

Carnival Overture, Op. 92 (1891)

by Antonín Dvořák (Nelahozeves, Bohemia, 1841 - Prague, 1904)

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings. Performance time: 10 minutes.

Overtures were originally orchestral pieces introducing an opera or theatre performance. In the 19th century, however, they gradually became independent from the stage. Beethoven was one of the first composers to write concert overtures (*The Consecration of the House*). He was followed by such 19th-century masters as Mendelssohn (*The Hebrides*), Brahms (*Academic Festival* and *Tragic Overtures*) and Tchaikovsky (*The Year 1812*).

Dvořák had published several of his early opera overtures as separate concert pieces, but it was not until his fiftieth year that he began work on concert overtures that were planned as such from the start. In 1891 he conceived a cycle of three overtures, to be performed together as an orchestral trilogy. He entitled the cycle *Nature, Life, and Love*; the individual overtures were called *In Nature's Realm*, *Carnival*, and *Othello*. Dvořák thought very highly of this cycle. In 1893, he wrote to his publisher, Fritz Simrock: "I think they are my best orchestral works," even though he had already finished his Symphony No. 9 ("From the New World") by that time. He presented the cycle both at his farewell concert in Prague before leaving for the United States (April 28, 1892) and at his first concert in New York (October 21, 1892).

What to listen for

The second overture, *Carnival*, is like a miniature symphony in four "movements," played without a break. But the last "movement" is nothing but a recapitulation of the first. Therefore, the overture can also be seen as an irregular single movement, with slow and scherzo-like sections inserted in the middle. Whichever way we may want to look at it, the work is framed by a happy and exuberant carnival march with cymbals, tambourine, and triangle. Then the brass and the percussion drop out, and the violins play an expressive melody in a distinctly operatic style. The third theme is introduced by the violins as the percussion re-enters in a hushed *pianissimo*. This theme grows to a full orchestral *fortissimo*, only to be suddenly interrupted by the harp (the only instrument that has been silent so far), winds, and violin. This passage serves as a transition to the lyrical slow section featuring solos of the woodwinds and violin. The melody of this section is identical to the main theme of the overture *In Nature's Realm*, providing a strong link between the two works of the cycle.

Another sudden interruption brings us to the next section, which has the playfulness and the vibrancy of a scherzo (the third movement in a typical symphony). Thematically, however, this is not an independent section since it is based on the transformations of some of the material heard in the march at the beginning. Finally, the march returns and the piece ends in a festive mood and with an exquisite, joyful abandon.

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16 (1868)

By Edvard Grieg (Bergen, Norway, 1843 – Bergen, 1907)

Instrumentation: piano solo, 2 flutes (second doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings. Performance time: 30 minutes.

Edvard Grieg was primarily a master of small-scale forms like the short lyrical piano piece or incidental music for the theater. Most of his larger works, including three sonatas (two for violin and piano, one for piano solo), date from his twenties, as does his Piano Concerto in A minor.

In 1868, when he wrote the concerto, Grieg was an ambitious young man of 25, dreaming of the day when his native Norway would no longer be the musical backwater it was then. Having returned from Leipzig, where he had studied at the conservatory for seven years and became exposed to Schumann's influence that can clearly be felt in to concerto, Grieg became more and more interested in Norwegian folk music. As John Horton has written in his biography of Grieg, the Piano Concerto "is generally agreed to be the most complete musical embodiment of Norwegian national Romanticism."

What to listen for

This claim finds support not only in the lively Norwegian folk-dance rhythms in the concerto's finale, but also in a melodic style that often departs from classical conventions. The concerto's very opening challenges a long-standing tradition according to which the seventh degree of the scale had to act as a "leading tone," that is, be followed by the first degree or tonic. The piano's first entrance is on the tonic A, followed by the seventh degree, G sharp that, instead of leading back to A, drops down to E. The same gesture, the leading tone moving down instead of up, occurs in the melody of the second-movement Adagio as well. Other themes in the work contain a certain "modal" flavor, that is, hint at scales other than the customary major and minor. At least one of these was thoroughly enjoyed by Franz Liszt when, in 1870, he sight-read the whole concerto in the presence of the composer and his wife. As Grieg later recalled:

I must not forget one delightful episode. Towards the end of the finale the second theme is...repeated with a great fortissimo. In the very last bars, where the first note of the first triplet – G sharp – in the orchestral part is changed to G natural, while the piano runs through its entire compass in a powerful scale passafe, he suddenly jumped up, stretched himself to his full height, strode with theatrical gait and uplifted arm through the great monastery hall, and literally bellowed out the theme. At that particular G natural he stretched out his arm with an imperious gesture and exclaimed; "G, G, not G sharp! Splendid! That's the real thing!" And then, *pianissimo* and in parenthesis "I had something of the kind the other day from Smetana." He went back to the piano and played the whole ending over again. Finally, he said in a strange, emotional way: "Keep on, I tell you. You have what is needed, and don't let them frighten you."

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100 (1944)

by Sergei Prokofiev (Sontsovka, Ukraine, 1891 - Nikolina Gora, nr. Moscow, 1953)

Instrumentation: flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, harp, and strings. Performance time: 45 minutes.

In the 19th century, symphony as an artform acquired certain attributes it had not had earlier. Externally, symphonies became longer and longer and employed ever vaster orchestral resources. Beneath that surface, the emotional range of the works expanded dramatically, and the symphony often came to represent a struggle between opposing forces. To an increasing extent, symphonies were both conceived and perceived as a form of instrumental drama, with forces of "darkness," "light," "fate," "longing" etc. either explicitly or implicitly present in the music.

Very few 20th-century composers have been able to address this characteristic of the Romantic symphony without falling into the trap of epigonism. Many were turned off by the intense emotionality of the Romantic symphony. One of the first composers to turn their backs on this approach was the young Prokofiev, who in his Classical Symphony (1917) had adopted an 18th-century formal framework and proceeded to poke gentle fun at an entire classical tradition.

Much water had passed under the bridge since that youthful *tour de force*. After years of revolution, emigration and homecoming, the 50-year-old Prokofiev found himself in a Soviet Union that was very different from what he had bargained for; a Soviet Union, moreover, that was being ravaged by World War II, forcing the composer to be evacuated from Moscow. In addition, Prokofiev's marriage had recently broken up and the composer was now living with a woman many years his junior. It was under these circumstances that Prokofiev returned to symphonic form for the first time in fourteen years. (His Symphonies Nos. 2-4 had been written in emigration between 1924 and 1930.)

It may have been, at least in part, the war experience that enabled Prokofiev to connect with the symphonic tradition of the 19th century and to embrace its dramaturgy. The Fifth claims Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius as its spiritual ancestors, and even the influence of Shostakovich -- Prokofiev's younger Russian contemporary and rival -- may be felt occasionally. In Prokofiev's Fifth, the traditional symphonic struggle ends with a complete victory, consistent with Soviet expectations, which for once coincided with Prokofiev's own personal feelings.

Prokofiev himself felt that he had produced his finest work with the Fifth Symphony. He called it, in characteristic Soviet propagandistic language, "a symphony about the human spirit," and declared: "I wanted to sing the praises of the free and happy human being -- of such a person's strength, generosity, and purity of soul. I cannot say I chose this theme; it was born in me and had to express itself."

Prokofiev spent the historic summer of 1944 in Ivanovo, outside Moscow, at a vacation estate run by the Soviet Composers' Association. All the prominent Soviet composers, Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Kabalevsky, were there. It was in that nurturing environment -- under conditions significantly better than those prevailing in the city -- that the symphony was written, at the exact time when the Red Army was liberating Russia from the Nazi invaders.

What to listen for

Prokofiev's Fifth is an eminently melodic piece. Each of its four movements is full of singing themes and expansive lyrical phrases. Traditional schemes such as sonata form or

scherzo are respected, but these formal outlines are filled out with material that is not always consistent with tradition. The first movement, for example, is an almost academically rigorous sonata form, but its tempo is a leisurely Andante instead of the faster Allegro that might have been expected -- a circumstance that confers a greater dramatic weight on the movement. Two of the themes are lyrical and introspective, the faster-moving third subject is closer to a scherzo character. The elaboration of all three ideas is frequently contrapuntal, with several different melodic lines superimposed on one another.

The second movement is a scherzo in all but name. Its main melody, in the droll vein that is so typical of Prokofiev, is first played by the solo clarinet to a violin accompaniment that keeps repeating a single two-note pattern. The orchestration of this theme becomes richer and more varied as the movement progresses. The middle section is a fast dance in 3/4 time, framed by a haunting woodwind melody in a slower tempo. The scherzo music then returns, shriller and more energetic than the first time; the movement ends abruptly after a powerful orchestral crescendo.

The third-movement Adagio is the emotional centerpiece of the symphony. It begins with an expressive melody played by the clarinets that develops towards a climax of great intensity. In the middle section, there appears a figure in dotted rhythm (with longer and shorter notes alternating) that gives the section a firm and resolute character. The slightly modified recapitulation ends abruptly after a powerful crescendo.

The finale opens with a short introduction based on reminiscences of the first movement. The main theme is, once more, presented by the clarinet to a march-like *ostinato* (rhythmically unchanging) accompaniment. The entire movement exudes the "free and happy" spirit Prokofiev spoke about. Its initially relaxed and easy-going mood becomes more exuberant towards the end. The growing role of the percussion instruments is to a large part responsible for the increase in excitement that culminates in the last measures of the symphony.