

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

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Water Music Suite

George Frideric Handel

(arranged by Sir Hamilton Harty)
born in Halle, Germany, in 1685;

died in London, 1759

First Performance: *The Thames River, London, either August 22, 1715,
or July 17, 1717*

*Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2
trumpets; timpani; percussion; strings*

Duration: 16 minutes

The last Stuart monarch of England, Queen Anne, died in 1714 "without issue," as they used to say. According to the terms of the Act of Settlement of 1701 the throne passed to the great-grandson of James I---the Elector of Hanover, a German prince who took the name George I. The new House of Hanover was unpopular in England and the new king experienced widespread disaffection. George, alas, lacked the personality and talents to win quick favor. Handel's biographer Christopher Hogwood quotes one contemporary, "The King...was undoubtedly of an affectionate nature; for all the people in the world he hated only three: his mother, his wife and his son." He never bothered to learn English; many thought him at best stupid, at worst a menace to ordered British liberty.

But he tried. Partly to offset the opposition of his son, the future George II, and partly to thwart an untimely Stuart uprising in Scotland, the King decided to cultivate the power elite of London. He devoted the summer of 1715 to a series of glittering parties and gala events, among them an evening's excursion on the Thames from Whitehall up the river to Chelsea and back. Spectators on the shore would have seen a river full of gilded barges, brimming with extravagantly dressed ladies and gentlemen, and accompanied by a boatload of some 50 musicians who, according to a London newspaper, "play'd the finest Symphonies, compos'd express for this occasion by Mr. Handel; which his Majesty liked so well, that he caus'd it to be played over three times in going and returning." After a four-hour dinner at Chelsea, the King "return'd the same way, the Musick continuing to play till he landed" at around four in the morning. The musicians no doubt worked without overtime!

Handel's relationship with the new King had been an off-and-on one. He had been appointed as court composer to the then-Elector of Hanover in 1710, but his many absences to London (he was courting the favor of Queen Anne) strained his relationship with George. With Anne's sudden death, Handel scrambled to get back in the good graces of his new Majesty. This proved no great problem, and the story that Handel wrote his *Water Music* as a desperate attempt to appease a wrathful monarch has been largely discredited. But confusion has not

been entirely dissipated. There is even some doubt about the date of the above river excursion. Other documents reveal that such an event happened two years later, in 1717, by which time the King and Handel had become fast friends again. There is also uncertainty as to precisely what music the King heard---on either occasion. The music known as *Water Music* was not published intact but piecemeal, in editions of Handel's works over twenty years. Little of it survives in the composer's own hand. The first full score appeared in 1788, long after Handel's death, arranged in three separate suites with differing instrumentations.

This confusion has given license to numerous compilers and arrangers to piece together their own *Water Music* selections. Such was the case with Sir Hamilton Harty (1880-1941), an Anglo-Irish composer, conductor, and arranger who set a number of baroque compositions for "modern" symphony orchestra. His arrangements of Handel's *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, done while he was conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in the 1920s, were the standard for most performances until the rise of the period instrument movement in the 1970s.

The RSO played the Harty arrangement of the Water Music Suite in 1962 with Manfred Blum conducting, and an arrangement for brass choir in 1990 under Thomas Elefant's direction.

Chanson de Matin (Morning Song)

Sir Edward Elgar

Chanson de Nuit (Night Song)

born in Broadheath, England, 1857;

died in Worcester, 1934

First Performance: Queen's Hall, London, September 14, 1901

Instrumentation: flute, oboe, 2 clarinets, bassoon; 2 horns; harp; strings

Duration: 4 minutes each

Elgar was the first English-born composer since Henry Purcell (1649-1695) to establish a firm international reputation. He was born into a middle-class Roman Catholic family, his father owning a music shop and playing the organ at the local Catholic church in a suburb of Worcester. Young Elgar had little formal musical education, scratching out a living by, among other endeavors, conducting the band of the local lunatic asylum. A few early compositions attracted attention after Elgar moved to London, but he was nearly forty before he could earn a steady living as a composer.

Coming of age musically at the height of late Romanticism, he became a master of full-bodied music on the grandest scale, as illustrated by his two symphonies, his operas and oratorios, his cello concerto, the *Enigma Variations*, and many other works of the early part of the 20th century. He readily applied the same standards of perfection and craftsmanship, however, to a range of shorter, more incidental pieces, many the product of those same years of his early maturity. The *Chanson de Nuit* (1897) and *Chanson de Matin* (1899)

were published as his Opus 15, nos. 1-2, and were composed for chamber orchestra around the time of his first major success, the *Enigma Variations*. The "Morning Song" is naturally the lighter and fresher of the two, its delicious melody heralding with sunny gentility the coming of a new day. The "Night Song" reflects a more restrained, even melancholy mood that is expressive of Elgar in his more pensive moments. The premiere of both works was conducted by Sir Henry Wood at one of his famous Promenade Concerts, an annual feature of British musical life from their founding by him in 1895 down to the present day.

These are the first performances of the Elgar Chansons by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.

The Lark Ascending
Ralph Vaughan Williams

born in Ampney, Gloucestershire,
England, in 1872;

died in London in 1958

First Performance: Queen's Hall, London, June 14, 1921

Instrumentation: solo violin; 2 flutes, oboe, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons;
2 horns; triangle; strings

Duration: 12 minutes

Ralph ("Rafe," as he pronounced it) Vaughan Williams was the greatest of the English nationalist composers. Occupied for many years in recovering and perpetuating the musical traditions of his native land, his work is steeped in the folklore and rhythms of the English countryside. As one critic put it, "Vaughan Williams displayed a 'sociologist's energies' in abstracting an atmosphere of authentic England." One of the most haunting evocations of that atmosphere is his romance for violin and orchestra, *The Lark Ascending*, composed in 1914 and drawing its inspiration from a poem of the same title by the English writer, George Meredith. These lines from the poem are written at the head of the score:

"He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake..

For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instills,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup
And he the wine which overflows
To lift us with him as he goes..

Till lost on his aerial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings."

The spirit of the poem is deftly reflected in the haunting music as the solo violin depicts the skylark, soaring until it almost disappears high above a tranquil meadow. The form is a classic ABA with the main

motif surrounding a central folk-like middle section. Vaughan Williams dedicated *The Lark Ascending* to the gifted English violinist, Marie Hall, who played it for him with only piano accompaniment at its completion in 1914. The war years intervened, however, and the composer revised it in 1920 for its public premiere the following year at the Queen's Hall in London, again with Marie Hall as soloist and the young Adrian Boult leading the British Symphony Orchestra.

This is the first performance of The Lark Ascending by the RSO.

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, Op. 56 , "Scottish"

Felix Mendelssohn

born in

Hamburg, Germany, 1809;

died in Leipzig, 1847

First performance: Leipzig, March 3, 1842

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani; strings

Duration: 40 minutes

2009 marks the 200th anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth. Though well trained in the Classical tradition of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, Mendelssohn served as a transitional composer to the Romantic era. As with many early Romantics, he was fascinated with exploring, both physically and through his art, the wilds of untamed nature. The vast reaches of the Scottish Highlands drew the young Mendelssohn in the summer of 1829 when he and a friend interrupted a stay in London to tramp through these remote regions, as he put it, "with a rake for folksongs, an eye for the lovely fragrant countryside, and a heart for the bare legs of the natives."

What he found on his journey both appalled and enthralled him. He wrote of the "wretchedness and comfortless, inhospitable solitude of the country... What are marked on their maps as towns are just a few sheds huddled together, with one and the same hole for door, window, and chimney, for the entrance and exit of men, animals, light, and smoke." "Now and then," he observed, "you find beautiful but empty parks, broad lakes, but without boats, and the roads are deserted. And over all this the brilliance of the rich sunshine which changes the heath into a thousand colors, all so divinely gay and warmly lighted; and the cloud shadows chasing hither and thither! It is no wonder that the Highlands have been called melancholy."

He was particularly inspired by a visit to Edinburgh and especially to the gloomy, crumbling precincts of historic Holyrood Castle, "where Mary Stuart once lived and loved in splendor and saw Rizzio murdered." It was in the ruined chapel where Mary had been crowned Queen of Scots that, as he wrote to his family, "I have found today the beginning of my Scottish symphony."

Mendelssohn began to compose it in the winter of 1830-31 in Rome, but the distractions of that sunny clime, so congenial to his own nature, soon caused him to lay it aside for work on his "Italian" symphony. The delay was to stretch for more than a decade to the winter of 1841-42 when he was in Berlin. He had been called from Leipzig by the new king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, to direct a

series of sweeping reforms in the musical life of the Prussian capital. But a combination of a stolidly conservative Court officialdom and incompetent and hostile orchestra players made it a distressing experience. Mendelssohn sought diversion by returning to his "Scottish" symphony.

The work was completed in January, 1842, and premiered under his baton by his own Gewandhaus Orchestra back in Leipzig in March. Later that summer he made another of his many trips to London where he conducted his new Symphony before Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. She graciously accepted the dedication of the Symphony to her and forever afterward considered Mendelssohn to be her "musical God."

The A Minor "Scottish" Symphony is considered by many to be his finest, even over the more popular "Italian." The acerbic George Bernard Shaw wrote of it as "a work which could be great if it were not so confoundedly genteel!" Nevertheless the gentility, spawned no doubt from a nature largely incapable of malice or intemperance, serves to moderate the "special effects" expected of a thoroughly Romantic evocation of the bleak Highland landscape.

The Symphony is scored for doubled winds, plus an extra pair of horns. It is in four movements played without pause. The first movement is moody, misty, with the slow opening theme that had come to him at Holyrood. Soon the first "allegro" theme, drawn from the introduction, enters in the strings and becomes agitated. The solo clarinet picks up the pace with a restless second subject in counterpoint to the first theme. The whole is repeated. A development and recapitulation lead to a tempestuous coda that recalls the opening material as a bridge to the second movement.

This scherzo, marked "vivace non troppo," is Mendelssohn at his most "Scottish." The clarinet has a bagpipe-like tune on a five-note scale, succeeded by a staccato subject in the violins. The bagpipe melody is passed around the orchestra, alternating with the staccato theme to make for a rollicking Highland romp.

The "adagio" third movement opens with a poignant song in the strings, followed by a subdued second theme by the horns and woodwinds in the manner of a funeral march. Is this Mary Queen of Scots in her agony or merely the bleakness of the windswept Highlands in winter?

In any case, the Finale lifts the spirits once again. The grand and expansive opening has been likened to a gathering of the warrior clans in full battle array (Mendelssohn wrote of it as an "allegro guerriero.") The second theme introduced by the oboe recalls the opening of the Symphony, but this time in majestic triumph.

The RSO performed the "Scottish" Symphony in 1987 with Thomas Elefant conducting.