PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Robert Schumann
Born June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Saxony, Germany.
Died July 29, 1856, Endenich, near Bonn, Germany.

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 97 (Rhenish)

Schumann composed this symphony between November 2 and December 9, 1850, and conducted the premiere on February 6, 1851, in Düsseldorf, Germany. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Schumann’s Rhenish Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 29 and 30, 1893, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given at Orchestra Hall on April 14, 15, 16, and 19, 2005, with Leonard Slatkin conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 22, 1941, with Carlos Chávez conducting, and most recently on July 30, 1994, with Hugh Wolff conducting.

For the record
The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Schumann’s Rhenish Symphony under Daniel Barenboim in 1977 for Deutsche Grammophon.

In his best-selling neurological case study, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, Oliver Sacks tells of Dr. P., an eminent musician and professor, who can no longer make sense of what he sees. He relies on Schumann's music to keep his bearings, and every action in his daily life is linked to a musical theme. Sacks, a British neurologist (best known for Awakenings, which was made into a motion picture starring Robert DeNiro and Robin Williams, and for a new bestseller, Musicophilia, published late last year), explains: "The real hero of Hat is surely music—the power of music to organize and integrate, to knit or reknit a shattered world into sense."

The year Robert Schumann was born, his father was attacked by a nervous affliction that troubled him the rest of his life. Schumann’s own medical history is full of mysterious ailments and breakdowns, depression, hallucinations, persistent trembling, a recurring fear of sharp metal objects, and—most painfully for a musician—tinnitus, a constant ringing in the ears. A recent study indicates that his mental instability first showed up when Schumann was in his teens. In 1844, at the age of thirty-four, when he suffered his worst breakdown, composing was out of the question and he couldn’t even bear to listen to music, "which cuts into my nerves," he complained, "as if with knives." Certainly in his last years, when syphilis caused his decline, music didn't have the power to reknit his shattered world, although he spoke of "wonderfully beautiful music" constantly playing in his head. In February 1854, just before he was institutionalized, he was haunted by devils and visited by angels who sang to him in E-flat; he finally ran out of the house and threw himself into the Rhine.

The fishermen who saved him and took him home to his wife Clara didn't recognize one of Düsseldorf’s most distinguished citizens, the famous composer who, only four years earlier, had written his last symphony in loving tribute to the Rhine River. Even in 1850, when Schumann began this E-flat symphony, he wasn't in the best of shape. He and Clara had recently moved to Düsseldorf—with some misgivings once he learned of the lunatic asylum there, for he didn’t like to be reminded of mental instability. At first, Schumann was unable to compose there because of the street noise. A visit to
Cologne in late September 1850 greatly inspired him, and in October he began his cello concerto and, on November 2, a new symphony in E-flat. The first movement was sketched in a week and, despite taking time out for another trip to Cologne, the entire work was finished by December 9.

Although Schumann sometimes is criticized for being unsympathetic to the symphonic language, the magnificent opening of this E-flat symphony argues otherwise. Here is a grand, striding theme that is both broad and powerful, obviously conceived in orchestral terms and ideal for symphonic treatment—Schumann writing for orchestra with the same command we find in his piano music.

Schumann originally called this music "a piece of life by the Rhine." He had already captured the Rhine in song—the majestic "Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome" (In the Rhine, in the holy river) from Dichterliebe, for example—but now, working with the full orchestral palette, Schumann creates one of the great German romantic musical landscapes. It's a landscape by suggestion, for this isn't a programmatic symphony; like Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, it's "the expression of feelings rather than painting." (Unlike Beethoven, Schumann doesn't include bird calls or thunderstorms to cloud the issue.)

If the Rhenish Symphony suggests Beethoven at all (and few musicians at the time saw the resemblance), it's the Beethoven of the Eroica Symphony, also in E-flat. In the vast unfolding of his first movement, Schumann is working on a Beethovenian scale, and with material worthy of the grand dimensions. It's largely through the sheer power of his main theme that Schumann sustains such an impressive movement, for development of the classical sort was never his strength, and even here he relies on simple, sequential repetition in place of thematic sleight of hand. There's a splendid surge of energy—and a new melody, cleverly placed—just before the end.

The next two movements are modest, taking their cue not from Beethoven's Eroica, which reaffirms the grandeur of its opening with each following movement, but from the "slow" movement of Beethoven's Eighth, famous for daring to be so unassuming. Schumann first gives us a slow ländler, with a lovely rolling theme in the low strings, as a gentle alternative to the traditional scherzo. A tiny slow movement, as delicate in dimension and scope as any of Schumann's miniatures for solo piano, follows.

The fourth movement is really part of the finale—a grand processional leading to a triumphant conclusion—even though they're written as two separate sections. The inspiration for this majestic and solemn music came to Robert on the Schumanns' second trip to Cologne, in November 1850, for the installation of the archbishop of Cologne as cardinal which was held in the magnificent cathedral there. Schumann immediately sets the ceremonial tone with a simple chorale in E-flat minor for three trombones. The music moves majestically, growing in strength and polyphonic complexity. And then, with the swift entrance of a striding new theme, Schumann launches his finale, an uncomplicated song of triumph in E-flat major. The "cathedral music" returns near the end, transformed by its bright new surroundings; a passing reference to the symphony's bold opening leads to a volley of E-flat chords.

Schumann conducted the first performance of the Rhenish Symphony on February 6, 1851, in Düsseldorf. Just three years later, he was confined to a private asylum in nearby Endenich. Clara wasn't allowed to see him for nearly two and a half years; when she finally visited him on July 27, 1856, Schumann (unlike Dr. P.) recognized his wife at once, but he was unable to speak intelligibly. When he died two days later, Clara and the young Johannes Brahms were at his side.

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

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