

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY
NOSTALGIA: CONNECTING WITH OUR PAST AND FUTURE
ALEX AMSEL, GUEST CONDUCTOR
APRIL 6, 2025
PROGRAM NOTES

Nostalgia is a blend of joy from recalling past experiences, such as childhood or relationships, and the sorrow of knowing those moments have passed. Like my favorite chocolates, nostalgia is bittersweet. As a young man moving to the United States, bittersweet was a reoccurring emotion in my life - the sorrow of recalling the life I was leaving versus the excitement and gratefulness for the life I would start. This feeling is universal. It is deeply human. And it is something we all experience at many points of our lives during periods of change or loss.

Nostalgia provides comfort when the present feels overwhelming. This might explain why, during times of change or difficulty, people often turn to nostalgic memories to manage their emotions like looking at pictures of the people or experiences we miss. During the COVID lockdowns, many longed-for pleasures like sharing a meal with a friend or experiencing the wonderful sounds of the West Valley Symphony, we tried to replicate that nostalgia through muting and unmuting ourselves on Zoom.

The opening piece of our exploration of nostalgia is by a composer from my home country of Argentina. In many ways, **Esteban Benzecry's *Obertura Tanguera*** hits the composer and me similarly. My grandparents met at the saloon while dancing tango, so tango for me has an overwhelming sense of nostalgia for my roots. Tango has also given me some of the happiest and most cherished moments of my life and I often listen to it when I need to encourage myself to go through a difficult period. Benzecry began writing this work a few months prior the passing of Astor Piazzolla, the monumental composer who created the new and avant-garde style of tango called "Nuevo tango" and who was a huge inspiration to him. As a part-homage, Benzecry writes, "The name *Obertura Tanguera* refers to the melodic and rhythmic turns of tango in its most modern expression, constituting a tribute to Astor Piazzolla who had died a few months before beginning to compose it. The work has a tripartite structure, with a short introduction that leads to a fast theme, a central section of a slow and expressive theme played by the strings, which go in crescendo until the re-exposition of the fast theme, reaching its climax at the end."

Nostalgia also helps us evolve to a better future. As nice as it might feel to ruminate on the past, all emotions must be balanced and in the 1850s, **Richard Wagner** began exploring the past works of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who believed music surpassed all other arts, even poetry, in importance. Wagner's operatic style, influenced by Schopenhauer, evolved during this period, particularly in ***Tristan und Isolde***. In ***Prelude und Liebestod*** (Life-Death), we hear the opening of the opera and seamlessly transition to its final scene. However, it is mostly the music and not the text that conveys the drama while paying homage to philosophers and theologians of the previous generation. The work opens with the famous "Tristan chord," an unresolved dissonance that symbolizes an incomplete beginning. As the opera unfolds, this chord reappears, never fully resolving until the final *Tod*, or Death. This climactic moment happens as Isolde, finding Tristan dead, contemplates joining him in death. The passage swells as she envisions blissful dissolution, and the music finally reaches a resolution of the "Tristan chord," symbolizing her union with Tristan in the afterlife.

The story itself is full of nostalgia, both raw and psychological, but so was Wagner. He used this connection he felt to past artists to help reshape how we view our own artform, and even our lives. He also implores progress by removing mundanity and tradition from music and replacing it with new harmonic and melodic ways of composing while appealing to the emotional side of his current listeners. A classic love story turned avant-garde, *Tristan und Isolde* uses unending and nonresolving melodic lines never used before to inspire future generations of composers and thinkers, all while using the 2 classic nostalgia-inducing ingredients: self-reflection and love.

After hearing **Beethoven's 9th Symphony** for the first time, **Johannes Brahms** was so deeply inspired that he set out to write his own **1st Symphony**. However, he felt such an overwhelming sense of admiration mixed with fear of not living up to the expectations of being the "next Beethoven" that even though he began writing a symphony many times, it took him over 14 years to finally complete the work. Written during the same period as Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, Brahms uses nostalgia in similar ways as Wagner to create new compositional and emotional styles, but with entirely different sonic results. While Wagner used nostalgia to wholly change how he composes, Brahms uses nostalgia to describe his most cherished emotions. After 14 years of writing and rewriting, Brahms was finally able to connect with his nostalgia and compose a symphony that not only quotes his hero's music but expands upon it to express his own truest self. The result is a symphony full of wistfulness, sentimentality, but more importantly, full of hope for the future.

Only when this self-critical composer was fully satisfied did he allow the 1st Symphony to be performed in 1876, more than 20 years after his initial symphonic attempts. The intense introduction gives way to a somber urgency reminiscent of the young, passionate Brahms that had helped solidify his style and popularity. The first and fourth movements are showcases of Brahms' compositional mastery: motifs are skillfully transformed through shifts in rhythm, dynamics, and timbre, combined, fragmented, and developed with precision. Brahms' symphonic strength is evident throughout, with his vision of form clearly rooted in Beethoven, especially through repeated references to the rhythmic motif of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The first movement is intensely dramatic, particularly in the long, building passage before the recapitulation, where Brahms' ability to expand dynamics creates one of his grandest symphonic moments.

The two central movements reveal the more wistful side of Brahms' style. The Andante, with its lyrical beauty and soaring violin solos that foreshadow his Violin Concerto, offers both tender expressiveness and internal connection to one's emotions. Creating a smooth transition to the typically more boisterous 3rd movement, Brahms begins with a lyrical palindrome. Where you would normally hear a rambunctious dance after the style of Beethoven, Brahms is onto something else - he is trying to connect *all* his emotions and does so by creating a connection between the final 3 movements of the symphony. After the opening lyric transition between the 2nd and 3rd movements are established, he cannot help but bring his idol back again, with a more lively, enthusiastic, almost rustic dance. The movement finishes how the 4th is about to start, however, inwardly.

The finale begins mysteriously and makes it unclear where we are or what we are feeling. With a more extended introduction where fragments of the upcoming Allegro appear, it grows in intensity to a tumultuous terror before being broken by a radiant horn call and a solemn chorale symbolizing peace, deliverance, and acceptance. This melody is derived from an Alpine horn call that Brahms likely heard during his travels and sent a sketch of this melody to his ardent supporter Clara Schumann. It reads "High on the hill, deep in the dale, I send you a thousand greetings". I have always felt that he is sending this message not just to Clara, but also to Beethoven and perhaps even to us. This horn call, this greeting, this nostalgic caress, leads into a grand theme often compared to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* from

the Ninth Symphony, providing comfort through its reappearances and building to a triumphant, exultant conclusion.

Nostalgia is a powerful tool that helps us manage life's challenges. Revisiting meaningful and cherished memories can be instrumental to coping with stress. I've always believed that music does not exist to give us answers, however. Music exists to help us ask the right questions. Much like these composers, we must use nostalgia not to lock ourselves into questions of the past, but to help us move forward with intentionality, admiration, and love just like they did with their music.

-Alex Amsel