

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

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Overture to Ruslan & Ludmilla Mikhail Glinka

Russia, June 1, 1804;

born in Novospasskoye,

died in

Berlin, February 15, 1867

First Performance: St. Petersburg, December 9, 1842

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons,
contrabassoon; 4 French horns,

2 trumpets, 3 trombones; timpani; strings

Duration: 5 minutes

Igor Stravinsky once claimed that all Russian music stemmed from one source: Mikhail Glinka. Glinka has been called the musical "father" of nineteenth-century Russian Nationalism. This paternity might seem odd, coming from the son of a cosmopolitan family of Polish origin. Glinka was born near Smolensk, southwest of Moscow near the border of modern-day Belarus. But for this musically precocious young man, a trip to Italy aroused such a homesickness as to "lead me gradually to the idea of writing in a Russian manner."

An early success, his nationalist opera *A Life For the Czar*, led him to a meeting with Alexander Pushkin, five years Glinka's senior and already enjoying fame as the great poet of Russian nationalism. With Pushkin's encouragement Glinka determined to set the poet's fairy-tale poem *Ruslan and Ludmilla* as an opera. The *Sleeping Beauty*-like plot concerns a beautiful princess, Ludmilla, and her true love, Ruslan. Their betrothal is interrupted by her abduction at the hands of an evil dwarf, Chernomor, who casts a magic spell that sends poor Ludmilla into a deep---possibly eternal---sleep. After a series of fantastic adventures, however, Ruslan comes to her rescue and, with the aid of a magic ring, awakens her from her enforced slumbers.

Pushkin himself agreed to write the libretto for Glinka's new opera, but was tragically killed in a duel before the project could be undertaken. Unfortunately Glinka then turned to the aid of an old friend, Konstantin Bakhturin, who, rumor had it, turned out a scenario in a vodka-soaked 15 minutes. It showed---the libretto turned out to make a muddle of Pushkin's fantasy. This, combined with a mediocre cast of singers, no doubt contributed to the very mild reception of the opera at its Bolshoi Theatre premiere.

Critics warmly praised Glinka's music, however, among them none other than Franz Liszt who heard the St. Petersburg premiere. *Ruslan and Ludmilla* was revived the following year with success, and became a strong influence on such Russian composers as Borodin, Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and, of course, Stravinsky.

The Overture has become a popular stand-alone concert piece. Its joyful opening prefigures the wedding music at the opera's end. A later melody in the cellos and violas is the lyrical theme from the Act

II battlefield scene where, in a quiet lull, Ruslan contemplates his love. The dissonance and agitation that infects parts of the development section recall the doings of the evil sorcerer Chernomor.

The Ruslan and Ludmilla Overture was played on May 20, 1956, in the very first concert of the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of its founder, Manfred Blum.

"Blue Tango"

Leroy Anderson

"Sandpaper Ballet"

Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 29, 1908;

Pizzicato"

Connecticut, May 18, 1975

born in

"Jazz

died in Woodbury,

instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 French horns,

3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; percussion; strings

For a period of thirty years in the mid-20th century, Leroy Anderson's name was synonymous with the "Pops" concert. Forging a flourishing partnership with Arthur Fiedler and his Boston Pops Orchestra, Anderson composed a series of light classical symphonic miniatures that still delight concert audiences and record listeners. Last year marked the centenary of his birth.

Leroy Anderson was born in 1908 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the shadow of Harvard University. He was the son of Swedish immigrants of modest means, his father a postal clerk, his mother a church organist. The bright young Anderson attended Harvard Grammar School and the Cambridge Latin School, entering the New England Conservatory of Music at the age of 11. He entered Harvard College in 1926, receiving his B.A. in music in 1929. Further graduate studies at Harvard included composition with Walter Piston and George Enesco.

For a time Anderson pursued a Ph.D. in languages (he eventually spoke nine of them fluently), but his directorship of the Harvard Band soon brought him to the attention of Arthur Fiedler, then at the beginning of his historic tenure as conductor of the Boston Pops. In 1938 the Pops performed Anderson's first composition, *Jazz Pizzicato*. Its sequel, *Jazz Legato*, quickly followed. These successes prompted Fiedler to commission a string of hits from Anderson over the next two decades. Not even a hitch in the army in World War II could interrupt the flow of pieces. Service in Iceland (where he mastered Icelandic while serving as an interpreter) was followed by a tour of duty at the War Department. During these years he wrote *The Syncopated Clock* and *Promenade*.

After the War his productivity increased, with such classics as *The Typewriter*, *Serenata*, *Sleigh Ride*, *Fiddle-Faddle*, and *Trumpeter's Lullaby*, all premiered by Fiedler and the Boston Pops. Later Anderson conducted and recorded his own works, a number of the premieres occurring not in the concert hall but in the Decca recording studio. These would include *Belle of the Ball*, *Bugler's Holiday*, *Forgotten Dreams*, *Horse and Buggy*, *Plink, Plank, Plunk!* and *Waltzing Cat*. His

own recording of *Blue Tango* sold a million copies and rose to No. 1 on the Hit Parade in 1952.

In the late 1950s Anderson branched out---with limited success---from his miniatures to more extended concert pieces, among them a piano concerto written in 1954 for Eugene List and his only venture into Broadway, the 1958 musical *Goldilocks*. In his latter years, Anderson guest-conducted numerous symphony orchestras and reaped a series of rewards and honors for his contributions to American music. He died in 1975.

Over the years the Richmond Symphony has performed a number of Leroy Anderson's miniatures, most recently his "Christmas Festival" in 2001.

Overture to "The Merry Wives of Windsor"
Otto von Nicolai

born in Konigsberg,
East Prussia, 1810;

died in Berlin, 1849

First Performance: March 5, 1849 in Berlin

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones; timpani; percussion; strings

Duration: 10 minutes

Born in the backwaters of East Prussia, Nicolai was a teenage runaway from a tyrannical father, eventually finding refuge in Berlin where he studied music and---despite the aristocratic "von" appended to his name---eked out a stark existence as a voice teacher and chorister. His life epitomizes that of the "Romantic" artist, struggling for survival, living for his art, mostly ignored by the wealthy and influential, and torn between a cocky arrogance and deep self-doubt.

His earliest compositions were sacred choral works, which were to remain a staple of his works. An offer as a church organist in Rome took him to what was still the center of the musical universe---Italy---where he fell under the spell of the stage. He began composing operas, his first modest successes coming in 1839-40 with two Italian melodramas. To earn a living, however, he moved to Vienna where he took up the baton and became a successful conductor. Because of continuing financial straits and self-doubt, Nicolai's compositional output was small; fame eluded him.

Given his touchy nature and a chronic difficulty in finding suitable librettists, Nicolai was fortunate that in his mid-30s he came upon Shakespeare. In 1847 he began his finest artistic achievement, *Die Lustigen Weiber von Windsor (The Merry Wives of Windsor)*. For a long time, however, he could not get a performance. Moving to Berlin, he led the cathedral choir and became Kapellmeister of the Opera before he finally saw the premiere of *The Merry Wives* on March 9, 1849. Two months later he fell dead of a stroke, a month shy of his 39th birthday.

Death took him on the brink of renown. *The Merry Wives*, while written in German, was stylistically an Italian opera, graced with popular, unpretentious, and singable melodies, with a classical emphasis on balance, proportion, and elegant refinement. The Overture conveys much of the flavor of what, had he lived, could have been an

avenue to international popularity for this ill-fated but gifted composer.

The Richmond Symphony performed this Overture in 1997 during Guy Bordo's first year as music director.

"Thunder and Lightning" Polka
Johann Strauss, Jr.

born in Vienna, in 1825;

died there in 1899

First Performance: unknown, but published 1868

Instrumentation: piccolo, flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 French horns,

3 trumpets, 3 trombones; timpani, percussion; strings

Duration: 4 minutes

Johann Strauss, Jr., the Viennese "Waltz King," also contributed to the growing popularity of the polka. The origins of this country dance are unknown but it was developed in Bohemia as a rural round dance, and was certainly known in Mozart's day. In Strauss's time in Vienna the polka was associated with stage spectacles that required various "special effects" from the orchestra. Especially popular was a variant of the traditional dance, the *schnell* or "fast" polka, sometimes called the "explosion" polka. Strauss's *Thunder and Lightning* is one such (in German the work bears the charming Night-Before-Christmas-like title of *Unter Donner und Blitz*). Surely the noisiest of Strauss's dances, this polka with its drum rolls and cymbal crashes simulates nature's roar at its most powerful. Along the way we are treated to another bevy of wonderful Straussian tunes.

The "Thunder and Lightning" polka was played by the RSO in 2006 under Guy Bordo's direction.

"Belle of the Ball"

Leroy Anderson

"Promenade"

"Serenata"

instrumentation: 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 French horns, 3 trumpets;

3 trombones, tuba; percussion; strings

Irish Tune from County Derry

Percy Grainger

Melbourne, Australia, July 8, 1882;

York, February 20, 1961

born in

died in White Plains, New

First Performance: traditional
Instrumentation: strings
Duration: 6 minutes

Musically ambitious and propelled by a "pushing" stage mother, the teenage Percy Grainger fled from his provincial roots in Australia to Germany, where he became a member of the so-called "Frankfurt Gang" of expatriate English-speaking composers and performers. Grainger was drawn to the new field of ethno-musicology, and was soon digging up and preserving folk tunes from the British Isles. Even after his move to the United States at the outbreak of the First World War, Grainger never lost his love for folk music, which he collected like a pack rabbit and packaged into marketable forms for wide public consumption. The "Irish Tune from County Derry" is one of his most successful examples, for its lush orchestration embellishes one of the most instantly recognizable of all folk tunes, the "Londonderry Air," or as millions know it, "Danny Boy."

Grainger's arrangement of this Irish tune was played by the RSO under Thomas Elefant in 1990.

"Poet and Peasant" Overture
Franz von Suppé

born in

Spalato, Dalmatia, April 18, 1819;

died in Vienna, May 21, 1895

First Performance: Theater an der Wien, Vienna, August 24, 1846
Instrumentation: piccolo, flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 French horns, 2 trumpets;
2 trombones, tuba; timpani, harp, percussion; strings
Duration: 10 minutes

Suppé, one of the pioneers of Viennese operetta, was actually born in Dalmatia---to be precise, on board a ship in the harbor of Spalato (now Split) in 1819. Christened with the most impressive name of Francesco Ezechiele Ermenegildo Cavaliere Suppé-Demelli, he was the son of a Belgian father and an Austrian mother who, when widowed, returned with her young son to her native Vienna. There "Francesco" Germanized his name and took up music seriously, having abandoned the earlier study of law.

Success came early to Suppé, with a string of successful stage productions, including twenty operettas in five years. But while many of the operettas of Johann Strauss, Jr., Franz Lehar, and Sigmund Romberg continue to hold the stage today, those of Suppé have sunk virtually without a trace. What remains, however, is a string of delightful overtures that have become staples in the symphonic repertoire, including *The Beautiful Galatea*, *Donna Juanita*, *Boccaccio*, *Pique Dame*, and *The Light Cavalry*.

Among the most popular is his *Poet and Peasant* (Dichter und Bauern) Overture of 1846, composed not for one of his own operettas but as incidental music to a play by a colleague named Elmar. So popular did the Overture become that it has been published in nearly forty different arrangements. The centerpiece of the Overture is a famous

syncopated string melody that is repeated with emphasis to close the piece.

The Poet and Peasant Overture has been played only once by the RSO, under Manfred Blum in 1966.

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