



ROCHESTER
SYMPHONY

Art of Strings

Program Notes



10.16.21 | 4:00 & 7:30pm

10.17.21 | 2:00pm

Rochester Art Center

Eine kleine Nachtmusik, K. 525
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Few music titles have entered the vernacular in a gaggle of languages. In fact, is there any that comes to mind more readily than "A Little Night Music"? (Stephen Sondheim, you may recall, even created a Broadway musical with that title.)

Yet Mozart's mini masterpiece remains a mystery: we don't know why he wrote it, why a movement of it was ripped out of the manuscript, where or when it was performed, or how many instruments he intended to play it.

What we do know is that on August 10, 1787, while busily scribbling out Act II of *Don Giovanni* at his home in Vienna, Mozart noted in his thematic catalog, "Eine kleine Nachtmusik, comprising an Allegro, Minuet and Trio, Romance, Minuet and Trio, and Finale." From events of his life, if not from his own records and letters, we generally know why, when, where, what and for whom he was composing (the how has always eluded us; that's what makes him Mozart). In this case we know nothing, not even if he ever heard a performance of his brief nocturnal serenade.

For, when he wrote his famous title, he had no idea he was writing a title. To add his new creation to the careful list he kept of everything he composed, he simply wrote a standard expression for any brief serenade intended to be performed in the evening: "a little night music." A more precise title might be, say, "Serenade in G Major," but he didn't write that, or any title. Besides, for us, where would be the charm?

There remains charm to spare in the music. It is one of the Mozartean miracles that he could write music that sounds utterly simple yet fascinates infinitely. (No one else ever did this so well: Bach is complex and sounds it; Beethoven is dramatically explosive, not simple and charming.)

The first movement, the only one we hear on this program, is a textbook example of sonata form with a snippet of a development. Close analysis reveals all the requisites of classical form, but Mozart wrote his bubbling serenade for sitting back and listening to, not analysis. We need say no more.

Two Elegiac Melodies, Op. 34
Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

On concert stages across the world, Grieg is best known for his piano concerto, but Norwegians hold him as a national hero at least as much for his folk-based piano music and songs. The problem with songs, of course, is language. If we can't understand the words, it's hard to know what the music is all about. Occasionally a composer manages to circumvent the problem of language by writing such beautifully expressive music in his songs that words become unnecessary. Mendelssohn explored that notion repeatedly in his lengthy series of piano pieces called "Songs Without Words." Grieg's solution was to take the music of some of his songs and render it for strings so poignantly that words become superfluous.

We hear two of those today, both part of his set of songs composed in 1880 and rendered for strings a year later. They were based on poetry by Aasmund Olavsson Vinje, a pioneer in the use of Nynorsk (new Norwegian) dialect, the standard for written Norwegian today.

In "The Wounded Heart," Vinje tells of the wounds that every heart suffers in the travails of life but that do not overcome a true heart, which does not lose faith. The opening verse presents the song simply, the heart's struggles clearly heard in dramatic changes in dynamics. Cellos take over the melody for verse two, supported dramatically by a pulsating accompaniment. The climactic third verse takes the dynamics—and thereby the heart's anguish—to extremes. This is emotional music indeed.

In "The Last Spring," Vinje depicts an old man who sees spring come alive, perhaps for the last time. Grieg presents the entire song twice, shaping it to a peak both times, yet evoking wonderfully different colors from the strings. Violins begin the second statement high in their range to achieve a thin, grainy timbre. As the music grows, lower instruments join in, the bass waiting until just before that peak to fill out the texture.

Such a glorious melody, among the most famous and perhaps the most beautiful of Grieg's songs, could only have been inspired by equally moving words:

Yet once again I could see winter leave,
And springtime advancing.
Buds soon appeared on the hedge and tree,
And flowers were dancing.

Life in its beauty once again I see,
But must from it sever;
Sad then of heart I wonder if this be
The last spring forever.

Green was the grass, and the flowers now shone forth,
In brilliant array.
Once more I hear the joyous song of spring,
Of sun and of summer.

Capriol Suite
Peter Warlock (1894-1930)

The Capriol Suite entails some of the cheeriest strains and one of the saddest stories in all of music.

The story begins with a young man confused about who he was. Philip Heseltine was one of England's brightest young scholars of early music. At the age of 16, he met Frederick Delius, a giant among English composers (especially in his own mind). Before long, a new personality began to emerge from young Philip. Gradually the gentle, pensive scholar was supplanted by a cynical sophisticate with a cocky attitude and a biting tongue. This character, with the swaggering name of Peter Warlock, preferred composing to researching.

In his perambulations in early music, Heseltine ran across a Parisian publication from 1589: Orchesography and treatise in the form of a dialog by which all persons may easily learn and practice the honest exercise of dancing. "Orchesography" was a new word combining the terms "orchestra" and "choreography."

The treatise was the first document in history describing precisely how dances were done that also included musically notated tunes appropriate to each dance. Like Heseltine/Warlock, the author of the treatise had two personae: the name on the essay, Thoinot Arbeau, who presented his argument in the form of a dialog with a lawyer named Capriol, and Arbeau's true identity, Jehan Tabourot. As canon of Langres cathedral, Tabourot did not dare let it be known that he advocated dancing between unmarried couples as a means of getting to know one another. (To create a new identity, he simply rearranged the letters in his name, Jehan Tabourot, changing the J to its Latin equivalent I to come up with Thoinot Arbeau.)

Heseltine turned the tunes in Arbeau's treatise over to Warlock, who created a six-movement suite out of them. Today we offer four of the six dances.

What we hear in Warlock's suite is a thoroughly captivating fusion of the 16th and 20th centuries. The melodies are clearly from the Renaissance, but their instrumental setting and pungent harmonies show distinct evidence of the modern era.

In the Basse-Danse, Warlock follows Arbeau closely, positing three melodies for the "low" dance in which feet stay close to the ground, not so much stepping as gliding. The Bransles is sprightlier, utilizing no fewer than five Arbeau tunes on its merry way to a grand climax.

The Pieds-en-l'air is one of the loveliest melodies ever penned, though only the first phrase derives from Arbeau's treatise. Warlock seamlessly supplies the rest. That the Mattachins is a sword dance is not clear at the sparkling start but becomes evident as Warlock drops Arbeau's melody halfway through so that the string sections may slash at each other furiously.

If the Capriol Suite with its double case of double identities represents the Heseltine/Warlock conundrum in its most clear-cut expression, neither it nor any of this scholar/composer's output could reconcile his divided persona. Nine years after completing his suite, he found his way out of his conundrum by closing the door of his London apartment and turning on the gas.

Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 3 Ottorino Respighi (1875–1936)

The musical identity crisis caused by both World War I and the artistic revolutions that preceded it led some composers after the war to turn back to music of earlier periods. Apparently exhausted by the pre-war flood of innovation, they preferred at times to explore the new frontiers of medieval, renaissance and baroque music, much of which was being rediscovered and performed in an historically accurate manner for the first time in centuries. From music by Bach came Villa-Lobos' series of pieces entitled *Bachianas Brasileiras*; from themes attributed to Pergolesi came Stravinsky's ballet *Pulcinella*; and from short works for lute written in the 16th and 17th centuries came the three Respighi suites of *Ancient Airs and Dances*.

Respighi, a pupil of teachers as diverse as Rimsky-Korsakov and Max Bruch, had established himself by 1920 as the greatest non-operatic Italian composer alive. He had the Italian gift of melody and drama combined with a nearly Teutonic grasp of structure and a Russian flair for orchestral color. All these he used to full capacity in his *Ancient Airs*.

For his three suites, Respighi delved into a book of lute pieces collected by Italian musicologist Oscar Chilesotti. Rather than totally rewriting the original works, Respighi merely tightened their organization and dressed them in modern orchestral garb, not with the sumptuous romantic sonorities for which his own works are famous, but lightly drawn, reflecting faithfully the delicate textures of the lute.

Most delicate of the three suites is the third and last, fashioned some years later (1932, as opposed to 1917 and 1923) and not set for full orchestra but for strings alone. The string sound retains more of the original lute character of the pieces and allows for a more graceful, elegant presentation of the subtler melodies.

This benefit is perhaps most apparent in the first and third pieces, both anonymous popular songs from around the year 1600. The *Italiana* is a simple melody of weightless grace in a setting as uncomplicated as the song itself. Equally graceful, the *Siciliana* has a more lilting swing and a more varied treatment, including a nimbly walking pizzicato accompaniment.

The longest piece, *Arie de corte*, features six short courtly airs by French lutenist Jean Baptiste Besard from his 1603 collection *Thesaurus Harmonicus*. Each captures the character implied in its title, and they follow in quick succession without pause:

1. "It is sad to be in love with you"
2. "Farewell forever, shepherdess"
3. "Lovely eyes that see clearly"
4. "The Skiff of Love"
5. "What divinity touches my soul"
6. "If it is for my innocence that you love me"

The finale, from a guitar collection published by Lodovico Roncalli in 1692, is a *passacaglia*: a simple theme that is repeated over and over again with variations (including tempo changes) built around it. The continual presence of a single theme demands creativity in variation but allows for dramatic ebb and flow that bring Respighi's history-based suite to a powerful end.

Two Pieces from *Henry V* William Walton (1902-1986)

Needing an heroic image to bolster morale during World War II, Great Britain turned to its most revered military hero, King Henry V, as portrayed by their greatest poet in his most unabashedly patriotic play. The result was a lavish technicolor spectacle, produced and directed by the leading British actor of the time, Laurence Olivier. For the musical score, Olivier turned to William Walton, whom he had met when they were both plying their arts for a film of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in 1936.

Olivier's brilliant inspiration was to start and end the film in the Globe playhouse, where Shakespeare first produced *Henry V* in 1599. He was aiming at authenticity in two historical periods—Henry's early 15th century and Shakespeare's late 16th. Walton accordingly drew his musical themes from early liturgical chants and folksongs as well as Elizabethan madrigals, arranged powerfully for a modern symphony orchestra.

Early in the film *Sir John Falstaff*, the rotund and witty fellow miscreant of Henry's youthful pranks (told in the two parts of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*), lies on his deathbed. As the old man recalls his painful dismissal from court by his beloved Prince Hal (now King Henry), the strings intone a passacaglia—a baroque form in which a simple bass line repeats over and over (nine times in all), finally rising to the violin as Falstaff's soul slips away.

A second string interlude derives from an earlier scene when Falstaff's friends, saddened by his death, are spending their last night together before embarking for France and war. The title is taken from a line in the play, and the music, a sad ballad, reflects the double sadness of the moment. This is one of the loveliest melodies in 20th-century orchestral music, so lovely that it has been known to accompany a bride as she moves down the aisle into her new life.

St. Paul's Suite: Finale Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

Applying the term "Englishman" to a name like Gustav Holst begs a natural question, but the explanation is simple. The composer's great-grandfather, also a composer, was a Swedish ethnic who emigrated to England, where he established a family tradition of giving each firstborn son a Swedish name. He named his son Gustavus, who in turn named his son Adolphus, who named his son Gustavus Theodore von Holst.

Young Gustav did not have an easy childhood: he was sickly and near-sighted; his mother died when he was eight. But by twelve he was studying, on his own, Berlioz's famous treatise on orchestration and beginning to compose. His hopes of being a concert pianist, fostered by his organist/pianist father, were dashed by neuritis in his right arm. So he took up the trombone.

But after a brilliant career at the Royal College of Music, his only employment was as a freelance trombonist. Years of scratching a living were relieved by the offer of an appointment he would never relinquish: music director at St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, a borough on the outskirts of London.

Since his industry as a teacher was astounding, and his success remarkable, Holst had time to compose only on weekends and during the August recess. When his colleagues on the faculty went abroad or to the sea, Holst shut himself into his soundproof studio at the school and composed. He wrote everything: opera, choral music, songs, ballet, incidental music, works for orchestra and band, and, occasionally, chamber music.

From the early years of the 20th century, Holst shared with another rising British composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, a passion for folk music. Separately and together, they collected folk songs while traipsing the countryside of rural England. These melodies became the building blocks of composition for both throughout their lives. For Holst, they led to suites for military band and, in 1912, a suite for his favorite group: his string orchestra at St. Paul's.

The suite's finale is a composing tour de force. Holst takes an eight-bar 16th-century folk tune called the Dargason and simply repeats it again and again—a total of 30 times in all—while he weaves a variety of accompanying figures around it. The most interesting interweaving comes during the 8th through 12th iterations as the oldest popular British folk tune, "Greensleeves," sails through the cello section. It's such a felicitous match that Holst brings it back in climax at iterations 24 through 27. The drama fades. A solo violin wafts sweetly aloft. With a final fortissimo chord, Holst puts a period on a piece that will remain a joy to musicians of all ages as long as stringed instruments are played.

