

PROGRAM NOTES

By Joshua Berrett, Ph.D.

This concert inaugurates an exciting development for Excelsior Symphony Orchestra. It is Excelsior's inaugural concert in Diller Hall, part of the state-of-the-art Allen Center for Creative Arts and Technology at the Hackley School.

The concert opens with a piece both festive and ceremonial. It is "Commemorative Fanfare," a 1979 composition for brass by John Cheetham (1939-2024). Cheetham had a very busy productive life. Not only was he for many years Professor of Composition and Music Theory at the University of Missouri, he also operated his own firm, BooneLick Press, found time for woodworking and raising a family.

"Commemorative Fanfare" will resonate for anyone familiar with pieces like Aaron Copland's 1942 "Fanfare for the Common Man," with its sonorous quartal harmonies—sounds using perfect fourths, like from C up to F. This type of writing had a broad appeal, especially in the 1940's and 50's, when composers like Paul Hindemith held sway, the young Leonard Bernstein was writing his clarinet sonata, and Miles Davis was immersed in "modal jazz."

"Mutations from Bach" (1968) by Samuel Barber (1910-1981) is another work for brass ensemble. But it is unlike so much Barber wrote. Trained initially as a baritone, he was a composer keenly attuned to the human voice and can be accurately characterized as a lyrical modernist—a quality evident for the most part in such works as the Violin Concerto, "Adagio for Strings," "Hermit Songs," and "Knoxville: Summer of 1915."

"Mutations from Bach" is atypical for Barber in its deep immersion in Baroque liturgy, with source material coming largely from J.S. Bach's Cantata No. 23, which in turn is based on the chorale *Christe, du Lamm Gottes* ("Christ, Thou Lamb of God"). Barber, a distinguished Curtis Institute of Music alumnus, was commissioned by Mary Louise Curtis Bok, founder of the institute and a prominent patron of the arts (and Barber's aunt by marriage), to write the piece for the inauguration of a new pipe organ at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia.

Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739), a contemporary of J.S. Bach, and a fellow Venetian colleague of Antonio Vivaldi, was highly prolific. His output includes oratorios, cantatas, sonatas, and sinfonias. His setting of Psalm 19 is inspired by the psalm's profoundly moving lyrics, beginning in the King James Version with: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork." At the same time, Marcello's melody has drawn upon Jewish liturgy; he is known to have attended services in some of Venice's synagogues.

Marcello's setting can be heard these days in a variety of arrangements, whether for organ, piano, strings, or brass ensemble. It is presented at our concert in an arrangement for 10-piece brass ensemble by Keith Snell, a professional trumpeter and noted clinician throughout the Los Angeles area.

Composed between 1888 and 1889 by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), “Festive and Commemorative Music,” Op. 109, marks the occasion when he was made an honorary citizen of Hamburg, his birthplace. The original work is a cycle of three celebratory motets for two antiphonal choirs using texts from Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and the Gospels that resonate with political meaning, reflecting Brahms’s admiration for Bismarck and German unification. This performance features an arrangement for brass made by Fred Teuber, a noted horn player and pedagogue.

Even though Max Bruch (1838-1920) composed some 200 works, he is popularly known for only three compositions--Violin Concerto no. 1 in G minor, “Scottish Fantasy” for violin and orchestra, and “Kol Nidre” for cello and orchestra. But his 1911 Romance in F, Op 85 for viola and orchestra is a beloved piece in the solo repertoire for that instrument. Modelled after Beethoven’s two violin Romances, it follows essentially an A-B-A form, combining rich lyricism with an understated virtuosity.

The life and legacy of Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) embodies much of the multicultural richness and universality of music of the 20th century. His name is synonymous with the tango, or more accurately, “nuevo tango,” a unique fusion of Argentina’s folk music, jazz, and polyphonic writing harking back to J.S. Bach. And his quintessential sound has long been associated with the bandoneon, the “crying” portable bellows-driven reed accordion

He was born in 1921 to Italian immigrant parents in Mar del Plata, Argentina, a resort city and fishing port on the country’s Atlantic coast within Buenos Aires Province. When he was four years old, he moved with his family to New York’s Greenwich Village and then Little Italy. It was a move that gave him his initial exposure to a broad range of music, helping foster what would become a lifelong passion for crossing stylistic boundaries and developing a kind of fusion that was very much his own.

Returning to Buenos Aires in the 1940’s, he spent the next years leading tango ensembles and honing his craft, including taking lessons in composition with Alberto Ginastera. August 1953 brought about a transformative change. Encouraged by Ginastera, he submitted his composition “Buenos Aires Symphony in Three Movements” to a competition. The end of the concert premiere has been remembered for a fight which broke out, so offended were certain audience members by seeing two bandoneons included in a traditional symphony orchestra. Much more importantly, the new work won him a grant to study in France with the legendary Nadia Boulanger. It was there that he also heard performances by baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan that left a lasting impression.

Piazzolla’s “Le Grand Tango,” an example of “nuevo tango,” vividly captures all these influences. Published in Paris and originally written for Mstislav Rostropovich, this single-movement piece for cello and piano melds tango rhythms and jazz-inspired syncopation. It falls into three broad sections: “Tempo di tango,” “Libero e cantabile,” and “Giocoso.”

The arrangement on our program for solo viola, string orchestra and piano was made by Brett L. Allen.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) had the time of his life when he visited Italy in 1830. As he recalled: “The whole country had such a festive air that I felt as if I were a young prince making his entry.” His “Italian” Symphony opens with a sonata-form *Allegro vivace*. With its cantering rhythm, it has the sparkle of brilliant sunshine while also displaying Mendelssohn’s mastery of J.S. Bach’s techniques of counterpoint and motivic development learned from his teacher Carl Zelter. The music grabs your attention immediately with the opening major third, A to C#, which becomes a powerful unifying motif.

The second movement, *Andante con moto*, has been associated with a Neapolitan religious procession Mendelssohn reportedly witnessed, but has also been traced to a ballad composed by Zelter. The third movement, *Con moto moderato*, evokes the spirit of the minuet at its most gracious, while the trio recalls his music for “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

The finale, *Saltarello: Presto*, captures the hectic fun of a Roman carnival. As Mendelssohn wrote:

I arrived at the Corso, and was thinking of nothing, when suddenly I was assailed by a shower of sugar candies. I looked up and saw some ladies whom I had seen occasionally at balls ... and when I took off my hat to bow to them, the pelting began in earnest.

Joshua Berrett © 2026

About the author: A member of the first violin section and ESO board member, Dr. Berrett is a professional musicologist and is internationally recognized for his publications in such diverse areas as the history of the symphony and jazz. Dr. Berrett and his wife Lynne are co-founders of the non-profit Ageless Mind Project. Visit them at <http://agelessmindproject.org>.