple melody—clear rhythm," he wrote.

Rossini wrote *Semiramide* in 1823. It is a serious opera about the Assyrian Queen Semiramide. In love with Prince Assur, she kills her husband, the king. However, she soon falls in love with the warrior Arsace, who turns out to be her son. To make matters worse, Arsace really loves another woman, Azema. The ghost of the dead king prophesies that Arsace (his son) will be the next King. A jealous Assur tries to kill Arsace, but gets Semiramide instead. Arsace kills Assur, takes the throne and marries Azema. (Ah, Opera!)

Like his operas, Rossini's overtures follow a set pattern. The overture to *Semiramide* begins very quietly. Over a repeated rhythm, the volume increases continually until a very loud

chord sets up a beautiful slow section. A quartet of horns play the melody here, which comes from the first act. The final fast section is based on a melody from the second act. This section contains several more examples of the volume trick from the introduction; a technique so connected to Rossini that scholars call it the *Rossini crescendo*.

In spite of his speed, Rossini seemed to have trouble with editing. At its premier, the first act of *Semiramide* lasted two-and-one-half hours! Nevertheless, Rossini's reputation was secure. As Thomas Pynchon wrote in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "The point is . . . a person feels *good* listening to Rossini."

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***Living Language***  
**Dan Visconti**

My new concerto for Jason Vieaux is a reflection of Jason's well-earned reputation as the classical guitarist who goes beyond the classical. Inspired by the special scales, expressive ornaments, and playing techniques of indigenous music from across the globe, the concerto explores the idea of music as a kind of "living language", with a simple introductory idea on the guitar expanding and evolving in a series of conversations between soloist and orchestra that transcend style, time, and place. The work is cast in three movements that begin with a simple chant-like melody that continuously transforms itself over three connected movements.

*Living Language* was commissioned by the California Symphony and a consortium including the Reading Symphony, Richmond Symphony, and Fort Wayne Philharmonic for the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Library of Congress, and dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky (2016). -- Dan Visconti

***Symphony No. 8 in F major, Op. 93***  
**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)**

Written: 1811–12

Movements: Four

Style: Both Classical and Romantic.

Duration: 26 minutes

With the fascinating details of Beethoven's well-chronicled life, it is tempting to look for biographical clues to help unlock the meaning of his works. In the monumental *Fifth Symphony*, who doesn't make the connection between Beethoven's deafness and his musical railing against—and eventual triumph over—fate? Things aren't always that evident. While he was writing his *Eighth Symphony*, he was in the process of ending the relationship with his "Immortal Beloved" (Antonie Brentano), and having a major run-in with his rebellious younger brother. He was also spending a lot of time lying sick in bed. Are there any indications of this in the music? None. Instead, the piece is what Beethoven called *aufgeknöpft* : "unbuttoned."

The first movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8* bursts out of the gate without any sort of introduction. What follows is a standard form for the first movement of a symphony. Apart from the lighthearted character of the melodies, what makes the movement humorous is Beethoven's intentional misplacement of the accents in the rhythm. You'll also find humor in the way that Beethoven explores surprising keys other than the home key of F major.

The second movement contains an inside joke. It refers to the German inventor Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, a builder of mechanical musical instruments. He is most famous for inventing the metronome, but Beethoven also used one of his ear trumpets to augment his hearing. The woodwinds play the *tick-tock* of Maelzel's metronome all through the second movement. Even though the rhythm is regular, it's hard to tell where the first beat is! Of

course, the mechanism winds down and the beat stops. Only after a vigorous shaking does Beethoven get it going again, only to abruptly end the movement.

Beethoven is the composer who changed the third movement of a symphony from a moderately paced one, called a *minuet*, to a much faster one that he called a *scherzo*. Here, he reverts to the slower tempo and puts in a few unexpected accents on the wrong beat of the measure. The last movement goes lickety-split and is full of surprising turns in harmony and dynamics. If a comedian today wanted to lampoon the typical ending of a symphony, he couldn't do a better job than Beethoven does himself with the ending of this "Humorous Symphony."

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