

## Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

*A founding member of the Robert W. Woodruff Arts Center*

**ROBERT SPANO**, Music Director

**DONALD RUNNICLES**, Principal Guest Conductor

## DELTA CLASSICAL SERIES CONCERTS

Thursday and Saturday, February 19 and 21, 2009, at 8 p.m.

and Sunday, February 22, 2009, at 3 p.m.

**MEI-ANN CHEN**, Conductor  
**NADJA SALERNO-SONNENBERG**, Violin

XI WANG (b. 1978)

***Above Light*** — a conversation with Toru Takemitsu (2006)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)

**Violin Concerto in E minor**, Opus 64 (1844)

I. *Allegro molto appassionato*

II. *Andante*

III. *Allegretto non troppo; Allegro molto vivace*

NADJA SALERNO-SONNENBERG, Violin

### INTERMISSION

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

**Symphony No. 5 in E minor**, Opus 64 (1888)

I. *Andante; Allegro con anima*

II. *Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza*

III. *Valse; Allegro moderato*

IV. *Finale; Andante maestoso; Allegro vivace*

“INSIDE THE MUSIC” preview of the concert, Thursday at 7 p.m.,  
presented by Ken Meltzer, ASO Insider and Program Annotator.

The use of cameras or recording devices during the concert is strictly prohibited.

# Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

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# NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Ken Meltzer

## ***Above Light* — a conversation with Toru Takemitsu (2006)**

**XI WANG** was born in China on June 7, 1978. The first performance of *Above Light* took place at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on October 26, 2007, with Osmo Vänskä conducting the Minnesota Orchestra. *Above Light* is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, three congas, xylophone, vibraphone, marimba, chimes, suspended cymbal, tam-tam, bass drum, log drum, crotale, marimba, five tom-toms, whip, five wood blocks, suspended cymbal (low pitch), harp, piano/celesta and strings. Approximate performance time is nine minutes.

*These are the first ASO Classical Subscription Performances.*

### **Xi Wang**

Composer Xi Wang has become recognized as one of the most talented and active composers of her generation. Her music has been widely performed in the United States and abroad, including Orchestra Hall (Minneapolis, MN), the Merkin Hall (New York City, NY), the Harris Concerto Hall (Aspen, CO), the Uji Hall (Tokyo, Japan), the Great Concert Hall (Dartington, United Kingdom), the Rachmaninov Hall (Moscow, Russia), and the Zhongzheng Hall (Taipei, Taiwan). Xi Wang's music has been performed by such ensembles as the Minnesota Orchestra, the Spokane Symphony, the California State University Northridge Symphony Orchestra, the Proteus Ensemble, the Tippet String Quartet, the Mark Pekarsky Percussion Ensemble, the Pacific Music Festival Academy Percussion Ensemble, Maya Trio, and DoublePlay.

Xi Wang has received four prizes from ASCAP. Her music has been spotlighted on Minnesota Public Radio, Aspen Public Radio and Radio-China. Xi Wang received the "Crumb Commission", in honor of the American composer, George Crumb, on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Oregon Bach Festival Composers' Symposium. She was the sole recipient of the 2006-2007 Robbins Family Prize in Music Composition for her exceptional merit and promise as a composer at Cornell University. Xi Wang was also one of the eight young composers featured in the project, *New Voices from China*, at the Bard College. Her other awards include the first prize of the Fourth International Jurgenson Competition for Young Composers; the Tsang-Houei Hsu International Music Composition Award; the fifth edition of Northridge Composition Prize; the first prize of the "Music from China" International Composition Competition; the first prize of the "Ensemble X" competition, the University of Missouri-Kansas City Chamber Music Composition Competition Award and the Outstanding Student Studying Abroad Award from the Chinese Government.

As a conductor, Xi Wang has led a number of premieres of her own compositions, as well as music by her colleagues. She performs as a solo pianist, as well as a chamber music player.

Xi Wang's music education started at the young age of five, when she received her first piano lesson. She received her Bachelor's degree in Music Composition from Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Upon receiving a full scholarship from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, Xi Wang came to the United States for her Masters degree in Music Composition in 2001, studying with Dr. Chen Yi, Dr. Zhou Long, and Dr. James Mobberly. In the summer of 2008, Xi Wang finished her Doctoral degree in Music Art at Cornell University, where she studied with Professor Steven Stucky and Roberto Sierra. Xi Wang divides her time between China and the US, teaching at Shanghai Conservatory and currently, as a member of the faculty of the Department of Music of Cornell University. For more information about Xi Wang, visit her personal website: [xiwangcomposer.com](http://xiwangcomposer.com).

### ***Above Light*—a conversation with Toru Takemitsu**

The composer provided the following commentary on *Above Light*:

The elegance and colorfulness of Takemitsu's imaginary soundscapes drew my deep love and admiration. The style of my compositions is quite different from Takemitsu's. However, I believe the beauty of music is its diversity and the coexistence of difference. I see struggles in my life, so does my music. And I love both of them!

There are two fundamental components in *Above Light*. The first material — a delicate melodic phrase played by piano, flute and harp, opens this piece. It reminisces and is a tribute to Takemitsu's music. It is soon interrupted by the second material — heavy strokes from percussions and a dark, low, sustained note played by bass instruments. These two contrastive materials are juxtaposed several times, and are developed in length and density each time. Later there comes an attempt to combine all the materials vertically. The first material — a lyrical melodic contour, is now played by piccolo and violins at the high register, producing a mist to shroud the rest of the orchestra. The other materials sweep in gradually, but violently conflict with the first. The orchestra reaches its saturation and is taken over by the massive sound from percussions. After reaching the forceful drum climax, the music collapses onto one long note played by violins at the extremely high register. It leads to a short recapitulation of the first material, with an aloof reminiscence of Takemitsu's music.

### **Violin Concerto in E minor, Opus 64 (1844)**

**FELIX MENDELSSOHN** was born in Hamburg, Germany, on February 3, 1809, and died in Leipzig, Germany, on November 4, 1847. The first performance of the E-minor Concerto took place on March 13, 1845, at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, with Ferdinand David as soloist and Niels W. Gade conducting. In addition to the solo violin, the E-minor Concerto is scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings. Approximate performance time is twenty-six minutes.

*First ASO Classical Subscription Performance: February 27, 1949, James de la Fuente, Violin, Henry Sopkin, Conductor.*

*Most Recent ASO Classical Subscription Performances: February 1, 2 and 3, 2007, Henning Kraggerud, Violin, Nicholas McGegan, Conductor.*

## “Whatever comes from the heart makes me happy”

**T**he genesis of Felix Mendelssohn’s E-minor Violin Concerto is memorialized in a July 30, 1838 letter from the composer to his dear friend, Ferdinand David (1810-1873). David, an eminent violinist, was then concertmaster of Mendelssohn’s Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig. Mendelssohn wrote from Berlin:

I am planning to begin writing out my symphony in the next few days and to finish it in a short time, probably before leaving here. I would also like to write you a violin concerto for next winter as well; I have one in E minor in my head, the opening leaves me no peace...I feel that with every piece I get further toward being able to write what is really in my heart, and in fact that is the only rule of conduct I have. If I am not destined for popularity I do not want to study or struggle to win it; or if you think that is not the way to speak, let us say I *cannot* study to win it. For I really cannot, and I don’t want to be able to. Whatever comes from the heart makes me happy, in its outward effects as well...

David was, of course, thrilled by Mendelssohn’s news. However, the progress of the Concerto proved to be slow, as Mendelssohn tended to other obligations. In response to a letter from David, written the following year, Mendelssohn acknowledged:

It is nice of you to press me for a violin concerto! I have the liveliest desire to write one for you, and if I have a few propitious days, I’ll bring you something. But the task is not an easy one. You ask that it should be brilliant, and how can anyone like me do this?

David continued to encourage Mendelssohn, and the composition of the Violin Concerto proved to be a truly collaborative effort. The violinist repeatedly offered constructive suggestions for modifications to the score-in-progress. In fact, it is generally believed that David was essentially responsible for the beautiful first-movement cadenza.

Finally, in December of 1844, Mendelssohn forwarded the score of the Violin Concerto to his publisher. But then, the composer immediately wrote the following to David:

Today I must ask you a favor. I have sent the score of the violin concerto to Breitkopf and Haertel and I have lately made several alterations in it with pencil, which can be copied into the parts. I have changed a number of things in the solo part, too, and I hope they are improvements. But I would particularly like to have your opinion about all this before I give up the music irrevocably to the printer.

After listing several corrections for David’s review, Mendelssohn concluded, “‘Thank God that the fellow is through with his concerto!’, you will say. Excuse my bothering you, but what can I do?”

Mendelssohn dedicated the Concerto to David, who appeared at the March 13, 1845 Gewandhaus premiere. Mendelssohn was recuperating from an illness at the time, and so, Niels W. Gade served as the conductor for that highly successful first performance. The Concerto was repeated during the subsequent Gewandhaus season. David was again the soloist at the October 20, 1845 concert, this time with Mendelssohn on the podium.

## “The heart’s jewel”

Another momentous chapter in the history of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto was written a few weeks later. Robert Schumann arranged a Dresden concert for November 10, 1845. The concert was scheduled to include the premiere of Schumann’s Piano Concerto, with the composer’s wife, Clara, as soloist. However, when Clara suddenly took ill, Schumann contacted Mendelssohn and David, with a request that the Violin Concerto be substituted. David had a conflicting engagement on the designated concert date, and so he sent in his place one of his students from the Leipzig Conservatory, a 14-year-old Austro-Hungarian violinist by the name of Joseph Joachim (1831-1907).

The concert proved to be a great triumph for Joachim, who ultimately established himself as one of the preeminent virtuosos of all time. Throughout his long and distinguished career, Joachim proved to be a tireless exponent of the Mendelssohn Concerto.

Many years later — at his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday party to be exact — Joachim offered the following observation: “The Germans have four violin concertos. The greatest, the one that makes fewest concessions, is Beethoven’s. The one by Brahms comes close to Beethoven’s in its seriousness. Max Bruch wrote the richest and most enchanting of the four. But the dearest of them all, the heart’s jewel, is Mendelssohn’s.”

To this day, the Mendelssohn E-minor remains one of the most beloved of violin concertos. The seamless, inevitable flow of the work belies the years of struggle invested by Mendelssohn and his worthy collaborator, Ferdinand David. The genial lyricism also tends to obscure the several innovative, even revolutionary, touches in the magnificent score. The E-minor Concerto, along with such works as the Overture to the Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the *Octet* for Strings, represent Mendelssohn at his zenith, a composer demonstrating the capacity to approach, and perhaps even achieve, perfection.

## Musical Analysis

I. *Allegro molto appassionato* — Mendelssohn dispenses with the traditional orchestral introduction of the Concerto’s principal themes. Instead, the soloist enters almost immediately, playing a haunting melody, soon repeated in highly dramatic fashion by the orchestra. An undulating second theme is initially played by the oboes and first violins, and then, by the soloist. The violin’s majestic, descending phrase leads to the introduction by the flutes and clarinets of the beautiful closing theme, marked *tranquillo*. In Concertos of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the solo cadenza traditionally appears toward the close of the movement. Mendelssohn departs from convention by placing the cadenza immediately before the recapitulation of the principal themes. The undulating second theme dominates the tempestuous closing measures, leading directly to the ensuing *Andante*.

II. *Andante* — After a brief and mysterious orchestral prelude, the violinist enters with the lyrical, principal melody. The *Andante* is fashioned along the lines of an opera aria, with the presentation and ultimate reprise of the melody separated by a contrasting, dramatic interlude. The concluding movement follows without pause.

III. *Allegretto non troppo; Allegro molto vivace* — A brief episode, featuring echoes of thematic material from the first two movements, serves as a bridge to the principal section of the rondo finale. A dialogue, consisting of fanfares by the brass and winds and upward flourishes by the violin, leads to the soloist's introduction of the rondo's elfin, central theme. The mood of the finale is joyous throughout, and the movement concludes in triumphant fashion, with brilliant solo writing.

## **Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64 (1888)**

**PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY** was born in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia, on May 7, 1840, and died in St. Petersburg, Russia, on November 6, 1893. The first performance of the **Symphony No. 5** took place in St. Petersburg on November 17, 1888, with the composer conducting. The **Symphony No. 5** is scored for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings. Approximate performance time is fifty minutes.

*First ASO Classical Subscription Performance: December 7, 1949, Henry Sopkin, Conductor.*

*Most Recent ASO Classical Subscription Performances: November 15, 16 and 19, 2006, Itzhak Perlman, Conductor.*

### **“Now I shall work my hardest”**

In the spring of 1888, after a highly successful three-month conducting tour of Western Europe, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky returned to Russia. Tchaikovsky was then determined to focus his attentions on composing. As he wrote to his brother, Modest: “first this summer *I shall without fail compose a symphony.*” A decade had elapsed since the completion of Tchaikovsky's last numbered Symphony, the Fourth (In 1885, he composed a programmatic Symphony, based on Lord Byron's *Manfred*). Tchaikovsky reviewed the Symphony No. 4 and, pleased with that work, embarked upon the creation of his Fifth.

Tchaikovsky composed his Symphony No. 5 during the summer of 1885. In June, he wrote to his benefactress, Nadezhda von Meck:

Now I shall work my hardest. I am exceedingly anxious to prove to myself, as to others, that I am not played out as a composer ... Have I told you that I intend to write a symphony? The beginning was difficult; but now inspiration seems to have come. However, we shall see.

During this period, Tchaikovsky also worked on a “Fantasy-overture,” based upon William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Tchaikovsky completed his Fifth Symphony on August 26. He put the finishing touches on the *Hamlet* “Fantasy-Overture” on October 19.

Tchaikovsky conducted the premiere of his Symphony No. 5 in St. Petersburg on November 17, 1888. In many ways, it was a grand triumph for the composer. At the concert, the orchestra saluted Tchaikovsky with a triple fanfare. He also received an honorary membership in the St. Petersburg Society. The audience greeted the new work with a rousing ovation.

However, the critics were far less enthusiastic about the Fifth Symphony. Tchaikovsky, who frequently battled the demons of self-doubt, soon wrote to von Meck:

Having played my Symphony twice in Petersburg and once in Prague, I have come to the conclusion that it is a failure. There is something repellent in it, some over-exaggerated color, some insincerity of fabrication which the public instinctively recognizes. It was clear to me that the applause and ovations referred not to this but to other works of mine, and that the Symphony itself will never please the public. All this causes deep dissatisfaction with myself ... Yesterday evening I looked through the Fourth Symphony ... How much better and superior it is!

However, in the early part of 1889, Tchaikovsky conducted the Fifth Symphony in Hamburg, Germany. The work earned the praises of the orchestra musicians, as well as the great German composer, Johannes Brahms. This reception seemed to buoy Tchaikovsky's spirits. He wrote to his nephew, Vladimir Davidov: "The Fifth Symphony was magnificently played and I like it far better now, after having held a bad opinion of it for some time."

### **The Fifth Symphony: A Struggle with Fate?**

Tchaikovsky insisted that his Fifth Symphony (unlike Nos. 4 and 6) did not contain a program. However, the progression of the Symphony No. 5 — with its presentation, frequent reappearance and dramatic metamorphosis of a central leitmotif — certainly seems to hint at some extra-musical significance. That notion is supported by the following words, located among Tchaikovsky's sketches for the Fifth Symphony:

Intr(oduction). Total submission before Fate — or, what is the same thing, the inscrutable design of Providence.

Allegro. I. Murmurs, doubts, laments, reproaches against ... XXX.

2. Shall I cast myself into the embrace of *faith*?

A wonderful programme, if only it can be fulfilled.

If it is true that Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 portrays a struggle with Fate, the outcome seems to be a positive one, certainly far more so than those depicted in the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies. But such considerations, ultimately, are secondary to the glorious music of this gripping and unforgettable symphonic journey.

### **Musical Analysis**

I. *Andante*; *Allegro con anima* — The Symphony opens with a slow introduction (*Andante*). The clarinets present an ominous theme that will appear as the central leitmotif in each of the Symphony's four movements. The theme soon becomes the basis for the opening melody (played by a solo clarinet and bassoon) of the ensuing *Allegro con anima*. The melody builds in intensity, until it receives a *fff* proclamation by the orchestra. The violins then introduce a more reflective theme, played *molto espressivo*. A cheerful dialogue between strings and chirping winds (*Un pochettino più animato*) leads to a yearning melody (*Molto più tranquillo*), played by the violins. This melody

and the preceding theme build to a climax, as the exposition reaches its dynamic conclusion. After a tempestuous development of the central themes, a solo bassoon inaugurates the recapitulation. The first theme of the *Allegro* dominates the fiery coda that finally resolves to a *ppp* close.

II. *Andante cantabile, con alcuna licenza* — After a hushed introduction by the strings, the solo horn plays the radiant principal melody, to which a clarinet soon provides obbligato accompaniment. A solo oboe then introduces the lovely second theme of this slow movement. The strings repeat the two themes in sequence, as the mood becomes ever more passionate. A solo clarinet launches a central episode that proceeds inexorably to a powerful reappearance of the Symphony's leitmotif. This leads to a varied restatement of the *Andante's* two principal melodies, interrupted again by the leitmotif, now in an even more savage guise. Calm is restored in the final measures with the strings' reprise of the second melody.

III. *Valse; Allegro moderato* — The third-movement *Waltz* is in ternary (A—B—A) form. The strings introduce the lilting, principal melody. A sprightly central section features *spiccato* strings and puckish winds. A reprise of the opening section ensues, followed by a coda in which the clarinets and bassoons utter a rather insinuating version of the central leitmotif. Six *fortissimo* chords bring the *Waltz* to an ebullient close.

IV. *Finale; Andante maestoso; Allegro vivace* — The *Finale* opens with a slow introduction (*Andante maestoso*). For the first time, the central leitmotif is transformed to the major key. A roll of the timpani heralds an agitated section (*Allegro vivace*) where the leitmotif again assumes a notable presence. Finally, after a dramatic pause, the leitmotif returns for the final time — now cast as a triumphal march (*Moderato assai e molto maestoso*). Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony concludes with a *Presto* coda, featuring the brass's exultant version of the opening movement's initial *Allegro* theme.

**MEI-ANN CHEN, Conductor**  
Assistant Conductor & League Conducting Fellow

**T**he first woman to win the Malko International Conductors Competition (2005), Mei-Ann Chen has established herself as a versatile, highly communicative and inspirational young artist. Currently, Assistant Conductor of Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, she was awarded the 2007 Taki Concordia Fellowship; as a result of that award, she appeared jointly with Marin Alsop and Stefan Sanderling in highly acclaimed subscription concerts with the Baltimore Symphony, Colorado Symphony and Florida Orchestra.



Ms. Chen opened her 2008-09 season with the Norrlands Opera in Sweden, and the Manhattan School of Music. Other engagements this season include all the principal Danish orchestras, the Norwegian Radio Orchestra, the National Symphony at Kennedy Center, as well as the symphonies of Alabama, Fort Worth, Honolulu, Kalamazoo, Memphis, Toronto, Princeton and Taiwan, and the Grand Teton Music Festival. This week marks Ms. Chen's subscription debut with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

Prior to the ASO, Mei-Ann served as Assistant Conductor of the Oregon Symphony from 2003 to 2005. In 2002, Ms. Chen was unanimously selected as Music Director of the Portland Youth Philharmonic in Oregon, the oldest of its kind and the model for many U.S. youth orchestras. During her five-year tenure with the orchestra, she led its sold-out debut in Carnegie Hall, received an ASCAP award for innovative programming, established new partnerships with Oregon Symphony and Chamber Music Northwest, and developed new and unique musician-ship programs for the orchestra's members. She was honored with a Sunburst Award from Young Audiences for her contribution to music education.

Born in Taiwan, Mei-Ann Chen has lived in the United States since 1989. She holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in conducting from the University of Michigan, where she was a student of Kenneth Kiesler. Previously, she was the first recipient in New England Conservatory's history to receive double master's degrees simultaneously in violin and conducting. As a violinist, she has performed in Carnegie Hall and at the Tanglewood Music Festival numerous times.

Ms. Chen is a member of the American Conducting Fellows program, a national conductor-training program developed and managed by the American Symphony Orchestra League. The program, which supports the musical and leadership development of exceptional talented conductors in the early stages of their professional careers, seeks to improve the qualifications of American conductors whose goal is to become music directors of American orchestras.

## **NADJA SALERNO-SONNENBERG, Violinist**

**P**assionate interpretations, impeccable technique and profound musicianship are just a few of the characteristics that have established violin virtuoso Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg as one of the most prominent violinists of our time. Her performances are as unique and powerful as the artist behind them and she was the subject of the 2000 Academy Award-nominated film, *Speaking In Strings*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival.

This season Nadja took on a new challenge when she became the Music Director and Concertmaster of New Century Chamber Orchestra (NCCO), a 17-member string orchestra made up of an international group of top chamber musicians. She leads this ensemble in four different subscription series throughout the season. She inaugurated her tenure with performances last September in Berkeley, San Francisco, San Rafael and Palo Alto. Next month Nadja embarks on a tour (including a date at Carnegie Hall) with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, performing Piazzolla's *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*. She reunites with the NCCO in March and May, and next performs with pianist Anne-Marie McDermott throughout the US.

A powerful and innovative presence on the recording scene, Nadja founded her own record label, NSS Music, in 2005. The label already features *Merry* (a compilation of Christmas favorites, with Nadja and friends), *Nadja* (Tchaikovsky and Assad violin concertos) and *Live* (Nadja and Ms. McDermott). An ever-evolving, creative project, NSS's mission is to release music from many genres.



**Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg**