

## Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942)

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### **Die Seejungfrau (The Mermaid, Fantasy for Orchestra) (1903)**

It was all because of the “hot” girl of her time, Alma Schindler. Schindler broke Zemlinsky's heart when she dumped him to marry the notable composer, Gustav Mahler. In February 1902, Alma's abandonment of Zemlinsky sent him scribbling furiously away on what would become his masterful orchestral tone poem, *Die Seejungfrau (The Mermaid)*. The work is based on the beloved fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid* (1836), which became a big screen sensation when the Disney film of the same name was released in 1989. The suffering composer identified with the hopeless love story of the Mermaid who saves a Prince from a storm at sea only to fall in love with him. The Mermaid drinks a magic potion (alas, with dire consequences) in order to become human like her Prince, only to discover that the relationship is doomed.

As the tale goes, the Sea Witch warns the Mermaid, “The first morning after he marries another, your heart will break.” This became the basis for Zemlinsky's orchestral fantasy—conjuring a vivid undersea world, which he began writing days before Schindler married Mahler. Zemlinsky delivers a grand, sweeping, late-Romantic portrayal of the Mermaid's love for the Prince, intertwining her adventures with heartbreak in bold, lush, musical strokes. According to biographer Antony Beaumont, Zemlinsky's musical inspiration came from Richard Strauss' tone poem *Ein Heldenleben*.

Scored for large orchestra, the three movements (without titles) follow a broad outline of the Andersen tale. The story is both charming and dark, with characters, places, and emotional states all richly imagined and orchestrated. The work's form becomes increasingly free as it progresses. Be sure to listen for: the solo violin theme representing the Mermaid, turbulent passages illustrating the storm, a section for the Prince's wedding, and other key moments that become transparent for the listener.

Zemlinsky's opening illustrates Andersen's first lines: “Far out at sea the water's as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower, and as clear as the purest glass; but it's very deep, deeper than any anchor can reach.” The first movement's playful first theme transforms into a powerfully evocative storm and its aftermath, while the second movement is more festive—filled with voluptuous music depicting the Mermaid's yearning and devotion to her Prince, and her dreams of love and immortality. The Mermaid, who first leaves the sea for land as the final movement opens, appears in a lyrical theme that the composer explained by noting in the score: “The youngest of the six sisters also was the most beautiful.”

The finale is filled with the heartbreak and sorrow that mirrors Zemlinsky's own life. He revisits motives and themes from earlier in the work over the course of the final movement, which is predominantly lyrical—until it reaches a gripping climax, when the Mermaid discovers the Prince has taken a bride. The Mermaid's

deep despair gradually transforms into a rapturous coda representing her metamorphosis into an immortal spirit.

The premiere of *The Mermaid* took place in Vienna on January 25, 1905, for an organization Zemlinsky had co-founded with Mahler (with whom he had since reconciled), and with his own brother-in-law and fellow composer, Arnold Schoenberg, as well as others. Unfortunately, despite his great talent, Zemlinsky's efforts never reached the heights of his two colleagues. When Zemlinsky died in New York in 1942, after escaping the Nazi regime in his native Vienna, he was all but a forgotten composer...only to rise again with the passage of time.

### Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

*Brahms wrote this concerto for his friend and cellist Robert Hausmann and preeminent violinist Joseph Joachim.*

#### **Concerto for Violin and Cello, op. 102, A minor, Double Concerto (1887)**

An act of betrayal and the loss of a dear friend were key to Johannes Brahms' *Double Concerto* (for violin and cello). Brahms wrote this concerto in the summer of 1887 for friend and cellist Robert Hausmann and violinist Joseph Joachim, the preeminent violinist of their time. Joachim was also Brahms' former best friend, whom he had known since 1853. Everything had changed abruptly when Joachim divorced his wife, Amalie, and Brahms made the pivotal decision to side with her by testifying in court on her behalf. Deeply hurt by this, Joachim severed all ties with Brahms, and they did not speak again for seven years. The *Double Concerto* became a gesture of reconciliation, with Brahms dedicating what became his last orchestral work to Joachim with the inscription, "To him for whom it was written."

*The first public performance of Brahms' Double Concerto was on October 18, 1887 in Cologne, Germany.*

As a violin pedagogue, conductor and composer, Joachim had a major impact on Brahms' career during their years of friendship, inspiring many of his compositions. Brahms had come to rely heavily on Joachim's confidence and advice, both professionally and personally. It was Joachim who had introduced Brahms to such musically influential people as Robert Schumann and Franz Liszt. Joachim had given the premiere of Brahms' *Violin Concerto* (dedicated to him by Brahms), and conducted the premiere of his first piano concerto, as well as other of his works. But Brahms' final orchestral work, the *Double Concerto*, was special.

The *Double Concerto's* signature melodies and grand, sweeping phrases pay tribute to Brahms' cherished friend, and in the end served as the perfect olive branch. For the piece, Brahms combined a solo violin and solo cello, and in doing so, created the sound of an immense stringed instrument with great sonority and range. Listeners should take note as the two instruments are heard together in the opening movement, charging smoothly ahead as a single unit from the top of the fifth position on the violin's highest string to the cello's lowest note, and then back and forth again.

The gesture of writing the piece for Joachim reunion was successful, in that it brought old friends together again. Hausmann and Joachim gave a private

concert to premiere Brahms' work in Baden-Baden on September 23, 1887, with the composer conducting. All three men also gave the first public performance on October 18, 1887 in Cologne.

But as with many works that build popularity over time, Brahms' concerto was not warmly welcomed at the time of its premiere. Critic Eduard Hanslick, who had long admired Brahms' works, wrote, "I do not know of a less important work of our good friend." After the public premiere in Cologne, Brahms told a friend, "Now I know what it is that's been missing in my life for the past few years. . . it was the sound of Joachim's violin." And as you will discover, the *Double Concerto*—eventually found its way back into public favor for good reason.

### **Johann Strauss II (1825-1899)**

*Johann Strauss II is acknowledged as the "Waltz King" and gave the world Die Fledermaus, the pinnacle of Viennese operetta.*

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*The lilt and step of the waltz brings back moments of a time gone by, but also fondly reminds the listener of the beauty of dancing in harmony with a partner.*

### ***On the Beautiful Blue Danube, op. 314 (1866)***

Johann Strauss II's *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* is one of the most familiar and beloved waltzes in the repertoire. Johann Strauss II is not to be confused with his father Johann Strauss, or with the unrelated composer with the same surname, Richard Strauss. All three wrote waltzes, so distinguishing between their music can be challenging. Even without the confusion, a waltz by Johann Strauss I often sounds indistinguishable from one by his son Johann II, who, it should be mentioned, also had siblings who were prominent composer siblings. All of the Strausses as well as Brahms, had not only the waltz in common, but also lived a majority of their lives in the city of Vienna. It was Johann Strauss I who perfected the form of the Viennese Waltz as it is known today.

Unfortunately, Johann I and his son, both successful composers and bandleaders, engaged in a long and ugly rivalry. In his day, Johann Strauss I was a more notable composer than his son, but it was Johann Strauss II who was later acknowledged as the "Waltz King" and who wrote *Die Fledermaus*, the pinnacle of Viennese operetta. Born in 1825, Johann II produced a succession of shimmering waltzes like *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*. Opening in A major with tremolo in the violins (a wavering effect) which evokes beautifully calm waters as dawn emerges, the horns enter with the familiar waltz melody, but not yet in the familiar  $\frac{3}{4}$  time characteristic of a waltz. It isn't until descending chords in the winds lead into a bright modulation into D major that the waltz—well, it indeed *waltzes* in.

The ever-gliding waltz is perhaps the definition of grace. The lilt and step of the waltz brings back moments of a time gone by, but also fondly reminds the listener of the beauty of dancing in harmony with a partner. *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* is one of the most dignified of all waltzes. But Johann Strauss II found a way to bring it to a rousing finish—with ardent essential chords emphasized by a brisk drum roll in the snares. The very charm and inventiveness of Johann Strauss II's music is what makes his work so memorable, so that it is able to stand the test of time.

*Stanley Kubrick used On the Beautiful Blue Danube in the film, “2001: A Space Odyssey” as the movie’s Pan American plane is shown docking a space station.*

In recent years, Stanley Kubrick turned to Richard Strauss and Johann Strauss II in choosing music for his film, “2001: A Space Odyssey.” His selection of the opening passage of Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* for the monolith discovery scene catapulted that once-obscure tone poem into ubiquity. Kubrick’s use of *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* was equally monumental. As the movie’s Pan American futuristic (at the time, anyway) plane is shown docking with a space station, the gargantuan stateliness of these two huge mechanisms dancing with each other changed the world’s view of space technology.

Since finding a welcoming audience after a disappointing premiere, *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* never fails to leave an impression on those who experience its captivating rhythms. As the tale goes, when the composer’s stepdaughter Alice von Meyszner-Strauss asked Brahms for an autograph, the composer replied by scribbling the first bars of the *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* along with the lament, “Alas! Not by Johannes Brahms.”

**Program Notes by Jayce Keane**

*Jayce Keane, who began her career as a journalist for The Rocky Mountain News, has been working in the orchestra industry and writing about music for the last 13 years. A longtime resident of California, she now resides in Colorado.*

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