

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Karl Goldmark

Born May 18, 1830, Keszthely, Hungary.

Died January 2, 1915, Vienna, Austria.

Violin Concerto in A Minor, Op. 28

Goldmark composed his violin concerto in 1877 and it was first performed in Bremen, Germany, that year. The orchestra consists of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-six minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Goldmark's Violin Concerto were given at the Auditorium Theatre on February 14 and 15, 1902, with Olive Mead as soloist and Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on November 23 and 24, 1984, with Christian Altenburger as soloist and Leonard Slatkin conducting.

Today, Karl Goldmark is one of music's nearly forgotten composers. When the Chicago Symphony played his *Country Wedding* Symphony in 1992 (our most recent Goldmark performances), it was the first time Goldmark's one-time runaway hit had appeared on the Orchestra's subscription concerts in fifty-six years. But Goldmark was once one of the most popular composers in the repertory; his music was featured in all but three of the orchestra's first twenty-five seasons. Both the *Country Wedding* Symphony and the overture *In Springtime* were staples of the Theodore Thomas era. For the Audience Request program held in 1900, Goldmark's *Sakuntala* Overture received more votes than Beethoven's Seventh or Schubert's *Unfinished* symphonies. Frederick Stock, Thomas's successor as music director, recorded two of Goldmark's works with the Orchestra.

Times change. The recently published *Rough Guide to Classical Music*—a self-described “who's who” compendium—discusses 194 composers, including out-of-the-way figures such as Gregorio Allegri, Grazyna Bacewicz, and Antoine Brumel, but it does not make room for Goldmark. Amazon.com lists only one recording of the *Sakuntala* Overture and just a handful of available versions of Goldmark's once ubiquitous symphony.

Goldmark's lifespan encompassed those of Brahms and Mahler, two composers whose popularity has only increased while his has dimmed. He and Brahms were quite good friends, beginning in the 1870s in Vienna, where they regularly moved in the same circles. In 1875, Goldmark sat with Brahms and Eduard Hanslick, the prickly Viennese critic, on the three-member Austrian Commission charged with passing judgment on the work of promising young composers. (Last year, a letter dated August 20, 1875, from the composer to Hanslick requesting the renewal of a loan, was advertised for sale for \$500.) After the premiere of Goldmark's opera *The Queen of Sheba* in March 1875, no one was more popular in Vienna than Goldmark. (Part of the opera had been previewed at a Viennese charity concert in 1874 that also included Liszt and Brahms on its all-star roster.) *The Queen of Sheba* quickly conquered Europe and later had triumphant runs in New York and Buenos Aires. In 1894, the Chicago Symphony program book stated that “Ever since 1875 Goldmark has been recognized as the only thoroughly successful German opera composer since Richard Wagner.”

Although Goldmark remained friendly with Brahms (they went to Italy together in 1878—he and Mahler were never close. In fact, Goldmark sat on the jury with Brahms in 1881, when the young Mahler submitted his dramatic cantata *Das klagende Lied* for the Beethoven Prize and was rejected outright. Later, when Mahler ran the Vienna Opera, he regularly conducted *The Queen of Sheba*, a work that

enjoyed the kind of public favor his own symphonies never achieved during his lifetime. Then, of course, in one of music's greatest turnarounds, Mahler's music moved from near-obscurity to cult status, while Goldmark's works slowly disappeared from the opera stage and the concert hall.

Goldmark had seen the musical world change around him—he was born the year of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* and lived into the heyday of Schoenberg and Stravinsky—but he didn't embrace the avant-garde. When Jean Sibelius was his student for a short time in the early 1890s, Goldmark urged him to model himself on Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven rather than upstarts like Berlioz or Wagner. “Work over your ideas so that they have greater inner character. Beethoven recast his some fifty times,” he said. Goldmark evidently saw himself as something of an outsider to the great musical tradition, although he may have overstated the originality of his career when he said, “Unable to be a pioneer and unwilling to be a fellow traveler, I went my own way.”

Goldmark's only violin concerto is a testament to his love for earlier masters, Mendelssohn in particular. It was composed in 1877, just a year before the violin concertos by Brahms and Tchaikovsky, works that were once no more beloved or frequently played than this piece. It is a fine and often inspired work, and its absence from orchestral programs today is unjustified. Although it begins stiffly with a sturdy marching theme, once the violin enters, Goldmark begins to spin the kind of irresistible lyric song that fills *The Queen of Sheba* and his later operas. Goldmark was a violinist himself, so the solo writing is particularly natural and felicitous, even in the showiest passages. The slow movement, hushed and eloquent, is a Mendelssohnian song without words, ever-so-slightly colored by Goldmark's enthusiasm for Wagner's harmonic language. The colorful finale, dancelike, virtuosic, and endlessly singing, may well have been in the mind of Goldmark's student Sibelius when he wrote the “polonaise” that concludes his own violin concerto more than a quarter-century later.

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

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