NOTES ON THE MUSIC
by Robert M. Johnstone

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Sinfonietta
Francis Poulenc
born in Paris in 1899;
died there in 1963

Premiere: London, October 24, 1948
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns, 2 trumpets; timpani, harp; strings
Duration: 28 minutes

Francis Poulenc began his musical career in his native Paris as a member of an amorphous group of young composers known as "Les Six" ("The Six"), which also included Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud. They preferred the title, "Les Nouveaux Jeunes" (The New Youth). They were noted for composing music that was witty, sometimes sassy—music primarily to entertain, influenced by the Parisian music hall, jazz, Latin rhythms—a sort of "pop fusion" of the Roaring Twenties. Most of the group moved on beyond this phase—as, indeed, did Poulenc—but he never lost his charming urbanity and a lightness of touch that reveal an irrepressible and thoroughly Gallic zest for life. Even in his sacred music (one thinks of the *Gloria* and his *Four Motets for a Time of Penitence)* his work retains an unpretentiousness and generosity of soul that warms more often than it overawes the spirit. Poulenc once described himself as "half–monk, half–bounder," and he never seemed to know when the one would supersede the other.

His *Sinfonietta* of 1948 is in the "bounder" class or—without being caddish—it reflects Poulenc as the "court jester," the *bon vivant,* the man–about–town, enjoying life and doing so in sonata form. In a letter to his old friend Milhaud in the summer of 1947, Poulenc confessed that he had had a "good spring this year. Now I'm about to write a Sinfonietta for orchestra for the BBC Third Programme" (the classical music station that often commissioned new works). One might call this delightful piece a parody on the classical symphonic forms of Mozart and Haydn. Poulenc never wrote a "symphony," however, and here he is careful to call it a "sinfonietta," a "little" symphony, not because it is brief (it lasts nearly a half an hour) but rather to convey its lack of weightiness and *gravitas*, its lightness of touch—as one critic put it, it was "too indecently daffy to earn its degree as a rightful symphony."

But it certainly bears the legitimate structure of a classical symphony: its first movement, marked "allegro con fuoco" (fast, with fire), has a primary and a secondary theme, a development, and a recapitulation, its formalism masked ingeniously by its delightful tunes. The second movement is a "molto vivace" (very lively) scherzo in a strict ABA form. The "molto cantabile" (very singable) third movement slows the pace to a gently flowing rhythm, again aglow with beautiful melodies, while the finale, "prestissimo et tres gai" (very fast and VERY gay) does what a good finale should do: ends the piece in a bold and breathless rush.

This is the first performance of the Sinfonietta by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.

Two Lyric Pieces, Op. 68, Nos. 4-5
Edvard Grieg
born in Bergen, Norway, in 1843;
died there in 1907

Premiere: Oslo, autumn of 1899
Instrumentation: oboe; horn; strings
Duration: 8 minutes

Norway's greatest composer, Edvard Grieg was also a most gifted pianist (he was called by his admirers the "Chopin of the North"). Oddly perhaps, he wrote only one concerto for his instrument, the great A Minor Concerto of 1868. Nonetheless he wrote a great deal of music for solo piano over his long career, among them dozens of "Songs Without Words" and ten volumes of *Lyric Pieces*, which he composed over a period of nearly thirty–five years, beginning with Op. 12 in 1867 and ending with Op. 71 in 1901. These brief works (usually 3–4 minutes in length) were written for himself to perform, either as a set or individually as encores at recitals.

Of the sixty–six *Lyric Pieces*, Grieg, with his friend Anton Seidl, chose to orchestrate only six, including the two from Op. 68, composed in 1898 and orchestrated the following year. No. 4, called, "Evening in the Mountains," is a plaintive rumination, highlighting the solo oboe and French horn. No. 5, "At the Cradle," is a lullaby for strings, with a simple (and simply beautiful) melody to a delicate harmony.

This is the first performance of any of the Lyric Pieces by the Richmond Symphony.

Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 104
Antonin Dvorak
born in Nelahozeves (Mühlhausen), Bohemia, in 1841;
died in Prague in 1904

Premiere: London, March 19, 1896
Instrumentation: solo cello; 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, triangle; strings
Duration: 40 minutes

The middle 1890s were rich years for Dvorak, both in the quality of his music and in the public esteem that he was enjoying. His famous American sojourn (1892–1895) gave him the opportunity to travel widely, to hear much native music and to compose at his leisure. The few compositions completed in America include some of his best–loved works, among them the 9th Symphony "From the New World," the "American" String Quartet, and the Cello Concerto.

Dvorak mildly disapproved of the cello as a solo instrument, but he was prompted to consider a concerto for it after greatly admiring the first performance of his friend Victor Herbert's 2nd Cello Concerto in Brooklyn in the spring of 1894. (Among the ideas borrowed from Herbert was the use of a three–trombone accompaniment to the solo cello in the slow movement). Dvorak was moved, as well, to honor a long–standing request for a cello concerto from his colleague back at the Prague Conservatory, Hanus Wihan. In three months during the winter of 1894–5, his last term as director of the National Conservatory in New York, Dvorak composed his B Minor Concerto. Shortly thereafter he returned to Prague to resume his duties as director of its Conservatory.

The premiere was delayed until the spring of 1896 when Dvorak made his ninth and final visit to London, a city that years before had given him his first opportunity to conduct his own works outside of Bohemia. Because of a scheduling mix–up the first cellist to perform it was not Wihan but Leo Stern, who achieved a personal triumph at the concert on March 19. (Also on the over–long program were Dvorak's 8th Symphony, his 5 Biblical Songs, and the Beethoven "Emperor" Concerto, with some minor items added to fill!)

The Cello Concerto was intended as a memorial tribute to his sister–in–law, Josefina Kaunitzova. Hearing of her serious illness while still in America, Dvorak inserted into the slow movement the melody of Josefina's favorite Dvorak song, "Leave Me Alone." On learning of her death upon his return home, he revised the last movement, substituting for the expected cello cadenza an altered version of "Leave Me Alone" as a farewell to her.

Despite its origins in America, Dvorak's Cello Concerto is a thoroughly Bohemian work in its melodic invention, its harmonies, its drama, and its general air of melancholy. Rather than serving merely as a vehicle to display the soloist's virtuosity, the Concerto is a work that integrates the cello with the orchestra into a

seamless whole. Nevertheless, the solo writing for this 40–minute work is among the most technically and physically demanding in the repertoire.

The first movement is the most extensive of the three. The dramatic first theme is announced by the clarinets, then expounded by the orchestra. The inspired second subject has been described by Donald Francis Tovey as "one of the most beautiful passages ever written for horn." Only now does the solo cello enter to reexamine the themes of the movement with invention and poetry. As the development section closes, the cello and orchestra are allowed to dwell upon the horn theme in its full glory. A commanding return to the opening subject ends the movement.

The slow middle movement opens serenely, in marked contrast to what precedes it. Soon, however, an orchestral flourish introduces the allusion to Josefina, variations on "Leave Me Alone." This melody is elaborated with deep emotion. The movement closes with a return to the calm of its opening theme, now expanded.

The concluding "rondo" movement opens in a mood of anticipation. The march–like first subject is stated boldly. Soon a second episode appears and is shortly restated by a solo violin. A brief restatement of the opening march introduces a lengthy, dream–like coda where various melodies are recalled, most notably "Leave Me Alone" in the final sixty bars. A brief stormy conclusion ends what many cellists consider to be the greatest concerto ever composed for their instrument.

The RSO performed the Cello Concerto twice under Manfred Blum, in 1961 with Salvatore Silipigni as soloist and in 1977 with cellist Fritz Magg; then again in 1987, with Janos Starker as soloist and Thomas Elefant on the podium.

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