

Oakville Symphony Program Notes

April 2 & 3, 2022 at the Oakville Centre

Featuring guest conductor Lorenzo Guggenheim and guest artist Stephen Sitarski

Amice Mary Calverley (1896 – 1959): Variations on a Harmonic Theme for orchestra (1929)

<i>Theme:</i>	<i>Broad</i>			
<i>Variation</i>	<i>I: Tranquillo</i>	<i>II: Piu mosso</i>	<i>III: Piu lento</i>	<i>IV: Canon and Fugue</i>
	<i>V: Presto, piu mosso</i>	<i>VI: Vivace</i>	<i>VII: Sostenuto</i>	<i>VIII: Adagio</i>
	<i>IX: Maestoso</i>	<i>X: Andante</i>	<i>XI: and Finale</i>	

Amice Calverley was born in England, lived in South Africa, and then Canada. She studied music in Toronto before winning a scholarship in 1922 to the Royal College of Music in London, where she worked with Vaughan Williams. In 1926, she became interested in Egyptian archaeology, in which discipline she achieved a considerable reputation. However, her relatively small output of compositions continued during the 1920's, including *Variations on a Harmonic Theme* in 1929. Calverley resumed her connection to Canada in about 1940, when she bought an old coach house on King Street, Oakville, for \$1500, and renovated it as a home for several times that amount.

Today's *Variations* begins with the main theme, which perhaps echoes "*O Canada*" in its few opening bars. Although "*O Canada*" did not become the national anthem until much later, it had been recognised as an important patriotic song since its composition in 1880, so it may well have been known to Calverley. After the opening theme, there are eleven variations, and a finale.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827): Violin Concerto: Op.61.

I: Allegro ma non troppo II: Larghetto III: Rondo

Beethoven played the violin as a boy – apparently quite disastrously according to those who heard him – and for a while he was a violist in the Bonn Court Theatre. He began to compose a violin concerto in 1792 but abandoned it. The concerto to be heard in this program was completed in 1806, during a period of great productivity for Beethoven when he composed numerous well-known works, such as the Appassionata Sonata, the Fourth Symphony, and Fourth Piano Concerto. The score was completed barely in time, so that the first performance, in Vienna, was given essentially without rehearsal. It seems that the work was considered too long to be played without a break, and so the first movement was played before the interval, and the others afterwards. (We will not continue this tradition!)

The work is thoughtful and graceful, and contains some of the most sublime music ever written for the violin. Beethoven's inscription refers to "clemency", given the relaxed nature of the piece. It begins unconventionally, with four quiet drum taps, and with a similar rhythm to the famous opening of the Fifth Symphony, but here with a different pace and mood. A flowing woodwind melody establishes a tranquil setting for the whole concerto. Several themes are introduced, and there is a minor outburst in the strings, before the soloist finally enters, repeating many of these ideas in a more relaxed and freer style. The development section of the first movement is quiet and mysterious, with the violin soaring above the orchestral texture. The four note figure from the opening is often heard in the background, and ultimately rather forcefully in the full orchestra, before a recapitulation and a cadenza.

In contrast to the complexity of the first movement, the *Larghetto* has only one basic melody, first heard on muted strings. There are four variations (by the clarinet, bassoon, orchestral violins, and pizzicato strings), decorated in turn by a high violin solo. The *Rondo* is vivid and joyful. Its one main theme heard at the start is repeated periodically, separated by various episodes for the solo and orchestral parts. There is a short cadenza, then development to what appears to be approaching a quiet ending, but two *forte* chords finish the work in characteristic Beethoven style.

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847): Symphony No. 5 in D (the “Reformation”)

I: Andante: allegro con fuoco *II: Allegro vivace*
III: Andante; Andante con moto (Chorale); Allegro vivace; Allegro maestoso

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was a devoted Lutheran for most of his life, and he composed this symphony in 1830 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Augsberg confession, a pillar of Lutheran faith. In fact, Felix Mendelssohn had been born Jewish. His father later converted to Christianity to “open doors” for Felix, and at the same time he modified the family name to become Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Some have commented that even the name Felix (“happy”) suggests a man born to wealth and position, and whose life was bereft of any personal struggle, unlike many of his musical peers. They allege that this happy situation cushioned Mendelssohn-Bartholdy so much that he had only ability to represent conflict in his music.

Indeed, this symphony portrays a struggle between the old and new faith in the church. During the exposition of the first movement, he twice uses a soft string passage, known as the “*Dresden Amen*”, from the Catholic mass. (This theme also occurs in Wagner’s *Parsifal*, leading Mendelssohn-Bartholdy’s supporters to accuse Wagner of plagiarism. However, it is likely that the *Amen* predates both composers, with origins in the 17th century.)

The second movement appears not to belong to the symphony’s programmatic development, except perhaps as analogy to a spiritual expression of faith. It contains a fanciful tune for woodwinds, and a melody for oboes over plucked lower strings. The third movement features a plaintive theme in the violins accompanied by other strings.

We then have a linking *recitativo* section, led by the flute. This brings us to the final movement, whose dominant element is a Chorale, based on Luther’s “war cry” *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (“A mighty fortress is our God”). This popular hymn is first heard on unaccompanied flute, and it heralds the arrival of the new religion. Other woodwinds, then violas and cellos are added and enhance the harmony. The *allegro vivace* provides a variation on the Chorale, and it transitions to the *allegro maestoso*, which begins with a fugue for strings. The Chorale is repeated independently by the winds, and then it combines with the fugue. The majestic finale, which includes some emphatic scoring for the brass, sees Luther’s Chorale played *fortissimo* by the entire orchestra, indicating the triumph of the new faith over the old.