



# BILLINGS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA & CHORALE

*Inspire your Imagination*

**Bright Lights & Rising Stars**  
**October 10, 2009**

## **Program Notes**

By Chris Morrison

### ***Chasing Light...***

**Joseph Schwantner (1943- )**

In 2007, Joseph Schwantner – Pulitzer Prize winner and two-time Grammy nominee – was selected as the composer for the second cycle of the nationwide Ford Made in America project, the largest orchestral commissioning consortium ever in the United States. The product of this commission, *Chasing Light...*, received its world premiere on September 20, 2008, with the Reno Chamber Orchestra conducted by Theodore Kuchar. Orchestras in all fifty states are slated to perform *Chasing Light...* during the 2008-9 and 2009-10 concert seasons.

Mr. Schwantner has written the following program note:

“One of the special pleasures of living in rural New Hampshire is experiencing the often brilliant and intense early morning sunrises, reminding one of Thoreau’s words, “Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me” (Walden). *Chasing Light...* draws its spirit, energy and inspiration from the celebration of vibrant colors and light that penetrate the morning mist as it wafts through the trees in the high New England hills. Like a delicate dance, those images intersected with a brief original poem that helped fire my musical imagination.”

### **Chasing Light...**

Beneath the sickle moon,  
sunrise ignites daybreak’s veil  
Calliope’s rainbowed song  
cradles heaven’s arc  
piercing shadowy pines,  
a kaleidoscope blooms  
morning’s embrace  
confronts the dawn

“The four-movement work, about eighteen minutes in duration, proceeds from one movement to the next without pause. Each movement’s subtitle is associated with a pair of lines from the poem.

“I: ‘Sunrise Ignites Daybreak’s Veil’ opens with an introduction containing three forceful and diverse ideas presented by full orchestra: (1) a low rhythmic and percussive pedal point on “F” followed by (2) a three-note triplet figure in the brass overlaid by (3) a rapid swirling cascade of arch-like upper woodwind phrases cast in a stretto-like

texture. These primary elements form the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic materials developed in the work. Following the introduction, the strings present a theme derived from the pedal point rhythmic gesture and the brass three-note figure leading to an extended series of upward thrusting six-note sonorities and a long increasing assertive line (first brass, then later strings and woodwinds) partitioned into two parts. The movement ends with a return to the introductory material and a sustained pitch on “G” providing a link to the next movement.

“II: ‘Calliope’s Rainbow Song.’ The rapid arched woodwind phrases in the introduction to the first movement, occur in a variety of divergent contexts throughout the work, not only as small scale gestures but in larger more extended designs. Cast in a major arch-like palindrome form, this movement begins softly, first with solo clarinet followed by a repeated piano sonority that forms the structure of a theme played by solo flute. Gradually, this theme builds to an exuberant midpoint, followed by sections that appear in reverse order finally ending quietly and gently with solo clarinet and a high ethereal violin harmonic on “A” that carries over to the third movement.

“III. ‘A Kaleidoscope Blooms,’ a slow expressive and elegiac movement for oboe, opens with a low dark repeated pedal played by piano, contrabass and tam-tam. Sudden rapid woodwind gestures contrast and frame a succession of gradually ascending oboe phrases that accumulate ever-greater urgency as the music approaches its maximum intensity at the end.

“IV: ‘Morning’s Embrace Confronts the Dawn.’ The rapid and aggressive woodwind phrases in the first movement now emerge in delicate and shimmering string textures. These earlier elements prepare for a stately but urgent chorale theme that builds forcefully to the palindromic music of the third movement, the introductory materials of the first, and a final climatic conclusion.”

### ***The Muse and the Poet, Op.132*** **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)**

A famous composer, pianist, organist, and writer on diverse subjects, French composer Camille Saint-Saëns was also quite a world traveler, visiting places as far-flung as Southeast Asia and the Americas. In 1908, having completed the score for the film *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise* – often cited as the first original film score ever – he decided to take a recuperative trip to North Africa, and it was in Luxor, Egypt in late 1909 that he completed *The Muse and the Poet*. Originally a piano trio and later orchestrated, the work was described by Saint-Saëns as “a conversation” between the violin and cello soloists “instead of a debate between two virtuosos.” He wasn’t the source of the work’s title – his publisher Jacques Durand was – but Saint-Saëns endorsed the notion that the lyrical violin represents the Muse, and the more active, excitable cello the Poet. The composition’s peaceful opening leads into a more aggressive central section, with long solos for the violin and cello, that culminates in a restless cadenza for the cello. The violin briefly calms the mood, and the final section recalls the opening music before a lively coda.

### **Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major** **Franz Liszt (1811-1886)**

The Hungarian pianist-composer Franz Liszt was one of the nineteenth century’s most famous musicians – renowned for his extravagant stage presence, his formidable piano technique (he was possibly the greatest pianist of his time, or even of all time), the riotous enthusiasm of his audiences, his colorful and sometimes progressive compositions, his generosity to musicians and charitable organizations, and occasionally his romantic dalliances.

Initial sketches for the Piano Concerto No. 1 date back to 1830, when Liszt was a nineteen year old student. Most of the work on the Concerto (including some orchestration help from his students) was done in the late 1840s, with revisions in 1853 and after its premiere, on February 17, 1855 in Weimar, with Liszt as soloist and Hector Berlioz conducting.

Nominally in four connected movements, the Concerto feels like a coherent whole, due partly to Liszt’s technique of “thematic transformation.” A handful of melodies recur throughout the work, constantly taking on new forms. Take

the idea that opens the Concerto: heard initially as an imperious gesture for the strings, followed by a two-note answer from woodwinds and brass, this melody is heard again, gently, in the first movement, in lyrical and aggressive guises in the third, and powerfully in the fourth.

It is said that Liszt and his son-in-law, the famous conductor-pianist Hans von Bülow, came up with somewhat mocking words for this opening theme: “Das versteht ihr alle nicht, haha!” (“None of you understands this, ha ha!”) Perhaps this was their way of acknowledging that there is more substance in this Concerto than the surface flash might indicate.

Flash and fireworks there are – thundering octaves and arpeggios from the pianist, portentous brass and lively march rhythms from the orchestra. Most of these are evident in the first movement. After the opening gesture mentioned above, the piano has a virtuoso cadenza. The mood turns lyrical as the piano meditates on the opening theme, joined eventually by the clarinet. A blustery episode and another mellow interlude are rounded off by a gentle run up the piano that leads into the second movement. A peaceful theme, heard first in the strings, is tenderly elaborated on by the piano. The mood turns tense and passionate in a central section, before woodwinds take up a new theme backed delicately by piano and strings.

The playful scherzo is announced by the triangle, whose prominence throughout the movement led the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick to dub the work “The Triangle Concerto.” The finale, in march rhythm, recaps and develops ideas from the previous movements, all weaved together by the active piano. What Robert Schumann said more generally about Liszt’s playing applies here: “Within a few seconds tenderness, boldness, exquisiteness, wildness succeed one another; the instrument glows and flashes under the master’s hands...”

### **Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551 “Jupiter” Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**

Mozart spent the last ten years of his life in Vienna, after his career had lost some steam and he had decided to leave Salzburg, his birthplace and longtime home. At first, he enjoyed some successes in his new city: subscription concerts in 1784 were well attended, and the opera *Le nozze di Figaro* was extremely popular when it premiered in 1786. But his next opera, *Don Giovanni* – a big success in its first performance in Prague in May 1788 – hadn’t done well in its Vienna performances later that year.

Finding himself so financially strapped that he was unable to pay his rent, in June 1788 Mozart and his family moved out of central Vienna to a cheaper home in the suburbs. That same month he wrote the first of several pleading letters requesting loans from friends. In one of these letters Mozart mentions a series of “Casino” concerts coming up later that year, and his grand final trilogy of symphonies, Nos. 39-41 – produced in an astounding two months, from late June to early August 1788 – were possibly intended for that series. Or it may simply have been, as Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein has suggested, that the symphonies were written for “no occasion, no immediate purpose, but an appeal to eternity.”

The triumphal Symphony No. 41 is known as the “Jupiter,” a title that, according to Mozart’s son, came from Johann Peter Salomon, the violinist-impresario famous for having brought Mozart’s friend Franz Josef Haydn to London. The first movement opens with a theme partly assertive, partly gentle that is repeated quietly with ornaments from flute and oboe. Two other themes are stated, one sweetly lyrical, the other a dainty tune that originated in an aria (“Un bacio di mano,” K. 541) Mozart wrote for someone else’s opera. The development section begins by making something rather dramatic of the dainty tune. After turning back to the opening theme, the development leads naturally into a recapitulation of the main ideas.

The second movement is remarkably intense, given its quiet and restraint. Several themes spin themselves out with variations and delicate embellishments. The aforementioned Haydn was so moved by this movement that he alluded to it in his own Symphony No. 98, written weeks after Mozart’s death in 1791. The Minuet, with its easy grace and lovely woodwind coloration, retains some of the restraint of the preceding movement. By contrast, the finale is a whirlwind of activity. Mozart’s remarkable contrapuntal facility is on display here, particularly in the symphony’s final moments where he combines no fewer than five separate melodic lines in an overwhelming peroration.