

Quad City Symphony Orchestra
PROGRAM NOTES
Masterworks VI: The Force of Fate

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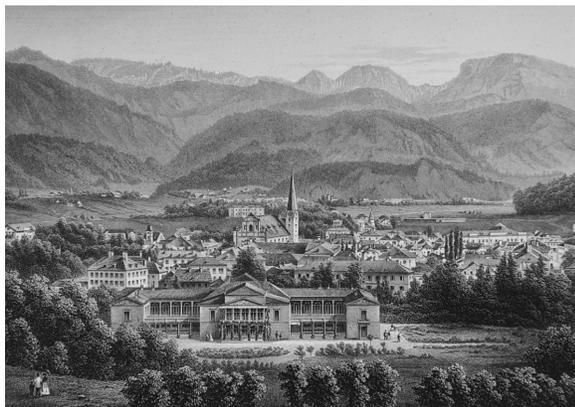
JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)
Tragic Overture, Op. 81

Instrumentation: Piccolo, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Tuba, Timpani, and Strings.

Premiere: December 26, 1880, Hans Richter conducting, Vienna.

QCSO Performance History: James Dixon conducted the first QCSO performance of *Tragic Overture* in November 1983; the only other QCSO performance was in April 2000 with Donald Schleicher conducting.

Emperor Franz Joseph I reigned over the Austro-Hungarian Empire for nearly seven decades, right up until the First World War. Over his long rule he faced numerous diplomatic challenges and witnessed fundamental changes to society; he also endured numerous family tragedies, including the assassination of his beloved wife, Sisi. Yet in any given tumultuous year, the emperor could at least look forward to spending the summer at what he called "heaven on earth", the



Bad Ischl in the nineteenth century

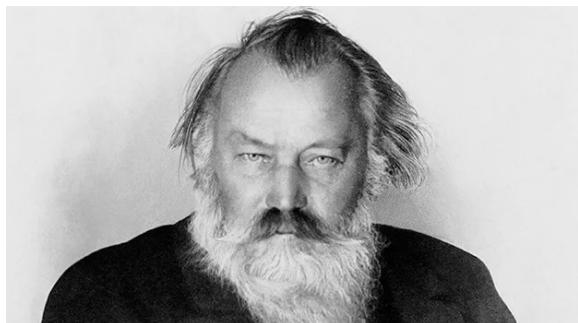
Habsburg family retreat in the mountain town of Ischl. It was in Ischl, a picturesque spa town 265 kilometers (165 miles) from Vienna, that the emperor said he "could flee a paper-dominated desk-bound existence with all its anxieties and troubles." At his death in 1916 at the age of 86, Franz Joseph had spent 81 summers in Ischl.

And beginning in 1880, another illustrious resident of Vienna would begin summering in Ischl: composer Johannes Brahms. Now 47 years old and well-established as a symphonic composer, Brahms spent his first summer at Ischl composing two short orchestral works to premiere in Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) at a concert in January 1881. The first work was written as a tribute to the faculty of the University of Breslau, who had honored him with an honorary doctorate the year before. Writing to Bernhard Scholz, who was to conduct the work, Brahms bandied about a title for the piece. "So that you are not too greatly embarrassed by your guest, I have written an 'Academic Festival Overture'...I don't exactly like that title, does another come to mind?" Scholz suggested a different, more localized name for the piece, but Brahms decided to keep his original.

Brahms similarly struggled to devise a title for the second orchestral piece of the summer, and wrote Scholz in September that he

would be naming it "'Dramatic' or 'Tragic' or 'Funereal Overture'. You see that this time I am unable to find a title; can you help?" Perhaps by this time Scholz knew better than to bother making a suggestion. Brahms eventually settled on "Tragic" as the overture's title, making it one of the few instrumental works in Brahms's output with a descriptive title.

Brahms famously resisted the idea that his art was in any way autobiographical, and it would be foolish to try to make a direct connection between the *Tragic Overture* and any contemporaneous events in the composer's life. But the weather in Ischl that summer was reportedly cold and rainy, and Brahms did indeed have a major personal tragedy looming. His closest friend, violinist Joseph Joachim, was suffering irrational bouts of marital jealousy, suspecting that his wife Amalie was guilty of infidelity. "I am unfortunately quick to take a gloomy view of this altogether," Brahms wrote Joachim that July from Ischl. "One thing is certain, that two people come apart more easily than back together again, just as it is easier to lose your mind than to get it back." The violinist's marriage would unravel by the following December, and as Brahms had sided with Amalie in the dispute, the long friendship between Brahms and Joachim was destroyed. Though the composer would almost certainly deny it, perhaps the *Tragic*



Overture is imbued with a bit of the pessimism Brahms felt about Joachim's impending divorce, and maybe even some ominous sense that, like storm clouds in Ischl, the composer's own personal heartbreak was imminent.

Tragic Overture Listening Guide

♩ **MOTIVE.** Brahms presents us immediately with three distinct ideas: the sharp, separated chords and timpani rumble; the sneaking, quiet, unison melody; and the dignified dotted-rhythm motive that sounds almost like a royal procession. All three of these ideas will appear in various forms throughout the overture.

♩ **ORCHESTRATION.** To contrast the complexity and storminess of the opening, Brahms calms down the accompaniment into pulsing strings, which support very simple long-tone solos in the woodwinds and horns. This eventually leads to the brief respite from the otherwise gloomy music, an inviting melody first appearing in the violins.

♩ **FORM.** You will hear again the forceful opening chords, and you might be tricked into thinking that Brahms has indicated a repeat of the opening passage. However, this is no repeat; we are now in the deceptively calm middle section, where you'll hear development and juxtaposition of the "sneaking unison" and "dignified" dotted rhythms. Brahms's return to the opening material and mood is very gradual, but before long you'll find yourself again cast about by the musical storm.

JACOB BANCKS (b. 1982) Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra

Instrumentation: Solo clarinet, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 2 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 2 Trombones, Timpani, 3 Percussion, Harp, and Strings.

Premiere: November 11, 2021 with Ricardo Morales as soloist, Philadelphia Orchestra, Rafael Payare conducting, Verizon Hall, Philadelphia.
QCSO Premiere.

Probably due to a number of overlapping factors (industrialization, the rise of the middle class, increasing literacy rates), the Golden Age of Symphonic Music largely coincided with the Golden Age of Letter-Writing. This was, of course, a boon for future writers of program notes. All one needs to do is find a letter from Brahms to Joachim bemoaning an impending tragedy, or Tchaikovsky to Madame von Meck oversharing about his latest symphony, and the program notes write themselves!

But this has me kicking myself for not backing up my data when I got my new phone. For, though today letter-writing is a dead art, we have only just begun what future program annotators will call the Golden Age of Text Messaging, and I could easily have told you the story of how my clarinet concerto came to be simply by sharing the stream of text messages Ricardo Morales and I exchanged while the work was being written. Without that “written” record, I’ll have to rely instead on my memory (always dangerous for a composer).

This project originated, I’m hesitant to admit, in an act of procrastination. Feverishly busy with preparations for my 2016 tenure hearing at Augustana, I was not able to finish

the large wind ensemble piece I had been commissioned to write for the United States Marine Band’s Spring 2016 concert series. After many *mea culpas*, the band agreed to postpone the commission one year, and after standing for tenure, I threw my heart completely into writing my *Occidental Symphony*, based on the work of Illinois poet Vachel Lindsay. It turned out that the extra time the Marine Band generously afforded me meant that I was able to write a much stronger piece than I would have otherwise. And it also turned out that postponement meant that the premiere of *Occidental Symphony* landed on the same 2017 concert as Jonathan Leshnoff’s clarinet concerto, with the one and only Ricardo Morales as soloist.



Ricardo Morales and several Bancks at the clarinet concerto recording session with the USMB Chamber Orchestra, Washington D.C.

I first heard Ricardo play in the early 2000s when my future wife Kara and I visited the Metropolitan Opera, where Ricardo served as principal clarinetist. Kara is a gifted clarinetist herself, so she made sure I paid attention to the outstanding clarinetist in the pit. We were both incredibly moved and impressed by his dramatic, bold, and elegant playing. Like a top-notch singer, Ricardo filled that huge hall with rich sound, playing with impeccable technique and almost-miraculous musical sensitivity.

So I was excited when I learned that I'd have a chance to actually meet Ricardo Morales at my postponed Marine Band concert. I didn't really know what to expect; I've met my fair share of well-known musicians who aren't all that friendly or interesting in person. But as it turned out, Ricardo is not only a great musician, he's also a great guy, and since we met during that concert week, he's become a great friend.

Of course, it was Kara who had the idea that Ricardo and I should collaborate. I still remember where we were driving as a family (John Deere Road, near Menards) when she made the suggestion that I write to Ricardo and ask if he would be interested in working together on a new piece. To my surprise, he was as excited about the prospect as I was. He facilitated the commission with the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he now serves as principal clarinetist, and my beloved Quad City Symphony signed on shortly after as a co-commissioner. Eventually the Marine Band Chamber Orchestra joined the co-commission as well, bringing the project full circle.

Thus began the epic stream of text messages. I would routinely send Ricardo my

questions, thoughts, and short musical excerpts via text, and he would reply with enthusiastic, frank, and hilarious feedback. No small number of emojis were exchanged. Often Ricardo would call me back to play the excerpts I sent, and I would pace around my backyard on my phone, laughing loudly and shouting my approval (apologies to my neighbors on 12th Street in Moline for these indiscretions). By the time we met up for the premiere in Philadelphia in 2021, Ricardo and I had produced what I consider a truly collaborative concerto.

The piece has made me proud on several occasions since then, including Ricardo's performances with the USMB Chamber Orchestra, the Olympia Symphony, and the Dolce Suono Ensemble (with piano reduction). Especially thrilling was the opportunity to participate in the studio recording of the piece this past September in Washington, D.C., again with the Marine Band, which you can hear on YouTube. But throughout the entire process, I have been anticipating this weekend's performances in a special way. It's one thing to create a new work, refine it through several performances, and share it with various live and online audiences. It's another thing entirely to bring that work home, to hear it prepared by the musicians whose playing I have the privilege of admiring so often, and to present it in my own community to family, friends and neighbors. I wish to express my gratitude to Music Director Mark Russell Smith for his generosity in sharing his amazing artistry; to the rest of the QCSO musicians for their beautiful playing (sorry about all those tricky passages!); and to Executive Director Brian Baxter for his support and advocacy for my work, and for never being mad when my program notes are submitted after the deadline.

Banks Clarinet Concerto
Listening Guide

First movement (“Unruly”)

♪ **MELODY.** I’m always wowed when I watch old *Looney Tunes* or *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. I have no idea how studio orchestras were able to play such wild music, much less sync it up with the frenetic animation. My concerto’s opening evokes this great chapter in the history of American music.

♪ **FORM.** The “far out point” of this movement is when the orchestra overwhelms the soloist with a rhapsodic Hollywood flourish. At first the clarinet seems to be content in this false paradise, but see if you can hear his quiet but certain “change of heart”, which begins in earnest the cycle back to where the music began.

♪ **ORCHESTRATION.** The first movement ends with a number of cadenzas for the soloist, accompanied by “vamps” (repeated bars, like in musical theatre) in the percussion. The solo and accompaniment parts are not intended to sync up during these passages.

Second movement (“Tender”)

♪ **MELODY.** Since he was kind enough to endure my feverish and frenzied first movement, the least I could do for Ricardo was give him an actual tune to play at the top of the second.

♪ **HARMONY.** The chords at the beginning of the second movement are what pedants describe as “diatonic”, meaning they use only the notes of the basic major scale. But see if you can hear the one “intruder” note that sneaks in at the end of the melody, sending us off into a much more complex harmonic world.

♪ **ORCHESTRATION.** In the middle part of this second movement, I tried using the orchestra, especially the strings, to create a bright acoustic fantasy world, which floats above the dark, rich color of the clarinet’s long tones.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION.** Aside from being a distinguished soloist and orchestral musician, Ricardo is also a gifted chamber musician, so I included a brief “quartet” for violin, viola, flute and clarinet at this movement’s most intimate moment.

Third movement (“Defiant”)

♪ **ORCHESTRATION.** If you haven’t noticed, I love writing for percussion, even if I consider myself a mere beginner in this particularly challenging area of orchestration. My Augustana colleague and QCSO percussionist Tony Oliver will certainly agree that the hi-hat is one of the finest instruments ever to be added to the symphony orchestra.

♪ **MELODY.** One matter which Ricardo and I discussed at length while I wrote this concerto were the great monuments of the orchestral and operatic repertoire, and this whole concerto is full of oblique references to works we both admire. One of the more explicit is this movement’s calmer middle section, which employs a melodic fragment from the slow movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION.** Ricardo has never once complained (at least not to me) about the ferociously fast sextuplets that swirl through the concerto’s final pages. The clarinet’s final burst of fury has occasionally prompted an expletive, but I never take that personally.

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36

Instrumentation: Piccolo, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Tuba, Timpani, Percussion, and Strings.

Premiere: February 1878, Moscow, Nicolai Rubenstein conducting.

QCSO Performance History: Ludwig Becker must have been hesitant to perform the entire symphony, leading partial performances in 1918 (movements 2 and 3), 1920 and 1921 (movements 2, 3, and 4), 1925 and 1929 (movements 3 and 4) and 1932 (just movement 4). Tri-City Symphony audiences finally heard the symphony's first movement (along with the second) in 1935 with Frank Kendrie conducting, but it wasn't until 1945 that Oscar Anderson led the first full TCSO performance of the work. Since then, it's been heard in eight sets of performances, led by Harry John Brown (1951), Charles Gigante (1959, 1963), James Dixon (1973, 1982), guest conductor Peter Leonard (1994), Donald Schleicher (2002), and Mark Russell Smith (2013).

Nadezhda von Meck was born to a landowning Russian family in 1831, and was raised to love arts and culture. She married Karl von Meck, a low-level civil servant, at age seven-



teen, and amid their newlywed poverty she encouraged her engineer husband to invest in the rapidly-expanding Russian railway system, a venture that would prove hugely profitable for the family. In 1876, when Karl died at the age of 54, he left Nadezhda thirteen children, and an enormous fortune.

In her widowhood, Madame von Meck exhibited a contradictory and complicated personality. On one hand, she was reclusive, pessimistic, and obsessively controlling of her children, even into adulthood. On the other hand, she was a talented pianist and a generous patroness of Russian musicians, leading her to support the newly-founded Moscow Conservatory and to employ a number of its gifted students as chamber musicians in her home. In 1877 she learned that a violinist in her entourage had studied in the harmony class of composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. She wrote the composer, expressing her admiration, and this exchange ultimately led to one of the most fruitful if strangest artist-patron relationships in the history of music.

Von Meck and Tchaikovsky exchanged nearly 1200 letters over the course their thirteen-year association; her generous financial support ultimately allowed Tchaikovsky to resign his professorship and devote himself entirely to composing. Their letters show an extraordinary intimacy and personal sympathy, but the two never spoke in person, they were never present in the same room (except once, by accident, at one of her country estates). "The very fact that you and I both suffer from one and the same sickness draws us together," Tchaikovsky wrote her early in their relationship. He said this "sickness" leads them to fear "the disappointment, the yearning for the ideal, that



every intimate acquaintance entails... I was forced to struggle with myself, and God alone knows how much this struggle has cost me." It is clear from their correspondence that as both Tchaikovsky and von Meck faced extraordinary personal anxieties, their peculiar relationship proved to be a source of solace for both.

Thus it is unsurprising that Tchaikovsky shared with von Meck the secret "program" behind his Fourth Symphony, composed in 1877 and dedicated to her. Referring to it as "our" symphony, Tchaikovsky confessed that "it is possible to express in words what it is trying to say, and to you, and only to you." The introduction of the first movement is, he wrote, "is that fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal, which jealously ensures that peace and happiness shall not be complete and unclouded... It is an invincible force that can never be overcome — merely endured, hopelessly." The happier-sounding music that follows is a false promise of relief from Fate. "Oh joy! Out of nowhere a sweet and gentle day-dream appears. Some blissful, radiant human image hurries by and beckons us away... How wonderful! How distant the obsessive first theme of the allegro now sounds!" But, he writes, "No! These were daydreams, and Fate wakes us from them."

Tchaikovsky went on to describe the remaining movements in relation to this idea of Fate. The second movement is a depiction of "that melancholy feeling which comes in the evening when, weary from one's toil... there come a whole host of memories." As for the third movement, he describes "drunken peasants and a street song... a military procession... strange, wild, incoherent." Finally, he says that the fourth

movement is an attempt to seek comfort by seeing the happiness of others in public. "O, how they are enjoying themselves! How happy they are that all their feelings are simple and straightforward... Rejoice in the rejoicing of others. To live is still possible."

It is difficult for us to know how to process these colorful descriptions as we listen to Tchaikovsky's work today. It's perhaps most tempting for us to feel like we've hit the jackpot: before being inundated with 45 minutes of difficult, wildly expressive music, Tchaikovsky has given us the answer key to understanding it all on an emotional level. But this certainly can't be how Tchaikovsky wanted us to approach his music, or he would have published his description in the concert program, rather than in highly private correspondence ("for you, and only you"). And that aside, can we simply take his description at face value? With his new wealthy patroness asking about the story behind the symphony dedicated to her, could Tchaikovsky have felt some pressure to provide a more concrete narrative than he originally had in mind? Or, could there be parts of Tchaikovsky's true narrative that he might have preferred not to share with anyone, including Madame von Meck herself?

In describing their own works, artists often obscure as much as they reveal, and even under full disclosure, the "true meaning" of any piece of music can't belong only to the composer. Ultimately, we are best served by reading Tchaikovsky's description simply as one possible interpretation of a richly expressive, formally complex work that has fascinated and engaged audiences for 150 years.

Tchaikovsky 4 Listening Guide

First movement: *Andante sostenuto – moderato con anima*

♩ **MOTIVE.** If he hadn't told Madame von Meck directly, we still might have guessed that the blasting horn motive that begins this movement is the call of Fate itself. The motive will return multiple times throughout this movement; when it does, it won't be subtle.

♩ **ORCHESTRATION.** Tchaikovsky uses a few orchestration tricks here to maximize the horn call's bracing effect. He first mixes in the bassoons with the horns, providing more definition and depth to their sound. And by reserving the trombones and trumpets for their own entrance a few bars later, Tchaikovsky is able to hit us even more forcefully. But after the two most violent chords of the introduction have passed, the horns return without the bassoons, to begin the fade to silence.

♩ **FORM.** After pages and pages of stormy music, Tchaikovsky surprises us with a charming exchange between the bassoon and clarinet; this ushers in the movement's much lighter middle section, though of course Fate is always around the corner.

Second movement: *Andantino in modo di canzona*

♩ **MELODY.** Tchaikovsky designates this movement "in the style of a *canzona*", which is an Italian song. The ambling and melancholy melody recurs frequently throughout the movement in various instrumental combinations.

♩ **FORM.** The *canzona* melody's principal contrasting idea is a more stable, solemn, pulsing figure that sounds

almost like it's being played on a church organ.

Third movement: *Scherzo*

♩ **ORCHESTRATION.** If any of the strings forgot their bows, they're in luck! Tchaikovsky indicates that the strings play *pizzicato* for this entire movement.

♩ **FORM.** As is typical in a symphonic dance/scherzo movement, this movement is delineated into an ABA form. The *pizzicato* sections are "A", and for the "Trio" ("B"), Tchaikovsky uses the woodwinds and brass sections in juxtaposition. Listen for how the non-strings sneak in a bit on the recap of "A".

Fourth movement: *Allegro con fuoco*

♩ **MOTIVE.** Tchaikovsky loved to turn basic scales into melodies; think of the emotional "Pas de deux" from *The Nutcracker*. The barn-burner figure that kicks off the symphony's final movement is another example; with just a few extra embellishments, this fantastic flourish is simply an F major scale.

♩ **MELODY.** Though often described as less "Russian" in his musical outlook than some of his contemporaries, Tchaikovsky actually made frequent use of Russian folk tunes in his music. The somewhat hesitating secondary tune in this movement is a quotation of the Russian folk tune "In the Field Stood a Birch Tree". Wags over the years have added satirical texts to this frequently-recurring tune, e.g. "Toscanini's wife had a baby."

♩ **FORM.** Though many composers integrated themes and motives between the various movements of their symphonies, there's probably no more explicit callback in the symphonic repertoire than the "total recall" of the first movement near the end of this work.