Opening Night

Friday, July 31, 2009 • 8 p.m.

Michael Torke

(born September 22, 1961)

Bright Blue Music (1985)

Welcome to another season of classical music under the stars at Britt Festivals! Opening the season this year is a work by a living composer, Michael Torke (pronounced TOR-key). Based in New York, Torke has written extensively for the symphonic genre, including a work commissioned in conjunction with the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, entitled *Javelin*. His music has been described as "some of the most optimistic, joyful and thoroughly uplifting music to appear in recent years" (Grammophone, August 1996). His early works tend to represent the post-minimalist style, where the repetitive structures of minimalism are fused with techniques of both Classical-era music and the contemporary pop music world. Later works by Torke use more expansive forms and themes, and can be described as neo-tonal.

Tonight's work, *Bright Blue Music*, was written shortly after Torke left his graduate studies at Yale to pursue a career independently (he was only 23 years old). He received a commission from the New York Youth Symphony as part of their First Music series, and the work received its premiere on November 23, 1985 at Carnegie Hall. The title of the piece comes in part from Torke's synesthesia, which is essentially the mixing up of the senses. In Torke's case, he sees colors when he hears music, and in his mind, certain keys in music are associated with certain colors. According to Torke, "The key of D Major, the key of this piece, has been the color blue for me since I was five years old."

In many ways, *Bright Blue Music* is an extension of the techniques Torke used to write some of his earlier pieces, like *Ecstatic Orange* and *Vanada*. In Torke's words, these three works "break up and reassemble a 16th note pulse in the context of a single, general sweep from beginning to end." He became unsettled with the harmonic language he employed to achieve this concept, so he decided to explore his ideas in a tonal context. The result is a wonderful piece that "sends a perky waltz-time figure galloping through the orchestra like a fugitive from one of Copland's cowboy ballets" (John von Rhein, *Chicago Tribune*).

Recommended Recording: Baltimore Symphony Orchestra; David Zinman, conductor; on the album *One* (Ecstatic Records, Torke's own record label).

Ernest Bloch

(born July 24, 1880; died July 15, 1959)

Schelomo – Hebraic Rhapsody for Cello and Orchestra (1916)

Ernest Bloch, a composer of Swiss origin who eventually settled in Agate Beach, Oregon, achieved his greatest fame for a series of pieces historians call his "Jewish Cycle," which lasted from 1912 to 1926. All these pieces were inspired (in part at least) by Bloch's Jewish heritage. Bloch's so-called "Jewish" works only make up about a fifth of his total output, yet he is almost exclusively known for these works. Tonight's program features one of these pieces, *Schelomo*, a beautiful work for solo cello and orchestra.

Around 1914, following the outbreak of World War I, Bloch became increasingly concerned about the war. He was particularly moved by a passage of Ecclesiastes (1:2-9, specifically), so he began sketches for a work for voice and orchestra as an expression of his feelings regarding the war. While trying to set the text, Bloch encountered problems; in his own words, "…neither French, German, nor English suited my purpose and I did not know enough Hebrew. Consequently the sketches accumulated and slept." Until one day, when he met a cellist named Alexander Barjansky. They quickly became friends, and Bloch played some manuscripts for Barjansky which Bloch had previously written (including earlier pieces from his Jewish Cycle). These works moved Barjansky greatly, and deepened their friendship. Bloch decided he wanted to write a piece for his newfound friend, and had a thought, "Why not use my Ecclesiastes material, but instead of a human voice, limited by a text, employ an infinitely grander and more profound voice that could speak all languages—that of his violoncello? I took up my sketches, and without plan or program, almost without knowing where I was headed, I worked for days on my rhapsody. As each section was completed, I copied the solo part and Barjansky studied it." After a few weeks, the work was completed, and since Ecclesiastes is generally attributed to King Solomon, Bloch titled the work *Schelomo*.

Although Bloch asserted that he "had no descriptive intentions" when he wrote the piece, he later commented that the cello is the voice of Solomon, proclaiming the value of all things, while the orchestra "represents the world surrounding him (Solomon) and his experiences of life; at the same time, the orchestra often seems to reflect Solomon's inward thought while the solo instrument is giving voice to his words."

Schelomo is a single movement rhapsody in three sections. Each section contains a rather dramatic orchestral climax. Listen for

the many orchestral effects Bloch used in composing this piece, especially the ones in the harp and string parts, and the distinctly Hebrew character of the work as a whole.

Anyone interested in reading further about this work may wish to visit the following website. It contains a complete analysis of the work, plus a good amount of historical background: http://www.cello.org/Newsletter/Articles/schelomo.htm

Recommended Recording: Prague Symphony Orchestra, Karel Ancerl, conductor; André Navarra, violoncello (1992).

Antonín Dvorák

(born Sept. 8, 1841; died May 1, 1904)

Symphony no. 7 in D minor, Op. 70 (1885)

I. Allegro maestoso
II. Poco adagio
III. Scherzo: Vivace - Poco meno mosso
IV. Finale: Allegro

Dvorák, long dismissed by the German-speaking musical world as a “naïve Czech musician,” has gained his place among the finest composers of the late 19th century. His music tended to be nationalistic in nature, and he earned worldwide fame with his symphonies, chamber music, oratories and songs.

Dvorák was a man of the world; he traveled abroad frequently, all around Europe, and even all the way to America (where he wrote his most famous work, his *Symphony No. 9*). A frequent stopping place for Dvorák was England, which is where he gained his fame. In 1883, he was invited to London by the Royal Philharmonic Society to conduct performances of his work during the coming season. The next year saw Dvorák travel to England for the first time. His name was already known there, due to performances of some of his Slavonic Dances and his Sixth Symphony, but England had no idea that such a musical genius was coming for a visit. On March 13, 1884, Dvorák conducted his overture *Husitská*, the Sixth Symphony and the *Slavonic Rhapsody No. 2* in St. James Hall. The musical world of London regarded Dvorák as the “musical hero of the hour,” and the Royal Philharmonic Society quickly made him an honorary member, and also commissioned him to write a new symphony for them. This was no small feat, and Dvorák knew it. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was commissioned by the Philharmonic Society, so Dvorák immediately knew that he had big shoes to fill! At the time he received this commission, Dvorák was coming to terms with his responsibility as symphonist. He had heard and greatly admired Brahms’ Third Symphony, and knew he needed to write such a symphony, not only for himself, but for the Czech nation. Dvorák took great pride in being Czech, and felt that his nation’s music deserved the same respect as any other nation’s. He began work on the symphony in December of 1884, declaring that it “be capable of stirring the world, and may God grant it that will.” In a mere five months, Dvorák completed his Seventh Symphony, and, in April of 1885, he returned to London to premiere it.

The work begins with a fairly ominous first theme, stated by the low strings and passed on to the woodwinds. In a way, this theme gives a sense of great things to come, which likely came from his feelings of honor for the commission he received. In contrast, the second theme is quite lyrical, and some think it was a nod in Brahms’ direction. The movement’s climax comes gradually, and after it happens, the movement ends with quiet intensity.

The second movement has an overt Czech feel; Dvorák uses similar harmonies and textures as he used in his Slavonic Dances, which are some of his most nationalistic works. The horn solo also accentuates this Bohemian mood, and leaves a pastoral seed in the listener’s mind. Originally, this movement was much longer, but after the London premiere, Dvorák trimmed about 40 measures, after which he declared, “Now I am convinced that there is not a single superfluous note in the work.”

In the third movement, a Scherzo, Dvorák hints at two Bohemian dances (the polka and the furiant). With strident cross-rhythms in the scherzo, and further pastoral themes and bird-like calls in the trio, this movement recalls the pastoral theme of the second movement, and shows Dvorák in his most natural element, which is writing Czech music.

A somewhat more tragic mood surfaces in the final movement, much like the first theme from the opening movement. The movement quickly becomes a Slavonic march, and a new, more light-hearted theme is introduced. This theme eventually takes second billing to the return of the march, which briefly becomes a rather serene hymn (much like the second movement), but only temporarily, as the march returns again, this time with renewed vigor. The end of the movement doesn’t have the jubilant feeling one might expect, but nonetheless doesn’t stray into the somber realm of much of the rest of the work. Although it is dominated by somewhat solemn material, Dvorák somehow manages to leave the listener satisfied. With the variety of styles and the authentic Bohemian feeling of this work, no composer but Dvorák could have written it.

Recommended Recording: Cleveland Orchestra, Christoph von Dohnányi, conductor (1992).

Program notes by Mark Knippel