

## Oakville Symphony Program Notes

July 9 & 10, 2022 at the Oakville Centre

Featuring guest conductor Pratik Gandhi and guest artist Kendra Grittani

### Leslie Opatřil (1994 - ): *Whisky Jack*

*[Notes for this item come from Leslie Opatřil]*

*Whisky Jack* is inspired by the character of the grey jay and its environment, a bird also known by the common name “whisky jack.” (This name is actually “an anglicization of the Cree *Wisakedjak* and similar variations used by nations in the Algonquin language family,” according to *Canadian Geographic*.) Grey jays are found in coniferous forests across Canada and do not migrate; they are tough, intelligent, assertive... and pretty darn cute. About the size of a robin, the grey jay is most closely related to the magpie. These birds will eat out of a person’s hand, and, if this person is not careful, perhaps fly off with some picnic goodies as well. At least, they will attempt this thievery; sometimes they are not strong enough to get far with the desired lunch item (a whole peanut-butter and jam sandwich, for example). The grey jay is also referred to as “Canada jay,” “lumberjack,” and - quite accurately - “camp robber.” After an online poll done by *Canadian Geographic* magazine, the whisky jack\* was unofficially selected as the national bird of Canada.

\* *Comment by SW:* Research shows the occurrence of two common spellings, with Canadian Geographic using “Whiskey Jack” for its national bird project, and Opatřil following the Canadian Oxford and CBC style guides in using “Whisky Jack” in her title. For people with Scottish heritage, whisky (without an e) can only mean their national drink!

### Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809): Cello Concerto No.2 in D.

*I: Allegro moderato    II: Adagio    III: Rondo; allegro*

This concerto was written in 1783. Its score was lost for some years after the initial performances, with the result that its authenticity has been challenged. Some authorities thought it had been written by the first cellist in the Vienna orchestra of Prince Esterhazy, by whom Haydn was employed at the time. However, Haydn’s handwriting and signature were identified in 1951 when the original score was placed in the national library in Vienna.

The first movement has a long orchestral introduction. The soloist’s later contributions require much rapid fingering, but there are some lyrical interludes as well. The *adagio* is relaxed, almost taking the form of an operatic aria that is restated several times, in different ways. The final movement features simple, almost childlike tunes, with both major and minor variations. The music finally resolves to the major key, with some virtuoso sections towards the end. Cadenzas complete each of the first two movements.

## Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98

I: *Allegro non troppo*

II: *Andante moderato*

III: *Allegro giocoso*

IV: *Allegro energico e passionato*

Brahms had taken over 20 years to compose his first symphony, while agonising over his perceived inferiority to Beethoven. In contrast, his last three symphonies were completed in a seven-year period, from 1877 to 1884, during which time he became firmly established as Vienna's leading composer. Brahms was a giant figure at the end of the Romantic era, but nevertheless he often wrote using classical forms.

Symphony No. 4 is epic, and its long outer movements are almost like symphonies unto themselves. The extensive first movement appears to grow out of the first few notes, which are like a subtle introduction to an ongoing conversation. The second movement *andante* is more melancholic, while the third movement introduces more tension. The final movement is a *passacaglia* (a form employed by Beethoven), in which the same eight-note melody is played repeatedly in lower instruments (often brass and woodwinds), while variations take place in higher octaves. Although the densely orchestrated variations are sometimes hard to follow, consider that there are no less than 31 of them, in four main sections! The first section includes eleven variations in 3/4 time, but the second section switches to 3/2 time, beginning with the notable twelfth variation in a flute solo. The third section returns to 3/4 time in a minor key with a loud statement of the original theme. The final section begins with new orchestrations of the first three variations of the movement, and a faster coda concludes the symphony.

Composers such as Wagner and Liszt considered Brahms to be behind the times, and indeed the first performance of this symphony was met by a hostile reception in Vienna, but subsequently his followers became more understanding. In 1897, an ailing Brahms attended a concert at which the Fourth was performed. The audience sensed that this might be the last time they would see him, and at the end of the first movement, they applauded long and loud until Brahms showed himself. As a witness states:

*"The demonstration was renewed after the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> movements, and an extraordinary scene followed the conclusion of the work. The applauding, shouting house, its gaze riveted on the figure standing in the balcony, so familiar, and yet in its present aspect so strange, seemed unable to let him go. Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there, shrunken in form, with lined countenance, strained expression, white hair hanging lank; and throughout the audience there was a feeling of a stifled sob, for each knew that they were saying farewell. Another outburst of applause, and yet another. One more acknowledgement from the master. Then Brahms and his Vienna were parted forever."*

Brahms died less than a month later.