

# NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

February 2, 2018

## *Romanian Folk Dances*

*Bela Bartok*

*born in Nagyszentmiklos, Hungary, in 1881;*

*died in New York City, in 1945*

*premiere: orchestral version, Budapest, 1917*

*instrumentation: strings*

*duration: 7 minutes*

One of the most creative of 20<sup>th</sup> century composers, Bela Bartok was a devoted champion of the music of his native Hungary. With his friend and colleague at the Budapest Conservatory, Zoltan Kodaly, he traveled into the mountains and villages, listening, writing down and preserving the folk music of his homeland, editing and arranging countless songs and dances and incorporating many of them into his more formal compositions. After its invention in 1906 he would lug a primitive Edison recording machine to preserve the music of the region. This also allowed him to extend his researches into neighboring Romania. In all, by 1918 he had collected some 2700 examples of regional folk music.

In 1915 he turned to composing his *Romanian Folk Dances*, dedicating them to his dear friend, Ion Busitia, a Romanian schoolteacher who had guided Bartok on his expeditions into the regions represented in the music. Originally written as solo piano pieces, the *Romanian Folk Dances* were transcribed for orchestra by Bartok in 1917. The dances are taken largely from fiddle tunes and adhere closely to the original melodies, albeit with Bartok's own harmonic treatments. Dance No. 1 in A Minor, "Jocul cu Bata," is a "stick" dance, fast-paced with a rhythmic emphasis upon the first beat that is characteristic of Romanian folk music. No. 2, "Braul," is in the Dorian mode, a brisk and colorful "sash" dance, reminiscent of George Enesco's *Romanian Rhapsody*. No. 3 in B Minor is in a slower tempo, as perhaps befits the title, "Te Loc," or "In One Spot." The languid fourth dance in D is a gentle, minuet-like "Buciumeana," or "horn"

dance in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. The last three of the dances are played without interruption. No. 5 in D is a polka, vigorous and boisterous with alternating rhythms of  $\frac{2}{4}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$ . No. 6, also in D Major, and No. 7 again in the Dorian mode are “Maruntels,” or simply “fast” dances that bring the set to a happy, if frenzied, conclusion.

*This is the fourth performance of the Romanian Folk Dances by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, the others coming in 1969 and 1977 under Manfred Blum and 1986 with Thomas Elefant conducting.*

### *Three Pieces in Old Style*

*Henryk Gorecki*

*born in Czernica, Silesia, Poland, in 1933;*

*died in Katowice, Silesia, Poland, in 2010*

*premiere: Warsaw, April 30, 1964*

*instrumentation: strings*

*duration: 10 minutes*

Henryk Gorecki is known to most people who know of him at all as the composer of one work: his Third Symphony of 1976. Subtitled “Symphony of Sorrowful Songs,” the work received little recognition at the time, but in 1992 a CD was made of it by David Zinman and the London Sinfonietta, with soprano Dawn Upshaw singing the “sorrowful songs” in Polish. For reasons that few can account for, this recording became a hit, reaching the top of the classical recording charts in Britain and the United States. To date it has sold over a million copies and is reputed to be the best-selling contemporary classical recording of all time.

Gorecki (pronounced Go-RETZ-ki) was born in southern Poland in 1933, so he was a child during the Nazi period, continuing to live under totalitarianism during the Communist dictatorship that ended only in 1989. His music can be seen to some extent as a reaction to his oppressive environment, much as is the music of Soviet era composers such as Shostakovich and Prokofiev.

Gorecki studied composition late; only after several years as a schoolteacher did he go to Conservatory. But he made up for lost time, winning prizes and earning a teaching position at the Conservatory

immediately upon graduation. His early influences were the *avant garde* composers of his day, notably Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Thus his early music was gritty, dissonant, atonal, abstract—and some might say, largely unlistenable. But his style soon changed under the powerful attraction of Renaissance choral polyphony (nearly half of his music is vocal), Medieval plainchant, Polish traditional music, and the liturgy and music of the Roman Catholic Church. His Third Symphony, mentioned above, is representative of Gorecki's later works.

Prophetic of this change in style are his *Three Pieces of Old Style*, written in 1963 for Tadeusz Ochlewski, a musician and editor of a Polish music magazine, who conducted the world premiere the following year. These pieces draw on early Polish music, stylizations of Renaissance melodies. In the first of the *Pieces*, the setting of a simple lyrical melody in modal form accentuates the ancient flavor. The second *Piece* is a lively folk dance, with energetic and constantly changing harmonies. The final *Piece* is a solemn chorale in three sections, an ethereal statement of the theme, a dissonant comment upon it, and a final emergence into bright sunlight, ending appropriately with an “Amen.”

Interestingly Gorecki considered this work at the time he wrote it to be almost a musical “aside” from his major compositions, He didn't even bother to assign it an Opus number. But it was a foretaste of things to come; and it remains today one of his most-performed works.

*This is the first performance of any work by Henryk Gorecki by the Richmond Symphony.*

### *Concerto for Violin & Orchestra in C Major*

*Fritz Kreisler*

*born in Vienna in 1875;*

*died in New York City in 1962*

*premiere: New York City, 1927*

*instrumentation: solo violin; strings*

*duration: 12 minutes*

In the 1940s at the peak of his enormous fame Fritz Kreisler was a household name to millions, many of whom knew very little else about

classical music. He was a brilliant violin virtuoso, and also—like the earlier Paganini and Sarasate—a clever showman and promoter of his art. He was a pioneer in the recording industry, committing most of his music to glass or vinyl. A Kreisler recital was an “event,” with packed audiences always clamoring for more. This was a stimulus for the great man to compose brief virtuosic miniatures for use as encores. In addition he would from time to time introduce to audiences works that he had “discovered” from earlier composers. Only late in his career did he reveal—to the amusement of his fans if not of other musicians—that he had in fact written them all himself.

Kreisler the showman was, in fact, classically trained in Vienna and Paris, his teachers including Anton Bruckner and Leo Delibes, the latter among his professors at the Paris Conservatoire where the young Kreisler won a prize for his playing at the ripe old age of twelve. Although he never pretended to profundity as a composer, Kreisler did write more extended works, among them two operettas, a string quartet, and his only violin concerto. As with other of his works, this 1905 Concerto in C was passed off as a “discovery” of a heretofore unknown work of Antonio Vivaldi. It was published in 1927 as “edited from a manuscript and arranged by Fritz Kreisler,” with the proviso that “Mr. Kreisler’s name must be mentioned when performing this work.”

That last should have been a dead giveaway. Anyone familiar with Vivaldi’s music (one might be surprised to learn that not much of it was known in the 1920s) must have suspected that this was either a fraud or an “inside” joke, for the music—now known as the “Concerto in the Style of Vivaldi”—actually bears only a superficial resemblance to Vivaldi’s style. Instead it reflects the filtered imagination of the Baroque by a late Romantic, as Kreisler clearly was. Nonetheless, this brief three-movement Concerto is a charming work, beautifully crafted and comforting to the ear.

*This is the first performance of a Fritz Kreisler composition by the Richmond Symphony.*

*Celestial Fantasy, Op. 44*

*Alan Hovhaness*

*born in Somerville, Massachusetts, in 1911;*

*died in Seattle, Washington, in 2000*

*premiere: Boston, 1944*  
*instrumentation: strings*  
*duration: 8 minutes*

Alan Hovhaness was the son of an Armenian father and a Scottish mother. Although neither parent encouraged his early interest in music, he was composing by the age of seven. After graduating from Tufts University he took his musical training at the New England Conservatory. An early interest in mysticism led him to study the arts of India and the Near East. From earliest memory he had also been enchanted with the melodies, rhythms, harmonies, and folk traditions of his father's native Armenia. Later he added to his musical palette a passion for medieval plainchant and the polyphony of Renaissance composers such as Dufay and Josquin des Pres. This unique blend of influences produced in the composer's works something we might legitimately call the "Hovhaness" sound. He was nothing if not prolific, publishing more than 500 works, including 67 symphonies. He also went through six wives, which might further indicate that, for Hovhaness, music was his whole life.

Recognition as a serious composer was not easy for Hovhaness, however. His early music, lush and romantic, was often ridiculed by advocates of a more dissonant, abstract musical philosophy. He in fact destroyed a good deal of the music that he wrote before the 1940s. But he never gave up his love of a good melody, nor of the harmonic exoticism that laces much of his work.

One of his early compositions that he fortunately did not destroy is his *Celestial Fantasy*. Written for solo piano in 1935 only a few years after his time at the Conservatory, he revived and orchestrated it for string orchestra in 1944. The long, slowly unfolding hymn-like melody in the lower strings displays his Eastern European and Near Eastern influences. Although called a "fantasy," the bulk of the piece is in the form of a four-voiced fugue derived from an Armenian inspiration. It is dedicated to an Armenian cleric who headed that people's church in about 1100.

*This is the first performance of Celestial Fantasy by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.*

*Serenade for Strings in E Minor, Op. 20*

*Sir Edward Elgar*

*born in Broadheath, England, in 1857;*

*died in Worcester, England, in 1934*

*premiere: Antwerp, Belgium, July 21, 1896*

*instrumentation: strings*

*duration: 11 minutes*

Elgar was the first English-born composer since Henry Purcell (1649-1695) to establish an international reputation, but it was a long time emerging. 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 he 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, among them *The Dream of Gerontius*, his cello concerto, and probably his most popular work, *The Enigma Variations*. But he applied the same standards of craftsmanship to a range of shorter, more incidental pieces, many the product of his early maturity. One of his earliest was a set of three miniatures that he composed separately in 1888 for the Worcester Musical Union in his home town. These he combined four years later to form his *Serenade for Strings* which was performed privately under his direction by the Worcester Ladies' Orchestral Class. Its public premiere was delayed until 1896 with a performance in the unlikely venue of Antwerp, Belgium. It wasn't heard in London until 1905. The *Serenade* is almost the earliest of his works to survive into the standard repertoire. Indeed, it is among his most frequently played pieces, one that he always considered to be his favorite composition.

*This is the first performance of Elgar's Serenade by the RSO.*

*Nocturne for Strings in B, Op. 40*

*Antonin Dvorak*

*born in Mühlhausen, Bohemia, in 1841;*

*died in Prague, in 1904*

*premiere: unknown*

*instrumentation: strings*

*duration: 5 minutes*

What we know as Dvorak's *Nocturne in B* began life as the slow movement, marked *andante religioso*, of a string quartet that he composed in 1870 but that was not published during his lifetime. It reflects the influence of Wagner, then all the rage in Europe and under whose baton Dvorak himself had performed as a violist in a concert of the German's music in Prague.

In January 1875 he resurrected the first section of the quartet movement with the addition of a double bass part to create the present *Nocturne* for string orchestra. Shortly after its completion Dvorak's two-year old daughter died, so it is little wonder that, associated as it was with this most painful experience, it was nearly eight years before the work was published in 1883, perhaps as a memorial to her. This is confirmed by the fact that he programmed the *Nocturne* for a number of important concerts in his later career, notably for his first appearance in London in 1884. He also made transcriptions of it for piano four-hands and for violin and piano. This "lovely, quiet piece," as his biographer describes it, is devotional in character, a poignant little miniature that nicely captures Dvorak's early style.

*This is the first performance of the Nocturne by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.*

*String Symphony No. 2 in D Major*

*Felix Mendelssohn*

*born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1809;*

*died in Leipzig, Germany, in 1847*

*premiere: not performed publicly during his lifetime*

*instrumentation: strings*

*duration: 12 minutes*

Felix Mendelssohn was born into a very musical family; his older sister, Fanny, and his aunt Sara Levy were skilled pianists. The young Felix was educated in Berlin where he studied composition under Carl Zelter, a personal friend of Goethe and a respected teacher steeped in the counterpoint of Bach and Handel. Zelter knew that his child pupil was gifted, seeing in him a precocity that rivaled Mozart. His mother acknowledged her son's gifts when she wrote to a cousin describing "the little tyke's" astonishing output of works in nearly all genres and the amazement with which outside experts responded to his budding genius.

Mendelssohn composed all 12 string symphonies over a two-year period, the first six coming in a rush in 1821 when he was all of twelve years old. Zelter believed that great artists in any form should learn their craft by studying the great masters of the past. So these string symphonies were to be exercises in structure, form, and tonality—the principal models being Bach, Mozart, and Haydn—and were rigorously critiqued by the teacher as they were being committed to paper.

The first six string symphonies, especially, illustrate Zelter's influence through their imaginative use of counterpoint, an interest which the mature Mendelssohn was to cultivate by almost single-handedly reviving the then-neglected music of Bach and his sons. No. 2 in D Major draws especially on the symphonic style of Bach's second son, C. P. E. Bach. As with the other eleven string symphonies, it is in three movements—fast, slow, fast. The *andante* middle movement is particularly affecting, contrasting a variety of string textures. The finale in 6/8 time is especially ingenious, spirited and original, revealing that, while indebted to his musical forebears, Mendelssohn was already developing a voice all his own.

Interestingly, the mature Mendelssohn suppressed these early symphonies, viewing them as constituting a mere "apprenticeship" and apparently resisting their comparison with the precocious Mozart. He avoided even mentioning them and they were not published during his lifetime. Indeed it was a century and a half, not until the 1970s, that they appeared in print and were recorded.

*This is the first performance of any of the String Symphonies by the RSO.*



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