

## PROGRAM

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIRST SEASON

### **Chicago Symphony Orchestra**

**Riccardo Muti** Music Director

**Pierre Boulez** Helen Regenstein Conductor Emeritus

**Yo-Yo Ma** Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

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Thursday, December 15, 2011, at 8:00

Friday, December 16, 2011, at 1:30

Saturday, December 17, 2011, at 8:00

**Esa-Pekka Salonen** conductor

**Baird Dodge** violin

### **Matheson**

Violin Concerto

Caprice

Chaconne—

Dance

BAIRD DODGE

**World premiere**

**Commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic**

### **INTERMISSION**

### **Mahler**

Symphony No. 6 in A Minor

Allegro energico, ma non troppo

Scherzo: Weighty

Andante moderato

Finale: Allegro moderato—Allegro energico

**Performed to commemorate the centenary of Mahler's death in 1911**

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**Through their commitment to the Center Stage Society, Thursday evening's concert is generously sponsored by Dora J. and R. John Aalbrechtse, in memory of Ted H. Moszynski.**

This program is partially supported by grants from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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## James Matheson

Born 1970, Des Moines, Iowa.

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### Violin Concerto

**W**hile Brahms was working on his violin concerto, he would send his soloist, Joseph Joachim, passages of the score in the mail and ask him to mark the parts which were “difficult, awkward, or impossible to play.” When Berg composed *his* violin concerto—on the opposite shore of the Worthersee from the lake house where Brahms had worked nearly sixty years earlier—he suggested that Louis Krasner, who would play the premiere, move in with him for several weeks, as an on-site reference on violin technique. The collaboration between James Matheson, whose new violin concerto is being premiered at these concerts, and violinist Baird Dodge, is a twenty-first-century updating of this kind of collaborative tradition. Their dialogue—grounded in years of friendship and a rare musical kinship, and driven

by the same desire to produce music that is idiomatic and playable as well as expressive—was conducted mostly by e-mail and telephone this past summer.

On a typical day, Dodge would print out a new installment from Matheson that he had just received as a PDF file and study it at the playground, while taking care of his then six-year-old daughter. He quickly realized that he couldn’t evaluate how playable these isolated chunks were without trying them out on the violin. “Jim had invented passages so original that I had no template to go by,” he recalls. “There was no substitute for taking the instrument out and practicing the often fiendishly hard passages until I could confidently say whether they needed tweaking.” An efficient, high-tech process developed. In a few cases, Dodge recorded passages

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#### COMPOSED

2011

These are the world premiere performances.

#### APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME

25 minutes

#### INSTRUMENTATION

three flutes and two piccolos, three oboes and english horn, three clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three

trombones and tuba, percussion (glockenspiel, marimba, xylophone, vibraphones, bongos, crotales, cowbells, tubular bells, gongs, bass drum, snare drum, tomtoms, tam-tam), harp, piano, celesta, strings

using GarageBand on his old Mac and e-mailed them to Matheson. Sometimes he just called Matheson, held up the phone, and played into it. When he was in Europe on tour with the CSO at the end of the summer, he and Matheson even began texting each other. “Not the idyll of uninterrupted stretches in a summer lake house,” Dodge says, “but doable.” Although their exchanges initially dealt with technical matters of violin writing, the discussions eventually touched on other matters, such as the overall shape of the piece and even details of orchestration.

Friendship is not a necessary condition for productive collaboration. (Louis Krasner was a complete stranger when he first asked Alban Berg to write him a violin concerto.) But it can streamline and deepen the process. For Matheson and Dodge (as with Brahms and Joachim), years of knowing each other, personally and musically, allowed for a kind of shorthand—a telepathic understanding of how music works. “We’re both attracted to dramatic works,” Matheson says. And they are both drawn to music that demands “wide-open ears,” but that, above all, “speaks strongly and directly to the listener.”

Matheson and Dodge met as fellow students at Swarthmore College. That is where Dodge first played Matheson’s *I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees*, a seven-minute piece for unaccompanied violin based on a poem by William Carlos Williams (he has since played several of Matheson’s other

works). In time, the two musicians went their separate ways—Dodge became a member of the Chicago Symphony in 1996 (he was named principal second violin in 2002), and Matheson began the inevitable patchwork life of a composer—teaching; writing; holding various residencies and posts (in 2009, for example, he became director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s Composer Fellowship Program); and accepting awards, including a 2000 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and, just last week, one of the most prestigious honors in the music business: the American Academy of Arts and Letters’ Charles Ives Living, given out only every few years. (A two-year grant, it is intended to relieve a composer from a “patchwork” existence, freeing him or her from the need for any employment other than full-time composition.)

Early in the composition of this Violin Concerto, Matheson and Dodge got together just once, to go over sketches; ironically, it was *so* early that none of the music they tried out that day found its way into the piece Matheson ended up writing. In fact, the original idea Matheson had for the opening movement—an idea he had been attached to for some time—turned out to be a dead end. “Once I decided to start from scratch again,” Matheson says, “the piece finally started to take shape and come together.” After that, the two were in touch nearly every day. Initially, when he was exploring ideas and gathering his thoughts, Matheson listened to nearly every

violin concerto he could find, both old and new. But once his own piece took flight, it developed a life of its own—and, in a pattern that has grown familiar to him, it strayed “significantly from whatever plan I had at the outset.”

The Violin Concerto has three movements: a big, sprawling Caprice—the title itself suggests the impulsive nature of the music; followed by two tightly focused shorter movements—a slow, expressive Chaconne, based on the old idea of variations over a repeating bass line; immediately followed, without pause, by a wild romp of a Dance. Throughout the piece, Matheson was particularly mindful of doing something new in a grand old tradition. As Matheson says,

I really wanted to write something that would acknowledge and contribute to the repertory of concertos for violin without being a slave to tradition. There are a variety of ways that this plays out, in terms of the interaction between the soloist (who, in general, presents most of the material, which is then elaborated upon by the orchestra) and the dominant role that the soloist plays, but also in terms of harmony and texture.

There are, for instance, a number of episodes, particularly in the first movement, in which the soloist leads the orchestra through a variety of shifting, quixotic materials. And the original ideas for many of these

can be traced back fairly easily to the solo violin works of Bach. But it's Bach reimagined with contemporary harmonies, with a modern attention to large-scale structure and, more significantly, to a modern TV-age audience's hunger for the sensibly unpredictable. (I am tube-glued to *Breaking Bad* and *Modern Family*, which are modern masterpieces of “plotting,” insofar as they draw on traditional tropes, while at the same time subverting and upending them).

In plotting the blueprint of this concerto, Matheson had no particular historical models in mind, but his own artistic sensibility—his inner voice, his understanding of the big picture—suggested the direction the piece would take.

My musical heroes include, for instance, György Ligeti, who was in turn a fast admirer of Escher and Mandelbrot. Escher had his twisting subversions of physical reality. Mandelbrot had his magical eye, which interpreted the world through a reductive lens; he could see a universe in an equation, find systemic and structural relationships between a molecule and the object to which it belongs. These are magical thoughts.

I'd never presume to put all of this into a piece of music, but there is something completely overwhelming to me about

thinking about the interplay between the world as we perceive it, with its limitations and imperfections (Escher), and the notion of a sensible universe, in which big things are composed of small things, but painted on a larger canvas.

My concerto certainly doesn't encapsulate these ideas, but to the extent that musical inspiration exists outside of the notes that composers choose, these ideas linger with me, stick to me, and in some indescribable

way, lie at the base of the work that I do.

A footnote. Any musical work born out of deep collaboration, like this Violin Concerto, must ultimately be passed on to a new set of performers. That will happen quickly in this case. The Los Angeles Philharmonic, which joined the Chicago Symphony in commissioning Matheson's concerto, will perform the work in March, with that orchestra's concertmaster, Martin Chalifour, as soloist and Pablo Heras-Casado conducting. ■



## Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.

Died May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

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## Symphony No. 6 in A Minor

**T**he Sixth was the last of Mahler's symphonies to reach the United States, in December 1947, more than forty-one years after the composer conducted its premiere. The Chicago Symphony did not get around to Mahler's Sixth Symphony until 1968, after it had played all the others, including the unfinished Tenth. Even considering the typical fate of Mahler's symphonies—launched with difficulty under the composer's baton, misunderstood and often rejected by audiences and critics, and ignored by major orchestras and leading conductors during

the decades that followed—the neglect of the Sixth Symphony is exceptional.

Mahler was the first to predict the reception of this symphony, the one his wife Alma said was his most personal work. Soon after finishing it, he wrote to Richard Specht, "My Sixth will present riddles to the solution of which only a generation will dare to apply itself which has previously absorbed and digested my first five symphonies." Even during his own lifetime, the Sixth seemed the least likely to catch on. After a handful of performances in 1906 and 1907, all under

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### COMPOSED

1903–1905

### FIRST PERFORMANCE

May 27, 1906, Essen, Germany. The composer conducting

### FIRST CSO PERFORMANCE

January 4, 1968, Orchestra Hall. Antal Dorati conducting

### MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES

October 23, 2007, Orchestra Hall. Bernard Haitink conducting

July 16, 2008, Ravinia Festival. Bernard Haitink conducting

### INSTRUMENTATION

four flutes and three piccolos, four oboes and two english horns, four clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, four bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, six trumpets, four trombones and tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, cowbells, xylophone, bass drum, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, tam-tam, deep bells, rute, hammer, celesta, two harps, strings

### APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME

80 minutes

### CSO RECORDINGS

1970. Georg Solti conducting. London

1979. Claudio Abbado conducting. Deutsche Grammophon

2007. Bernard Haitink conducting. CSO Resound

Mahler's direction, there apparently were no others before his death in 1911. Even in Amsterdam, arguably the earliest camp of Mahler enthusiasts, it was not performed.

The deepest tragedy of Mahler's career was not that he was neglected, unknown, or penniless—he lived the life of a musical celebrity, having become one of the most successful conductors of his time—but that he went to his grave believing that he had failed in his real life's work. When he died in 1911, he did not expect that his Sixth Symphony would ever be played again, and he certainly did not know that people would ever appreciate his music. Arnold Schoenberg, whose own music still has not found a large and sympathetic audience, understood Mahler's profound sadness only too well. In a compassionate article about the composer, he wrote:

How will they seek to answer for this: that Mahler had to say "It seems I have been in error"? How will they seek to justify themselves when they are accused of having brought one of the greatest composers of all time to the point where he was deprived of the sole, the highest recompense found when the artist's faith in himself allows him to say: "I have *not* been in error"?

Perhaps Mahler did not truly believe that he *was* in error. For one thing, important musicians and fellow composers, starting with Schoenberg, valued what his music

had to say and seemed to understand its importance. Schoenberg, who would himself turn traditional harmony on its head, admired "the boldness of harmony" in Mahler's Sixth Symphony. He also wrote an insightful and admiring analysis of the gentle melodies of the Andante.

Both Alban Berg and Anton Webern, the two students of Schoenberg who made history themselves, thought the Sixth Symphony the finest of all Mahler's works. Berg told Webern that Mahler's was "the *only* Sixth, despite the *Pastoral*."

Like nearly all Mahler's symphonies, the Sixth began on a summer holiday. In June 1903, Mahler, his wife Alma, and their little girl Maria arrived at their summer villa in Maiernigg on the Wörther See, where for the third summer Mahler would find the peace that made it possible for him to compose. He spent his days deep in the woods in a small, sparsely furnished *Waldhauschen*—a forest hut remarkable only for the fact that such extraordinary, even visionary, music was written in this plain, dark room.

That summer he wrote two movements of the Sixth Symphony. Alma later remembered how "after



Alma Mahler

he had drafted the first movement, he came down from the wood to tell me he had tried to express me in a theme. 'Whether I've succeeded, I don't know; but you'll have to put up with it.'

The next summer, after another turbulent season as head of the Vienna Opera, Mahler returned to Maiernigg with Alma, Maria, and their new baby Anna. It was the most productive summer of his life: he completed the Sixth Symphony, began a seventh, and wrote the last of the *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the death of children). Alma was particularly disturbed by the intrusion of these songs into their peaceful family holiday: "I cannot understand bewailing the deaths of children who were well and happy,

barely an hour after hugging and kissing them." She saw unwanted dark clouds, too, in the symphony's scherzo: "In the third movement he represented the unrhythmic games of the two little children, tottering in zigzags over

the sand. Ominously, the childish voices became more and more tragic, and, at the end, died out in a whimper."

But there was nothing in this new symphony more ominous

than the finale. "In the last movement," Alma wrote, "he described himself and his downfall, or, as he later said, his hero: 'It is the hero on whom falls three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled.' Those were his words." Alma was worried by this dark, tragic work—for a while Mahler even called it his *Tragic* Symphony—and she feared that her husband, in writing this music, had altered forever the happiest time of their life together. Later, after fate had played its horrible role, Alma would write:

No work had poured from his heart so directly as this one. We were both in tears. So deeply did we feel this music and the sinister premonitions it disclosed. The Sixth is Mahler's most personal creation and a prophetic one at that. In it, as in the *Kindertotenlieder*, he truly anticipated his own personal life.

In reviewing the sad events that followed the completion of this symphony, it is difficult not to admit a parallel with the three blows of fate Mahler had etched in music. In 1907, bad press, controversy, and rising anti-Semitism forced Mahler from his prestigious post as head of the Vienna Opera. That summer, soon after the family retreated to Maiernigg, Maria, the older daughter, fell ill with scarlet fever and died within weeks. Before Mahler could begin to recover from this shock, his serious heart condition was diagnosed—the final blow



**Mahler with his daughter Maria on the terrace at Maiernigg.**

that would ultimately fell him as a tree is felled, to use his own words.

Whether it was prophesy, tempting fate, or simply music, the Sixth Symphony is Mahler's only tragic work in the truest sense—the only one that fails to rise to victory, the only one in which the unnamed hero is utterly defeated at the end. No other work so unrelentingly asserts a single key: three of the four movements are planted in A minor, and, although Mahler is known for the way his symphonies end in keys never suggested by their openings, here he seems unable to escape the grim pull of A minor, and the final page ends with the same low A with which the first movement opens.

The work begins with military music—not the leaden funeral marches of the Second or Fifth symphonies, but a quick, driven march—soldiers' music remembered from his childhood. There is the recurring sound of drums; Mahler calls for a larger contingent of drums and percussion here than in any other symphony. The march ends with a sound that becomes the symphony's motto: a brilliant major triad that turns to minor while the drums pound the drillmaster's rhythm. After a quiet wind chorale, the impetuous "Alma" theme takes wing in the violins—a "great soaring theme," as Alma described it—and each time it returns throughout the movement, it is slightly changed, as elusive and bewitching as Alma herself.

Later, when the music calms, we hear from the distance the sound of cowbells. Knowing that, in 1906,

conductors and percussion players surely did not expect cowbells in their symphonies, Mahler added a footnote to the score suggesting that "the cowbells should be played with discretion—so as to produce a realistic impression of a grazing herd of cattle, coming from a distance, alternately singly or in



After a performance of the Sixth Symphony in 1906, a caricature of the composer and his extensive percussion battery ran in the German press. The caption reads: "My God, I've forgotten the motor horn. Now I shall have to write another symphony."

groups, in sounds of high and low pitch. Special emphasis is laid on the fact that this technical remark admits of no programmatic interpretation." Later, however, Mahler did say that the cowbells "are the last earthly sounds heard from the

valley far below by the departing spirit on the mountain top.”

Mahler originally planned to follow the great sonata-form first movement with the scherzo, placing the calm Andante before the vast finale. But at the time of the symphony’s premiere, in Essen in May 1906, he reversed the two inner movements. The first published score, however, kept the scherzo before the Andante—though with a note about Mahler’s second thoughts—and it is this sequence that most conductors today, Esa-Pekka Salonen included, prefer, despite Mahler’s own apparent change of heart.

Mahler may have contemplated delaying the scherzo because it is so closely related to the mood of the first movement. Certainly the opening, with its driving A minor rhythm, sounds as if it belongs to the previous music. Two gentle trios interrupt the scherzo, both rocked by the totterings of little Anna and Maria, one in F and one in D (the keys, not coincidentally, in which the exposition and development of the first movement had come to rest). There is a great, prophetic orchestral scream—a premonition of the finale—just before the end, and then the last zigzagging of the two children.

The Andante, set in E-flat major, the most remote key from A minor in the tonal system, does indeed seem to come from another world, although it is still touched by the tragic tone of the previous movement. One could learn forever from following this exquisite music, so delicate that a

single note can disrupt the mood, casting sun or shadow, so subtle that a seemingly commonplace phrase is made unforgettable by an unexpected harmony or an added beat, like an extra breath. The cowbells sound from the valleys below, and the spirit of the *Kindertotenlieder* hovers.

The finale is, in every sense, one of the biggest movements in Mahler’s output, building slowly and masterfully through three massive climaxes, each crowned by a hammer blow. The music is richly varied and even quotes passages from the earlier movements. Mahler calls for a great array of instruments, including, of course, the sledge hammer. A cartoon in the German press in 1906 showed Mahler in despair over his Sixth Symphony: “My God, I’ve forgotten the motor horn. Now I shall have to write another symphony.”

The music is deadly serious. It begins with an echo of the scream from the end of the scherzo—an unsettling explosion that unleashes sounds exotic even by Mahler’s own standards. From there, Mahler moves through music of sweeping complexity—his command of counterpoint is particularly impressive—toward the first of the hammer blows, a climax that lands in unexpected harmonic territory as the hammer falls *fff*. Twice more, through vast and meticulously charted stretches, Mahler approaches exultation. And again, the hammer falls. At the end, nothing is left but a few threads of sound, one last horrible lunge, and the deathly sound of A minor.

This music was not easy for Mahler to bear. Alma remembered that

None of his works moved him so deeply at its first hearing as this. We came to the last rehearsal, the dress rehearsal—to the last movement with its three blows of fate. When it was over, Mahler walked up and down in the artists' room, sobbing, wringing his hands, unable to control himself.

At some point after the first performances, Mahler decided to

omit the third hammer blow—the one that fells the hero. (At these performances, Esa-Pekka Salonen omits it as well.) But Mahler could do nothing about the blows of fate that would soon befall him, and nothing could stop the heart condition that was already weakening him and shortly would kill him. ■

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**Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.**

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