

Lewisville Lake Symphony Orchestra Feb. 11, 2022 program notes

Schumann Piano Concerto in A minor Op. 54; Victoria Han, piano, 2022 Grand Prize Winner, Vernell Gregg Young Artists Competition Franz Josef Haydn Symphony No. 94 in G Major, H.I:94 ("Surprise")

Robert Schumann (1810-1856): Piano Concerto in A minor Opus 54 (Victoria Han, piano)

I was once asked by a person not well-versed in classical music *why* so many of the truly great composers seemed to have poor health and miserable personal lives. Mozart died penniless at age 35; Beethoven was uncouth, unmarried and deaf; Chopin was sickly and controlled by Mademoiselle Sand; Scriabin abandoned his wife and children and suffered delusions of grandeur; and Robert Schumann was no exception. A permanent finger injury forced him to abandon hopes for a performing career, so he turned to composition. He had been mentally unstable all his life, haunted by fears of insanity since the age of 18. The completion of his only Piano Concerto in mid-July 1845 was followed by a total physical breakdown and incapacitating fear for him. He had to cancel appearances at a Beethoven festival in Bonn, and spend the summer and fall resting. He did manage to pull himself together long enough to attend the work's premiere in Dresden on December 4, 1845. The work was written for—and premiered by—Clara Schumann, his wife, who was considered to be one of the great pianists of the day.

Robert Schumann married Clara Wieck, the daughter of his piano teacher, in 1840, after Schumann had gone to court to overrule her father's legal objection to the marriage. Before his marriage, Schumann had concentrated primarily on composing songs and smaller piano works. We can thank Clara for encouraging her husband to try his hand at larger-scale forms such as symphonies and concertos. With Clara's support, Schumann entered one of the most creative periods of his life. For five years, he produced huge masterworks, one after another. The Piano Concerto bookends these years of massive productivity. It was originally conceived as a Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra in one movement, Schumann's first work for piano and orchestra, completed in May of 1841. In 1845, he added a slow movement and finale to a revised version of the Fantasy to complete a three-movement concerto. Without a doubt, Schumann composed the concerto with Clara in mind as soloist. The piece would become her signature concert staple; she would give over half the total performances of the work between 1845 and 1900.

The Concerto begins with the reworked version of the 1841 Fantasy. In the first movement, "Allegro affettuoso," a fiercely powerful opening theme is contrasted with a lyrical piano and clarinet duet, providing elegant contrast between the two divergent moods.

The second movement, a sweet and songlike "Intermezzo," resembles a scene of quiet happiness. Schumann surrounds sparkling but pointed writing for the piano in a dreamy haze of strings in a movement that is among his most beautiful creations. Without pause, the piece moves into the final movement, "Allegro vivace." The movement's major-key adaptation of the first movement's main theme is nicely contrasted with the playful character of the syncopated second theme. A long coda, impulsive and irresistible, ends Schumann's Concerto, one of the most accomplished and unique in the repertory, with three minutes of pure perfection.

Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809): Symphony No. 94 in G Major, H. I:94 ("Surprise") (1791)

Haydn has popularly been known as the "father" of the symphony, but in reality, no one person truly is. However, his contributions to the development of the "classic style" symphony as we know it today

were the most significant. “Papa” Haydn pioneered the structure, and his popularity was such that other composers, including Mozart and Beethoven, chose his work as their model for how a symphony should be composed.

In 1761, Haydn had the good fortune to secure an appointment to the court of the wealthy Esterházy family outside of Vienna. In the midst of a vigorous artistic environment at the Estate, with a full schedule of sacred, theatre, chamber music, ballet, and large ensemble performances weekly, Haydn was charged with composing the music for much of the festivities as well as rehearsing and conducting.

After the death of Prince Miklós József Esterházy in 1790, Haydn set out for England. He arrived in London on New Year’s Day, 1791, and remained in the city for a year and a half. Londoners turned out by the thousands to watch him conduct premieres of his new works, and critics and audiences alike were generous with their praise. He returned for a second 18-month visit in 1794–95. Among the works heard at these concerts were 12 new symphonies, the last ones Haydn ever wrote, including the perennially popular *Symphony No. 94 in G Major*.

The symphony gained fame when Haydn himself, conducting the piece’s London premiere on March 23, 1792, altered the dynamics of the second movement on a whim. There has been much speculation on the reason behind the change. According to one account, Haydn had already given the downbeat to begin the second movement when the gentle snores of a front-row patron roused his sense of humor. He and his musicians forged ahead with the little theme until reaching its final chord, for which Haydn cued an immense *fortissimo*, bringing the sleepy patron to his feet. Whatever Haydn’s motivation, the episode ultimately earned for the work its everlasting nickname, *Surprise Symphony*.

The Surprise Symphony begins with a slow, scene-setting introduction. The movement proper has a varied cast of characters. The charming, slightly whimsical first theme begins mischievously outside the home key. The second theme is a pure and simple lilting waltz tune, and the third is a warm and ingratiating melody containing distinctive downward leaps. The remainder of the movement unfolds with predictable sureness that characterized Haydn’s superior craftsmanship.

The Andante theme of the second movement, of nursery tune simplicity, is presented by the strings softly, repeated by them even more softly, and then punctuated by The Chord. (Surprise!) The four ensuing variations on the theme are so seemingly simple they require no description. One cannot, however, fail to mention the amazing coda, where the simple theme in the winds takes on a wonderfully Romantic hue through the provocative and misty harmonies in the strings.

The third movement is dance-flavored, a true Austrian peasant dance specifically resembling the then-popular minuet, a predecessor of the waltz. The last movement is the liveliest of all, with brisk ideas that bring the piece to an energetic conclusion. This finale is 100-proof Haydn, in turn witty, brilliant, and songful, and filled with those turns, twists, and, yes, supremely logical surprises, that only Haydn’s genius could produce.