

Program Notes for December 18, 2021

NO PLACE LIKE HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Opera highlights in this concert sing themes of reunification. Guest conductor Elinor Refuizen also had “Coming Together Again” on her mind while choosing the pieces in tonight’s concert. “I wanted to bring together the music of Vienna and Italy,” she said. Across the geographic divide between these two nurseries of Classical music, many bridges are built. This concert culminates with the German composer Mendelssohn’s portrait of Italy.



Gioachino Rossini

1792-1868

La gazza ladra overture (1818)

La gazza ladra, or “The Thieving Magpie,” is an Italian melodrama in two acts. Rossini wrote the entire *opera semiseria* in great haste, reportedly tossing pages of manuscript wet with ink out of the window of a locked room on top of La Scala, so that copyists could prepare the parts just hours before the premiere. Rossini’s obvious energy can be felt in this overture. Even in the delicate $\frac{3}{4}$ time of the flute passages, the playfulness of the libretto’s central action – the theft of a silver spoon by a bird – is perfectly suited to the ebullience of the composer. The opera ends happily, with the falsely-accused silver thief, Ninetta, being saved from the firing squad and reunited with her family.

Carl Maria von Weber

1786-1826

From Act II of *der Freischütz*

“Kommt ein schlanker Bursch gegangen” (1821)

In this aria from *The Freeshooter*, a libretto filled with magic bullets, holy hermits, and sales of souls, the heroine Agathe is teased by her servant Ännchen about her love for the marksman Max. Agathe is beset with bad omens after a painting of one of her ancestors falls from the wall. Ännchen attempts to cheer her with her song:

*If a slim young man comes along,
With fair hair or dark hair,
Bright-eyed and with red cheeks –
Oh! It’s worth looking at him!
Of course you lower your eyes demurely
After the fashion of bashful girls;
But secretly you look up again,
When the young man is not looking.*



*If you do exchange glances,
Well, what harm is there in that?*

Max soon arrives and dispels the images of the handsome young stranger, but the two have many trials yet to face. In the end, Agathe and Max are wed and all is well, with all joining in a prayer of thanks.



W. A. Mozart

1756-1791

From Act II of *Don Giovanni*

“Meta di voi qua vadano” (1787)

This aria takes place in the second act of *Don Giovanni*. At this stage of the opera, Don Giovanni is disguised; several other characters, peasants, are searching for him. The disguised Don Giovanni joins the search party and suggests that the searchers split into two groups, one of which includes himself. While this piece describes the physical separation of two groups, in this scene both the peasants and the noble Don Giovanni are united in a common goal. Their motives, however, differ; while the peasants seek to find Don Giovanni and capture him for his crimes, Don Giovanni seeks to avoid detection.

Giacomo Puccini

1858-1924

From Act II of *la Bohème*, Musetta’s Waltz

“Quando m'en vo” (1893-95)



Puccini’s lush harmonies and instrumentation are the perfect vehicle to tell the tale of former lovers Musetta and Marcello, as they pretend they are not still madly in love. Near the end of Act II, on Christmas Eve, Musetta, feigning indifference and telling tales of her sex appeal, successfully making Marcello insanely jealous. This being grand opera, love reigns triumphant, all is forgiven, and they are a couple once more.



Johann Strauss II

1825-1899

From Act I of *die Fledermaus*

“So muss allein ich bleiben” (1874)

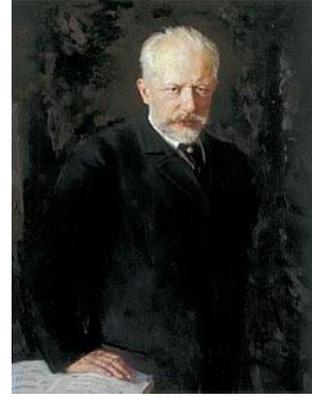
In this farcical storyline, Eisenstein pines to his wife Rosalinde about going off to prison, while secretly planning one last night on the town. Rosalinde has plans of her own, though; once Eisenstein is gone, she can meet her lover. Both feign sorrow as the parting moment comes, yet the closing words of the aria hearken toward a happy reunion. In the end, after numerous misunderstandings, the two really do reconcile, blaming all their troubles on champagne.

Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky

1840-1893

Waltz of the Flowers

from the *Nutcracker Suite* (1892)



"It's awfully fun to write a march for tin soldiers, a waltz of the flowers, etc.," Tchaikovsky told friends, even as he faced turmoil in his personal life. *Waltz of the Flowers* is one of Tchaikovsky's last compositions (along with his *Symphony No. 6*). He had just returned from a successful tour of New York (where he conducted at the opening of Carnegie Hall), Philadelphia and Baltimore. After creating some of his finest and most joyous work, he died of cholera; many at the time said the disease was self-induced, to avoid the scandal of a relationship with an aristocratic man. Whatever the truth, the joy of *The Nutcracker Suite*, and in particular *Waltz of the Flowers*, lives on.



Mykola Dmytrovych Leontovych

1877-1921

Carol of the Bells (1914)

One of the iconic songs of Christmas was actually written to celebrate the coming of spring. *Carol of the Bells*, originally commissioned by the conductor of the Ukrainian Republic Choir, was based on a Ukrainian folk chant celebrating the new year, which in post-Christian Ukraine happened in April. When the Julian calendar was adopted in the Ukraine, the chant, with its memorable four note in a minor key, moved with new-year celebrations from April to January. Lyricist Peter J. Wilhousky rearranged Leontovych's original composition *Shchedryk* for the NBC radio network's symphony orchestra in the early 1930s, and with inclusion of words – "Hark, how the bells . . ." – it has become a holiday classic.

Franz Schubert

1797-1828

Ave Maria D.839, Op. 52, No. 6 (1825)

This hymn, universally used in Christian service settings, was written as one of seven songs which set to music *The Lady of the Lake*, a narrative poem by Sir Walter Scott in 1810. The words *Ave Maria* (Latin for "Our Lady," and the first words in the Latin prayer of the same name) were used in "Ellen's Third Song," where she prays for guidance during a Scottish clan war. Aside from "Ave Maria," the rest of the original words used in Schubert's version of "*Fräulein am See*" have been largely forgotten, supplanted by the text of the Latin prayer. The simple, plaintive quality of Schubert's music fits the humble, supplicative prayer so well that they are now almost inseparable. The beauty of the melody and words has inspired countless artists to record the prayer, regardless of religious significance.





Franz Lehár

1870-1948

The Merry Widow (1905)

Lehár's lilting melody evokes a vision of the Vienna of the Habsburgs almost as pictorially as *The Blue Danube Waltz*. The waltz has made its way into the soundtracks of countless movies, perhaps most notably in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* in 1943. Lehár himself was born in the kingdom of Hungary (now Slovakia), but an early career in the army brought him to Vienna, where he began to write operettas, the most successful of which was *The Merry Widow*, performed at Theater an der Wien at the end of 1905. The waltz itself plays a role in the story, when the widow Hanna takes pity on Danilo, who, on having been snubbed by Hanna, waltzes by himself at an embassy ball. Two acts later, the couple finally declare their love for each other.

Franz Xaver Gruber

1787-1863

Stille Nacht (Silent Night) (1818)

The quintessential Christmas carol *Silent Night* was the result of a broken organ. On Christmas Eve in 1818, the organ at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf bei Salzburg, Germany, had ceased to function, causing great anxiety for the parish. How could Christmas mass be celebrated without great music? The answer was found in simplicity; the assistant pastor, Fr. Joseph Mohr, had written a Christmas poem a few years earlier, and asked Franz Gruber to set it to music for voice and guitar only. Together, Mohr and Gruber sang *Stille Nacht* that night, with Mohr on guitar, and the choir repeating the last two lines of each stanza. The simple beauty of the melody and words has transcended time. In perhaps one of the most poignant moments in Western history, it was the tune *Stille Nacht*, floating across No Man's Land in France on Christmas Eve 1914, that inspired the English Tommies across the barbed wire to respond with the version they'd grown up with, *Silent Night*. Armed only with the warmth of the fellowship inspired by *Stille Nacht/Silent Night*, the enemy combatants emerged from their trenches, shook hands and traded stories, and for a moment, heavenly peace descended on a field of battle.



Felix Mendelssohn

1809-1847

4th Symphony in A major, Op. 90

(1833-34)

"This is Italy! And now has begun what I have always thought . . . to be the supreme joy in life."

So wrote a young Felix Mendelssohn upon arriving in Italy. From 1829 to 1831, he experienced the Grand Tour of Europe. Like many men of his social class, Mendelssohn travelled to refine his cultural sensibilities. Unlike many of his peers, however, Mendelssohn also used his travels to inspire his compositions. The products of this tour – the Third ("Scottish") and Fourth ("Italian") Symphonies and the *Hebrides* overture – attempted to convey the various cultures and sights Mendelssohn encountered in his travels.

The first movement begins with a lively theme that some musicologists speculate is meant to recall an urban landscape. In his travels, Mendelssohn visited the great cities of Rome, Naples, and Venice, so the theory is valid. Other scholars, by contrast, have speculated that the first movement is meant to evoke the Italian countryside, with its rolling hills and lush vegetation.

The second, more subdued movement, is said to be based on Mendelssohn's impression of a Catholic religious procession he encountered while visiting the city of Naples. During his Neapolitan excursions, Mendelssohn wrote that "in Naples, the music is most inferior." Perhaps this Naples-inspired second movement was the composer's attempt to rectify the city's "inferior" musical landscape.

The third movement is a minuet, a courtly dance which was popular in the eighteenth century. While this courtly style may have been intended to recall the "high culture" of Renaissance Florence, its steady and constant rhythmic pulse is also reminiscent of sections of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*, an 1834 composition based on Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* which, like Mendelssohn's Fourth Symphony, was inspired by the composer's travels in Italy.

The fourth and final movement is grounded on lively Italian folk dances. The tarantella, a type of Tuscan folk music and dance, was already a well-known musical form in Europe by the time Mendelssohn reached Italy. His fourth movement is intended to evoke both this quintessentially Italian dance and the *saltarello* music Mendelssohn encountered in Rome. During his travels in Rome, Mendelssohn wrote that the city's orchestras were "unbelievably bad." Despite his negative reaction to both Roman and Neapolitan interpretations of European classical music, however, Mendelssohn used local folk styles to inspire his own composition.