The VCU Symphony presents

UNITY

Conducted by Daniel Myssyk

Friday, March 4th, 2022 at 8 PM
Sonia Vlahcevic Concert Hall
W.E. Singleton Center for the Performing Arts
922 Park Avenue, Richmond, VA 23220
VCU Symphony
Daniel Myssyk, Conductor

Flute
Emily Speight
Samantha Leatham
Anamarie Diaz*, piccolo

Oboe
Daniel Edwards*
David James*, English horn

Clarinet
Yuxiao Zhang
Myles Baldwin
Margaret Albrecht*, bass clarinet

Bassoon
Gregory Morton
Bruce Hammel*

Horn
Philip Boulanger
Anna Bon-Harper
Joey Rutherford
Luke Sardinia

Trumpet
Sebastian Ford, co-principal
Ninon Kirchman, co-principal

Trombone
Carson Longacre
Chris Moss
TJ Lindsay

Tuba
Isaac Patton

Percussion
Axel Gray, principal
Charles Brown
John McCormick
Cameron Shattuck

Piano
Sasha Wang

Harp
Colleen Thorburn*

Violin 1
Arianna Greggs, concertmaster
Aiyana Pringle
Tyler Miranda
Rachel Dale
Spencer Conroy
Gaby Sandoval
Sabrina Almond
Nicole Rodriguez
Caleb Stanger

Violin 2
Luz Recinos, principal
Naim Gmati
Ileana Mattison
Grace Fisherhoff
Sara Jade Kelly
Annelise Box

Viola
Faith Utz, principal
Alex Trouslot
Anna Mitchell

Cello
Kofi Mrarama, principal
Jackie Lankenau
Chris Kim
Nathaniel Wood
Daniel Rivera
Tiannah Washington
Asa Abbot
Adam Jones
David Bui
Sarah Swan
Zach Williams

Bass
Kai Mitchell, principal
Chase Glover
Erin Stephens
Program

Cello Concerto in B minor .................................. Antonín Dvořák
   I. Allegro
   Zach Williams, cello

Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor ....................... Camille Saint-Saëns
   III. Molto moderato e maestoso – Allegro non troppo
   Caleb Stanger, violin

Umoja: Anthem of Unity for Orchestra ............... Valerie Coleman

Polovetsian Dances ........................................ Alexander Borodin
   No. 8: Dance of the Polovetsian Maidens
   No. 17: Polovetsian Dance
Antonín Dvořák: Cello Concerto in B minor
I. Allegro

Program notes written by Nathaniel Wood

Antonín Dvořák was born on September 8th, 1841 in Mühlhausen, Bohemia (Nelahozeves, Czech Republic). He was the oldest of eight surviving siblings and showed early musical aptitude as young as six years old. At the age of thirteen, Dvořák was sent to live with his uncle, Antonín Zdeněk, to learn German from Antonín Liehmann (Antonín went to live with Antonín to study German under Antonín). In addition to teaching the young Dvořák German, Liehmann gave the future composer lessons on organ, piano, and violin as well as taught him music theory. It was because of Liehmann’s urging that Dvořák’s father allowed his son to pursue a career in music — under the condition that he become a career organist. Needless to say, Dvořák did not stick solely to the realm of the organ and went on to compose many famous works for a variety of different instruments.

Dvořák never particularly enjoyed solo cello very much. He enjoyed the middle-range of the instrument, but found that the high-end was too nasally and the low-end was too muddled. Despite this, Dvořák attempted his first composition for solo cello in 1865 with his Cello Concerto in A major; however, this work was never finished. Later in 1894, during the composer’s time in America as Director of the National Conservatory, Dvořák would hear Victor Herbert’s second cello concerto and became inspired to again attempt a composition for solo cello. This would ultimately result in his Cello Concerto in B minor. Despite Dvořák’s dislike of the Cello as a solo instrument, this Concerto would go on to become a staple of cello repertoire.

Inspired by a deep homesickness, Dvořák’s Cello Concerto in B minor would be composed with the help of cellist Hanuš Wihan. Ultimately, Wihan was too involved with the process and kept attempting to add new parts and cadenzas to the point of prompting Dvořák to write to his publishers stating “I give you my work only if you will promise me that no one — not even my friend Wihan — shall make any alteration in it without my knowledge and permission, also that there be no cadenza such as Wihan has made in the last movement; and that its form shall be as I have felt it and thought it out.”

The first movement of the concerto opens with a somber orchestral theme reminiscent of a funeral. Eventually, the dramatic opening gives way to the tranquil second theme played on solo horn. Then, about five minutes into the piece, the solo cello is finally introduced. Melodic motifs inspired by American hymns and spirituals characteristic of Dvořák’s other works can be heard throughout the movement. There is much drama throughout the movement culminating in a grandiose fanfare.
Camille Saint-Saëns: Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor

III. Molto moderato e maestoso – Allegro non troppo

Program notes written by Nathaniel Wood

Camille Saint-Saëns was born on October 9th, 1835 in Paris, France. He started music early on the piano and was widely considered to be a prodigy. In fact, Saint-Saëns' mother is reported to have not allowed him to publicly perform until the age of 10 because she didn't want him to get famous as a child. By the time he was 13, Saint-Saëns was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire. There, he would study organ and composition under Fromental Haléy, where he would participate in several competitions for organ. Following his graduation from the Conservatoire, he would take a job as the organist of the church of Saint-Merri where he would write his first symphony in E flat major. From here, he would go on to become one of the most prominent French composers of the 19th century.

Throughout his lifetime Saint-Saëns wrote many famous works, including his Carnival of Animals and Samson et Dalila. One of his most well-known pieces written for violin is his Violin Concerto No. 3 in B Minor. Composed in 1880, the piece was dedicated to the Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate. On the process of composition, Saint-Saëns wrote that "during the composition of this concerto, Sarasate gave me invaluable advice, to which is certainly due the considerable degree of favor it has met with on the part of violinists themselves." This collaboration is evident through the meshing of both French and Spanish motifs that can be heard throughout all three movements. Interestingly, despite Saint-Saëns not knowing how to play the violin, he still managed to write virtuosic and memorable violin solos intuitively. The end product is one of Saint-Saëns' most memorable works and is a cornerstone of violin repertoire, with the third movement being the most famous of the three.

The third movement starts with a dramatic cadenza-like entrance from the soloist, unlike many other concertos of the time. This dramatic opening leads into a Spanish-sounding march that is both playful and moody. This movement has a strong momentum to it, with the piece only slowing down significantly for the introduction of the secondary melody in the orchestral violins. Despite this, Saint-Saëns maintains the drama all the way through to the end, with the final twist of a solemn chorale brought on by the brass that grows into an explosive and exciting finale.
Valerie Coleman: Umoja: Anthem of Unity for Orchestra

Program notes written by Sasha Wang

Valerie Coleman is a GRAMMY-nominated flutist, entrepreneur, and composer. In 2017, Coleman was highlighted as one of the Washington Post's Top 35 Women Composers and was named Classical Woman of the Year by Performance Today in 2020. Coleman has received awards such as the MAPFund, the ASCAP Honors Award, and the Herb Alpert Ragdale Residency Award for her contributions to the world of classical music. *Umoja: Anthem of Unity* was chosen by Chamber Music America as one of its Top 101 Great American Ensemble Works.

Coleman was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, and now lives in New York City. After expressing interest in music early on in her childhood Coleman started her formal music education in the fourth grade at the age of eleven, picking up the flute as her principal instrument. Even from a young age, Coleman was interested in composing music. As Coleman's musical education progressed, she started writing full-length symphonies and competing in several local and state competitions. Later, Coleman received a double Bachelor of Arts in theory/composition and flute performance from Boston University. She then graduated from Mannes College of Music with a master's degree in flute performance.

*Umoja* was originally a simple song arranged for a women's choir. In 2001, 2002, 2003, 2008, and 2019, *Umoja* was rearranged for a wind quintet, Imani Winds, chamber music for a wind sextet, concert band, and orchestral, respectively. Coleman rearranged *Umoja* "with the intent of providing an anthem that celebrates the diverse heritages of the ensemble itself" quoted by Coleman in an article. The orchestral arrangement of *Umoja* premiered in 2019 upon a commission from the Philadelphia Orchestra. *Umoja* is a historic achievement, as it was the first time that the Philadelphia Orchestra had commissioned a work from a living African-American female composer.

*Umoja* was written for the African Diaspora holiday Kwanzaa, which is a time of celebration. During Kwanzaa, families gather together to celebrate African and African-American culture with singing, dancing, and recitations of original poetry. Kwanzaa is a time for families to honor their ancestors with African drumming and meal sharing, strengthening the bonds between the families. Kwanzaa lasts for seven days with a candle lit each day based on its principle. The lighting of the candles on each day is called a kinara, which in Swahili means candle holder. *Umoja*, meaning unity in Swahili, is the first principle of Kwanzaa. It means "to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race," and stresses the importance of unity, according to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture. *Umoja* reflects the African proverb, "I AM because WE ARE."
This powerful phrase inspires our community and brings us all together to achieve great things.

*Umoja: Anthem of Unity* starts with ethereal passages played by bowed percussion keyboards, supporting the melody played by a solo violinist. The melody in this section beautifully encapsulates Appalachian style music with its legato lines and rubato phrasing. The dialogue and connection between each family of instruments and the violin solo weaves and dances throughout the beginning of the piece, adding an extra layer of texture. The orchestra then comes together to produce a majestic, dolce melody, delivering a feeling of serenity and peace. From there, the trumpet solo parallels the violin solo with the orchestra interrupting, adding hints of harmony to the sweet melody.

As the piece gets more intense, the string families compete for the melody with the time signature changing rapidly to add intensity and power. The piccolo repeats the melody, bringing the delicate airy ambience back once again. The air suddenly changes as a new melody is introduced and the tempo transitions into a 5/4 time signature with an allegro tempo. The melody intertwines between each family of instruments, interrupted by dissonant, jarring tones and sudden rhythm changes. This section is led by the brass section and includes heavy percussion involvement, specifically the temple blocks, that add a layer of spiky texture to the piece to depict the struggles of racism and the realities of injustice. As the clash of tones climaxes, the mood suddenly turns solemn as the battle comes to an end. The entire ensemble crescendos, adding to the intense feeling as the battle was thought to have been lost, but the battle is not yet over as the change in key inspires a sense of victory.

This time, the brass section and the strings section converse between each other in an upbeat melody as the people are dancing in memory of the affection and compassion that still exists in the world. The gentle melody eventually returns, this time with the singing of the melody passing between each family of instruments while being supported by the ensemble, giving a gentle reminder of kindness and humanity. As the brass leads the ensemble tutti and the battle of injustice, racism and hate minimizes, the melody that shouts unity returns back to the original anthem. The piece ends with the ensemble singing all together on a major chord, bringing back justice, warmth, and most importantly — unity in the piece.
Alexander Borodin: Polovetsian Dances

Program notes written by Anna Mitchell

Russian Romantic composer Alexander Borodin (1833 - 1887) never allowed himself to be defined simply by one role. Born in Saint Petersburg, Borodin studied piano, flute, cello, and composition from a young age, but his passion for music was just one of many loves he held in his heart. The young, studious Borodin grew up to be both a chemist and a physician, and in his adult life, he made groundbreaking contributions in both the worlds of science and classical music. When he wasn't taking composition lessons from pianist Mily Balakirev, he was writing articles for various research journals, and when he took breaks from his job at several different universities, he spent his free time writing symphonies, operas, chamber music, and more. Borodin's character displayed itself in his various works, and his two Polovetsian Dances from his 1868 opera Prince Igor are particularly true to who he was as a person; they rapidly change between themes and moods and never dare to let themselves be defined by one tempo marking or time signature. Like Borodin, they rarely take breaks, are wide and varied in their content covered, never are without purpose, and are vivid and full of life at every single moment.

The dances might seem to be numbered oddly, but this is due to the fact that both dances originally appeared as scenes in Prince Igor, and their numbers correspond with their original scenes from the nineteenth century opera. The first of the two dances, No. 8: Dance of the Polovetsian Maidens, is considerably shorter than its successor, but is just as full of life in two and a half minutes as the other dance is in twelve. Clocking in at roughly two and a half minutes, the dance begins with a spritely spiccato stroke in the string section and features a series of very quick chromatic solos in the wind section. The strings soon pick up the main melody, and sets of spritely trills and flourishes of quick eighth notes and sixteenth notes increase the intensity of this short spitfire of a dance. The dance ends just as suddenly as it begun, with the winds, strings, and percussion all coming together for one crisp final beat.

Though the second of the two dances, No. 17, is technically titled Polovetsian Dances with Chorus, the orchestral accompaniment is strong enough to stand on its own, and is frequently performed in this form. The dance opens up with a swaying, honeyed flute solo that sweetly opens the door for a similar solo on the A clarinet. A high harmonic A major chord follows this wind-dominated section, where the only presence of any string instruments is the cellos' gentle strumming of a low A. As the oboe solo and English horn solo begin, the higher strings make their delicate appearance. These first few minutes are gentle and sweet and offer just a glimpse of what is to come in the remaining ten minutes of the work.
The starting melody, regal and flowy, continues to make its way between several different instruments. The first section finishes with another solo by the English horn, and after the briefest of pauses, the violas begin to chug away at the Allegro vivo, the B flat clarinet begins a jolly new solo, the key modulates into F major, and the tempo and energy this dance quickly take flight, reminiscent of the dance we heard just before this one. Happy, jaunty runs remind us of the joy embedded in this dance, and a quick accelerando leaves us excited to see what is to come.

After a sudden, self-assured fermata and a key change into D major, with a rumble of the percussion, the brass, strings, and winds all break into a proud, stately march fitting of the royalty and military featured in Prince Igor. The three beats in each measure are all equally prideful, and flourishes and trills in the wind section serve to ornament this regal experience.

Just as dramatically as the previous section began, the time signature morphs into an even quicker 6/8 and the tempo raises as the violins and violas saw away at their strings together, initially playing softly but quickly loudening. Similarly to the previous section, the strings and winds play in a sturdy, stately fashion, with quick and spiritedly runs serving to accent every few moments. There is a brief interlude where the oboes and the violas—an unlikely but charming duo—return to the dulcet melody from the very beginning of this dance, and the cellos soon step into place with a lower version of the same warm, reassuring theme. In what is perhaps the most profound moment of the entire set of dances, the violas and basses segue into a gentle pizzicato as the first violins pick up the melody, the animated winds continue with their light, lilting flourishes, and an immense feeling of warmth surrounds the stage. This brief section, in its call back to the beginning of the dance, is, as Borodin intended, vivacious and spirited, and though it is quite different from the louder, quicker segment we just heard, both parts are equally and infinitely full of life.

Not long after, the dance transitions back to the glorious, self-affirmed presto of before, the tempo changes coming even quicker now as the piece speeds into an Allegro con spirito and wraps up with an even more lively Più animato. The second dance ends with a quick chromatic run, a striking set of A major chords, and a trill that crescendos into the final, most impactful note. From the rapid, jaunty first dance to the soft, swaying melodies and proud cheers of the second dance, Borodin’s Polovetsian Dances are full of life in every moment, and every beat shines as vibrantly to this day as they did back in 1800s Russia.
About the Conductor

Assistant Conductor of the Richmond Symphony, Canadian-American conductor Daniel Myssyk was Music Director of the Montreal based Orchestre de chambre Appassionata from 2000 to 2016. In recent years, he has made critically acclaimed appearances with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, and the Lubbock Symphony Orchestra, among others. In 2015, Myssyk made his debut in Guanajuato (Mexico) where he has been returning almost every season since. In 2019, return engagements have brought him back to Canada to conduct the Orchestre symphonique de Trois-Rivières and the Orchestre de la Francophonie.

Myssyk’s recordings have received widespread critical acclaim. Czech Serenades with works by Suk and Dvořák, was nominated for best recording of the year at the ADISQ awards, Quebec’s equivalent of the Grammys and at the Prix Opus from the Conseil québécois de la musique.

Professor Myssyk has been Virginia Commonwealth University’s Director of Orchestral Activities since 2007. Under his leadership, three VCU Opera productions of The Gondoliers (2015), The Old Maid and the Thief (2012), and Hansel and Gretel (2011) won top prizes at the National Opera Association competition. His involvement toward the youth reflects a well-honed passion for music education. In addition to his work at VCU, he is a regular collaborator with Senior Regional Orchestras throughout Virginia, among others. He was appointed conductor of the Richmond Symphony Youth Orchestra in 2018.

In the early 2000s, Myssyk was a conducting fellow at the Aspen Music Festival and School where he spent two summers under the tutelage of David Zinman. A student of Larry Rachleff, he received his Masters Degree in Conducting from the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in 2006.

Friends of Music

The VCU Friends of Music Scholarship Fund continues to assist many of our VCU Music students with necessary scholarship funds making it possible for them to pursue their education. To contribute to this fund online, please go to: support.vcu.edu/give/Arts — scroll to “Friends of Music.” For additional information on how to support VCU Music, please email music@vcu.edu or call 804-827-4541. Your support is valuable and appreciated!

Department of Music at Virginia Commonwealth University
922 Park Avenue, Room 132
PO Box 842004
Richmond, VA 23284-2004
804-828-1166
music@vcu.edu