Program Notes

Other concerts in this series have taken us along less-travelled roads where we can admire scenery we may not have encountered before. The Directors Concert usually returns us to the main highways. The route is familiar, but it's a great ride.

Mark Fraser continues his traversal of the Bach solo cello suites. Last year it was #1. This year he has selected the Prelude and Fugue from Suite #5, which is unusual in a couple of ways. The Fifth Suite is generally darker than the others, in the somber key of C minor. The French Overture format (a stately slow introduction followed by a fast section, usually an extended fugue) sets a serious tone. One way in which Bach darkens the sound is by specifying that the top string of the cello be tuned down a whole step, from A to G; the term for such non-standard tuning is scordatura. (Some cellists choose to stay with conventional tuning, which requires that some chords be revoiced.) Bach also made a version of the Fifth Suite for lute; we know it's authentic because the manuscript is in his own handwriting.

Brahms composed three violin sonatas. This last one differs from the others in having four movements instead of three. As with many of his works, it had a long gestation. He began it while on vacation in the summer of 1886 shortly after completing its predecessor, but stopped work on it and didn't resume until two years later, again while on summer vacation (and in the same spot). Commentator Blair Johnston has described it as "an athletic, fibrous, and at times even nervous affair." The opening movement takes us through a wide gamut of emotions. The Adagio is songlike. Clara Schumann's claim that the Scherzo is "like a lovely girl playing with her lover" is a minority opinion; the movement seems too weird for that. The finale, Presto agitato, is aptly named. Two giants associated with the work are its dedicatee, conductor Hans von Bülow, and the violinist who played its premiere, Jenő Hubay. That was in Budapest in 1888. Brahms was the pianist. Don't you wish you'd been there?

With Shostakovich we enter the realm of "reception theory." Divide the twentieth century -- his century -- in two parts. Same composer; same music; completely different meaning. From the Russian Revolution through the end of the Cold War what we heard was the Soviet Artist, sometimes grandiose, sometimes puckish, celebrating the masses in the idiom Stalin insisted on, "Socialist Realism." Then in 1979 Russian musicologist Solomon Volkov published Testimony, which he claimed was Shostakovich's "as-told-to" autobiography. Its authenticity was, and continues to be, hotly challenged. But whether faked or not, its essence

rang true. We learned that Shostakovich was an angry, bitter, unhappy man, virulently anti-Fascist, anti-Soviet, and anti-Stalinist, and that his music was not praise but protest. We now believe we've cracked the code. We can no longer hear the music in the old way. The noisy finale to his best-known symphony, #5, sounds not triumphant but satirical. During the post-Stalin era he became more daring, his anger more overt. (Symphony #13, "Babi Yar," sets a poem by Yevtushenko about Nazis murdering Jews.) But even in earlier works the bitterness spills over, especially in the less "public" chamber music. His Piano Trio #2, composed in 1944, is a lament on both a personal and global level. The personal was the death of his colleague Ivan Sollertinsky at age 41. The global was the Holocaust. For the

first (but not last) time Shostakovich writes in the style of Jewish folk music. The Jewish influence is most prominent in the final movement, a "Dance of Death," in which the melody is relentlessly hammered into our ears and brains. He re-used that tune for comparable effect in his String Quartet #8. That quartet and this trio are his most frequently performed chamber works. They speak most clearly to us. They are not Stalin's Shostakovich, but Ours.