

Symphony No. 94 in G major (*Surprise Symphony*)
by Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809)

Duration: Approximately 23 minutes

First Performance: March 23, 1792 in London

These are the first ESO performances of the work

In 1790, at the behest of Johann Peter Salomon, one of London's leading impresarios, Haydn left Vienna for his first concert tour of England. The trip was eventually to last some 18 months and would eventually be followed by a second trip in 1794 -1795. These trips proved to be a spectacular success for the composer, not only musically, but socially and even romantically as well. He was lionized by the English as the greatest composer since their beloved Handel and hobnobbed with everyone worth hobnobbing with, including His Majesty King George III and his Highness the Prince of Wales. As for his romantic adventures, in the interest of delicacy it will perhaps suffice to say that Frau Haydn, to whom the composer had been unhappily married for 30 years, remained on the Continent.

One of the great successes of the first sojourn was the London premiere of the work that in German speaking countries is known as the *Symphonie mit dem Paukenschlag* ("Symphony with the drum stroke"), or in English, *The Surprise*. The nickname derives from a single loud chord in the second movement (measure 16, to be precise) strategically placed in the middle of an innocuous little child-like theme played softly. Various theories were advanced as to the meaning of the surprise, including a quote attributed to Haydn that the effect was intended to "make the ladies scream." Another explanation was that the chord served to awaken audience members who might have been inclined to doze off, many of them no doubt having come from one of the famously huge English dinners of the period, greatly enhanced by copious draughts of preliminary sherry, prandial hock, and post-prandial port. When Haydn's biographer Georg August Griesinger asked the composer point-blank whether that was his intent, Haydn gave him quite a different explanation: "No, but it was my wish to surprise the public with something new, and in making a brilliant debut, so that my student Pleyel, who was at that time engaged by an orchestra in London and whose concerts had opened a week before mine, should not outdo me." Competition between Salomon's series and the rival one featuring Pleyel was fierce and Haydn was not one to be out shone by his young former pupil. Incidentally, Ignaz Pleyel (1757-1831) would have his own temporary success as a composer in a relatively simple melodic style that was no match for the richness of his teacher's, but ultimately would be better remembered as the founder of a highly successful piano manufacturing firm in Paris. Though they may have been rivals for a time, pupil and master remained on friendly terms.

Although to our jaded modern ears the famous surprise may seem mild and it can be said that many of Haydn's symphonies contain surprises of many sorts, some even more

dramatic, this particular effect is a delightful example of the whimsical humor that helped to make Haydn the most universally beloved composer of his lifetime.

The symphony is a beautiful example of Haydn's mature style, which had developed over decades of experimentation. The sprightly first movement is preceded by the brief slow introduction which Haydn often used to open his symphonies. This movement contains many delightful surprises of its own, including some striking rhythmic effects featuring rather daring syncopations. The second movement alluded to above is an ingenious set of variations on the famous simple nursery style melody. The third movement is the customary minuet but is unusual in that it is marked "very fast," giving it more of the flavor of a peasant dance rather than that of a true aristocratic minuet. In the whirlwind finale, Papa Haydn, as he came to be known, places tongue firmly in cheek and brings the symphony to a delightfully humorous conclusion.

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Concerto No. 1 in G minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 26
by Max Bruch (1838-1920)

Duration: Approximately 24 minutes

First Performance: January 5, 1868 in Bremen, Germany

Last ESO Performance: October, 2005; Robert Hanson, conductor; Robert McDuffie, violin

Max Bruch may not belong in the same select company as those other three B's, but during his lifetime he was considered one of Germany's leading musicians. Active also as a conductor and teacher, he was as a composer considered an important figure in the conservative wing of German Romanticism, led by Schumann and Brahms. He composed in many genres including opera and symphony but was perhaps most highly regarded as a composer of choral music. A good indication of his renown was the bestowing of an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University in 1893 at the same time that that honor was given to such worthies as Grieg, Saint-Saëns, and Tchaikovsky.

As music history has so abundantly demonstrated, however, a successful career is no guarantee of artistic immortality, and many a composer renowned in his or her lifetime has been consigned to obscurity by the inevitable winnowing process of history. Bruch was more fortunate than most, however, for, although much of his output has been forgotten, a handful of works have remained in the repertoire. The best known is the First Violin Concerto, a beautiful work that was immediately successful, has never lost its popularity, and by itself would be enough to keep Bruch's name alive. Incidentally, Bruch wrote two other violin concertos which he valued as highly as the First, but which are relatively seldom performed.

Although the First Concerto was first performed in 1866, there is evidence that Bruch began work on it as early as 1857, when he was just 19 years old. The premiere left Bruch unsatisfied and he began an extensive revision. During the process he was aided by Joseph Joachim, one of the great figures in nineteenth century violin playing who deserves a sentence or two in his own right. At a time when many audiences were titillated by the flashy violinistic tricks of traveling virtuosi, Joachim stood for the highest and purest musical values, serving as champion of such works as the Bach Sonatas and Partitas and the Beethoven Violin Concerto, works now occupying a hallowed place in the violin repertoire. In addition, he was the dedicatee of the Brahms Violin Concerto and worked closely with the composer on many details of that monumental work.

After having worked with Bruch on the revision into the version that we now know, Joachim gave its premiere in 1868 and after that became one of its greatest advocates. He would eventually pay Bruch one of the highest compliments imaginable. Of all the four great German violin concertos, said Joachim (meaning those of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms, in addition to Bruch's G minor), Bruch's was the "richest, the most seductive."

The concerto begins in unexpected fashion with a dramatic, free, improvisatory-like passage for the soloist which makes it easy to understand why Bruch first thought of calling the entire work a fantasy rather than a concerto. Eventually, however, the movement settles into an *allegro* and takes on most of the characteristics of a typical concerto first movement, including much dramatic interplay between violin and orchestra. Near the end of the movement the opening rhapsodic solo passage returns, and it then becomes clear why the composer actually labeled the movement quite unusually with the word *Vorspiel* ("Prelude"). After the solo passage the music quiets down and leads directly without pause into the slow movement, which serves as the center of gravity for the entire work. Here we are treated to beautiful melodic writing of the ripest Romantic sort, leaving no doubt as to why this has for so long been one of the most beloved works in the violin repertoire.

The fiery finale is based on a Gypsy-like tune featuring chords in the solo part (so-called double and quadruple stops). As many commentators have pointed out, the theme bears a strong resemblance to that of the final movement of the Brahms Concerto. Bruch's version came first, however, and although no one would claim that he was a Brahms, this beautiful concerto has deservedly won him a piece of immortality.

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Variations on a Hungarian Folksong (*The Peacock*)
by Zoltán Kodály (1882 – 1967)

Duration: Approximately 25 minutes

First Performance: November 23, 1939 in Amsterdam

These are the first ESO performances of the work

Hungary has long been recognized as a highly musical culture, producing accomplished musicians in remarkable numbers. One of the most important figures in building that musically literate society was Zoltán Kodály, who was not only a major composer but also a pioneering scholar and a highly influential teacher. Ethnomusicology today is a firmly established academic discipline but when Kodály went with his friend and colleague Béla Bartók out into the farms and fields of Hungary to collect genuine folk-songs as sung by peasants, he was doing path-breaking work. As a teacher, he was mentor to many distinguished musicians and his well-known Kodály system of music education for children has been widely used throughout the world.

As a composer, Kodály managed, while absorbing various other influences, to create a distinctively Hungarian style, with frequent use of the Hungarian folk music that his scholarly work had provided. An excellent example is his *Peacock Variations*, considered by many to be his richest orchestral score. The work was commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam and was first performed on 23 November of 1939 under the direction of Willem Mengelberg. The folk melody on which it is based is, according to the composer, over a thousand years old and yet had a lively contemporary significance in Hungary as a popular song. The peacock was an important symbol in Hungarian culture, symbolizing freedom and eternal love, and appeared not only in songs but also in the decorative arts, such as textiles. It is not hard to see why the text to this song, which Kodály had already set for chorus, acquired political significance: “Fly Peacock, fly....to bring freedom for poor prisoners.” The tune was considered so incendiary as a threat to authority that Kodály’s orchestral work was censored by the Nazis during the Second World War.

The atmospheric opening gives fragments of the theme in various instruments, before the solo oboe finally has the honor of presenting the theme in its most definitive form. This melody, incidentally, is, like so much of the world’s folk music, based on the so-called pentatonic or five –note scale, and the sound of that scale inevitably adds much to the rather exotic sound of the entire work.

Having heard the theme, we are then launched into a series of 16 variations, played without pause. Most of the opening group are in fast tempo, frequently dance-like in character but also marked by lyricism. At times the rather chipper folk-like character is reminiscent of English composers such as Vaughan Williams, who set English folk songs. The eleventh variation brings a sharp change of mood as the English horn intones a soulful melody that is then taken up by other woodwinds. The melancholy tone continues through variation 12 into variation 13, which is actually labeled a funeral march. Then follows an exotic variation featuring some spectacular finger-work in the flute and piccolo, possibly suggesting the peacock in flight. Incidentally, in this and other sections of the work the influence of Debussy’s Impressionist style can be heard. Kodály had spent time in Paris and much admired Debussy’s work.

The vigorous, cheerful tone of the opening variations returns with the 15th variation, which gives way to a more stately 16th variation marked *maestoso* (“majestic”). The composer then tops off the work with its longest section, an exciting finale. Here Kodály’s brilliant mastery of orchestration highlights ideas already heard, including one

last triumphant statement of the theme in the full orchestra. After slowing down for that final apotheosis, the dance resumes and rushes at breakneck speed to the conclusion.

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