

# NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

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*“Polovtsian Dances” from Prince Igor*

*Alexander Borodin*

*born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1833;*

*died there in 1887*

*premiere: St. Petersburg, November 4, 1890*

*instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, percussion, harp; strings*

*duration: 13 minutes*

For some reason 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian composers had a difficult time finishing their music. Mussorgsky, Liadov, Borodin---all died leaving lots of potential masterpieces uncompleted. Perhaps Borodin put his finger on it best: “We old sinners, as always, are in the whirlwind of life---professional duty, science, art. We hurry on and do not reach the goal. Time flies like an express train. The beard grows gray, wrinkles make deeper hollows. We begin a hundred different things. Shall we ever finish any of them?”

Borodin’s life was certainly a whirlwind. Music was not even his primary calling. He was educated as a surgeon and later a chemist who took his science seriously, working away nearly every day in the lab. Social causes, too, notably an early championship of women’s rights, took him away from his music, which he composed mainly on weekends and holidays. The wonder is that he produced such beautiful and well-crafted works, including two lovely symphonies, tone poems, chamber music, and his unfinished masterpiece, the beautiful and exotic opera, *Prince Igor*.

The opera was based on a 12<sup>th</sup> century Slavic folk poem, *The Lay of Igor’s Host*, concerning the glory and ultimate defeat of Prince Igor in military campaigns against the barbarian tribe, the Polovtsians, in 1185. Borodin began composing the opera in 1869, writing set pieces such as the “Polovtsian Dances.” Doubts soon arose about the plot---or rather the absence of any coherent plot---and he suspended his labors. He returned to *Prince Igor* in 1874, again in 1876, still again in 1879, and was still at work

on it upon his sudden death in 1887 at the age of only 54. Borodin's work, however, had long had a champion in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov who, along with Alexander Glazunov, stepped in to finish the score. It was first performed in St. Petersburg at the Mariinsky Theatre in the autumn of 1890. None of its collaborators ever solved the problem of an implausible and often incoherent plot, so that the full opera is rarely performed outside of Russia.

The "Polovtsian Dances" are, however, an exception. In the second act of the opera Prince Igor and his son are captured in battle by the Polovstians. Their king, as an act of honor to his prisoners, gives them a grand feast at which a series of tribal dances, both savage and sultry, are performed.

*The "Polovtsian Dances" were performed by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in 1991 with guest conductor André Gaskins on the podium.*

*Ave Verum Corpus, K. 618 Sancta Maria, K. 273*

*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*

*born in Salzburg, Austria, in 1756;*

*died in Vienna in 1791*

*premiere: Ave Verum Corpus, July, 1791; Sancta Maria, September, 1777*

*instrumentation: chorus; strings*

*duration: 8 minutes*

Mozart composed the four-minute motet, *Ave Verum Corpus* ("Hail, true body"), in Vienna in the summer of 1791, during the last year of his life. This was a pleasant interlude in an otherwise difficult time of declining health and failing fortunes. His wife, Constanze, was pregnant with their sixth child and Mozart was enjoying his collaboration with an old friend, the actor-manager Schikaneder, who was writing the libretto for what would soon be *The Magic Flute*.

Mozart composed *Ave Verum Corpus* for Anton Stoll, a friend and village choirmaster who lived near the famous spa town of Baden. Except for the *Requiem*, unfinished at his death, the motet was to be Mozart's last

sacred composition. It has become among his best-loved works. In its 46 bars---a scant two pages in the autograph manuscript---Mozart penned music that in its mysterious, touching beauty seems, as one critic put it, “to float like a cloud of incense in the air.” H. Robbins Landon has argued that Mozart was attempting a new style of church music, “unadorned, devotional, and easily understood.” While artfully constructed, the piece conveys to the listener an effortless and disarming simplicity, a mood that is enhanced by an orchestra of strings only, presumably dictated by the modest resources of Herr Stoll’s village church.

*Sancta Maria, mater Dei* (“Holy Mary, mother of God”) is a much earlier work, composed in Salzburg when Mozart was 21. In the summer of that year Wolfgang’s father, Leopold, sought permission to leave the service of Archbishop Colloredo, the rather despotic leader of Salzburg, to seek more lucrative employment in Vienna. The Archbishop responded by dismissing both from his service. Leopold was soon rehired but Wolfgang was not. Nonetheless he composed his *Sancta Maria* as a dedication to Mary, completed for the Feast Day of the Blessed Virgin, on September 8, 1777. Within a week he had departed with his mother for visits to Augsburg, Mannheim, and Paris, where she suddenly and tragically died.

*The “Ave verum Corpus” has been performed by the RSO and the Richmond Symphony Chorus in 1991 under Thomas Elefant’s direction, and again in 2011 with the RSO Singers under Guy Bordo. This is the RSO’s first performance of “Sancta Maria.”*

## *Desert Transport*

*Mason Bates*

*born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1977*

*premiere: Phoenix, Arizona, February, 2011*

*instrumentation: piccolo, 3 flutes, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, Eb clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, harp, piano/celesta, percussion; strings*

*duration: 14 minutes*

Mason Bates turned forty this year. As befits his age, Bates incorporates into his music with ease and agility many recent innovations

in musical form and advanced technology, especially in the blending of acoustic instruments with electronics. Born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, Bates graduated from the Columbia University-Juilliard School Exchange Program, where he studied composition with John Corigliano and David Del Tredici. He earned the Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 2008. Despite his youth, Bates has earned numerous awards, notably the Charles Ives Scholarship, the 2004 Rome Prize, the 2005 American Academy in Berlin Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the first prize in the 2008 Van Cliburn American Composer Invitational. Another sign of his growing eminence was his appointment in 2010 to a two-year term as Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

*Desert Transport* is a symphonic poem composed in 2010 for the Arizona Music Festival. It was premiered by the Festival's Orchestra in February of the following year. The work was inspired by an actual helicopter ride over the Arizona desert. Bates wrote in a program note that the work combines "mechanistic rhythmic figuration and expansive desert sonorities." The reviewer at the premiere wrote that the music "takes us on a sonic helicopter ride over Sedona and Montezuma Castle." Another reviewer found the piece to be "accessible music full of creativity on many dimensions--from sonority to inventive developments within its thematic material." The work begins with an orchestral imitation of helicopter rotors churning up for a takeoff, then the music depicts the flight over an arid desert landscape. As the aircraft draws near to the famous cliff dwelling, Montezuma Castle, Bates imports a field recording of a Pima Indian chant, bringing the piece to a highly poetic conclusion.

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

### *Iphigenia in Aulis Overture*

*Christoph Willibald Gluck*

*born in Erasbach, Bavaria, in 1714;*

*died in Vienna in 1787*

*premiere: Paris, April 19, 1774*

*instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets; timpani; strings*  
*duration: 10 minutes*

Born the son of a forester, Gluck was educated privately before moving to Prague in his early 20s. He journeyed on to Vienna in 1730, then began a peripatetic career as a journeyman opera composer for houses in Milan, Venice, London, Dresden, and finally, back to Vienna where in 1762 he scored his greatest artistic achievement, a setting of the Orpheus legend, *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Gluck was a pioneer in a new form of operatic writing that he called “music drama.” His idea was the precursor to Wagner’s masterful development of a similar idea of a “superart,” one that synthesized music, drama, poetry, scenery, and dance into an architectonic whole.

Gluck was at the height of his powers when he agreed to write an opera for Paris. The French were leery of a German daring to write a “French” *tragedie lyrique*, but with the intervention of none other than the Dauphine, Marie Antoinette, Gluck not only got his opera staged but scored a dramatic triumph with *Iphigenia in Aulis*. (Some five years later he returned to its theme with a sequel, *Iphigenia in Tauris*.) The opera was based on a libretto by a French nobleman derived from Jean Racine’s tragedy, which in turn was patterned on the last surviving play of Euripides.

The story concerns King Agamemnon, who was preparing to lead the Greek armies during the Trojan wars. The king had run afoul of Diana, goddess of the hunt (he had slain her favorite stag!) In order to appease the goddess and gain fair winds for his troops to sail to Troy he decides to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia at the port of Aulis from which the fleet was to sail. The plot is thickened by the fact that Iphigenia has been engaged to be married to the Greek hero of heroes, Achilles. But Agamemnon is determined to honor his pledge to the goddess. At the last minute Achilles arrives with his armed supporters. Just as mayhem is about to break out, a messenger from the goddess appears to announce that that worthy deity has changed her mind--the sacrifice need not be made. The marriage may proceed.

As a show of his admiration for Gluck, Wagner made a German version of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, with suitable “Wagnerian” revisions, in 1847.

The Overture that we will hear this evening bears the inscription, “after the revision by Wagner.”

*This is the first performance of the Iphigenia in Aulis Overture by the RSO.*

### *Claire de lune in D-flat Major*

*Claude Debussy*

*born in St. Germain-en-Laye, France, in 1862;*

*died in Paris in 1918*

*premiere: revised version, Paris, 1905*

*instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns; harp; strings*

*duration: 5 minutes*

Debussy’s most popular work for solo piano, *Claire de lune* (“Moonlight”), is most often performed as a stand-alone piece. But it is actually the third of the four-movement *Suite Bergamasque*, composed in 1890 and inspired by the 1869 poems of the French Symbolist, Paul Verlaine. A “bergamasque” (or “bergamask” in English) was a rustic dance attributed contemptuously to the people of Bergamo in northern Italy who in Shakespeare’s day were noted for their clumsiness. The dance was associated with the love-sick awkwardness of the French pantomime character, Pierrot.

*Claire de lune* would seem an odd fit in a dance suite associated with buffoonery. It is designed to be played slowly, with much expressiveness and largely *pianissimo*, and played in the unusual 9/8 metre. Originally titled “Promenade Sentimentale,” it, along with its sister movements, was substantially revised when *Suite Bergamasque* was published in 1905. By that time Debussy’s style had matured in ways that made him reluctant to embrace his earlier compositions. Nonetheless he permitted his younger colleague and close friend, André Caplet, to orchestrate it. Caplet was a prolific composer in his own right, but he is known almost exclusively today for his fine orchestrations of a number of Debussy’s works, always with the latter’s approval.

*Caplet's orchestral arrangement of Claire de Lune was performed in 1967 and 1979 with Manfred Blum conducting; the earlier performance featured the harp duo of Longstreth & Escosa.*

### *Capriccio Espagnole*

*Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov*

*born in Tikhvin, Russia, in 1844;*

*died in Liubensk, Russia, in 1908*

*premiere: St. Petersburg, October 31, 1887*

*instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, harp, percussion; strings*

*duration: 16 minutes*

A disciple of the early Russian nationalists Glinka and Balakirev, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov was both a fine composer and a selfless teacher. He inspired a younger generation that included both traditionalists (Rachmaninoff and Glazunov) and modernists (Stravinsky and Prokofiev). The critic Carl Van Vechten has written, "The folk song, the Orient, and the sea were the three great influences which pursued Rimsky-Korsakov throughout his career, and he never got very far away from any of them." Trained as a naval officer, he traveled widely and his music reflects the exotic, the fanciful, and the picturesque.

This is certainly the case with *Capriccio Espagnole*. Its composition marked a revival of Rimsky's musical creativity after several years of almost pietistic devotion to ordering, editing, completing, and in some cases re-composing the last works of his two great patrons, Mussorgsky and Borodin. After finishing the latter's great opera, *Prince Igor*, Rimsky gave final shape to his own *Capriccio* in early 1887, conducting the premiere that autumn in St. Petersburg.

The Italian word "capriccio," literally means "a head with hair standing on end." In its English form, "caprice," it refers to behavior that is sudden, impulsive, and whimsical. In music, then, a "capriccio" is an irrepressible piece that is free in form, often rhythmically brisk and bold in execution. *Capriccio Espagnole* was certainly written that way--in Rimsky's words, designed to "glitter with dazzling orchestral color." This

patchwork of “striking ideas and bright effects,” he continued somewhat immodestly, “the change of timbres, the felicitous choice of melodic designs...exactly suiting each kind of instrument, brief virtuosic cadenzas for solo instruments, the rhythm of the percussion instruments, etc., constitute here the very essence of the composition and not its garb or orchestration.”

His original intent had been to write a rhapsody for violin and orchestra on Spanish themes, but he decided instead to use the orchestra itself as his virtuoso “instrument.” He reported that the players loved the piece in rehearsal, applauding at the end of each section. He not only dedicated the piece to the St. Petersburg players, but listed all 67 musicians as “featured soloists” on the program page at the premiere. The opening night audience echoed the performers’ delight, demanding it be repeated on the spot.

The *Capriccio* is in five sections played without pause: I. “Alborada,” is a Spanish morning serenade that opens flamboyantly and then subsides into ethereal quiet; II. is a set of “Variations” on the opening theme, led by the French horn, each of the five variations embodying a different orchestral color; III. “Alborada,” is a repetition of the first section with changes in key and orchestration; IV, is labeled “Scene and Gypsy Song,” and V. “Fandango of the Asturias,” is a dance of Andalusia, appropriately accompanied by guitar and castanets. The piece ends with a final recall of the “Alborada” theme.

*Thomas Elefant conducted Capriccio Espagnole in 1993 and Guy Bordo has programmed it twice before, in 1999 and 2008.*

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