

Program Notes by James Sommerville

Until World War II, Scandinavian music largely began and ended in the public's mind with Sibelius. But when post-war tastes turned away from the strangeness of the European avant-garde and the intellectualism of the Second Viennese School – Schoenberg and his acolytes – an attraction to nationalism and folk melody began to wend its way into compositional styles and concert halls. The melodic familiarity of folk song and its characteristic rustic and dance rhythms flavored a growing style among mid-twentieth century Western composers in Europe, Russia, and the Americas.

Nielsen, *Helios Overture*

Carl Nielsen, however, never thought of himself as a “nationalist” composer. In fact, from his early days as a composer Nielsen had been, as he acknowledged in 1908, “a bone of contention ... because I wanted to protest against the typical Danish soft smoothing over. I wanted stronger rhythms and more advanced harmony.” He revered Bach and Mozart, but was ambivalent towards much 19th-century music, judging it according to such criteria as manliness, healthiness and absence of self-pity, echoing contemporary debates over the relative merits of Brahms and Wagner and of Classicism and Romanticism. He composed at a time when program music, like the tone-poems of Richard Strauss and the operas of Wagner, ruled the concert halls. And though Nielsen's symphonies wrestled with more abstract ideas, his *Helios Overture* was indeed the embodiment of programme. Here, Nielsen inscribed in the score itself:

Silence and darkness –
The sun rises with a joyous song of praise,
It wanders its golden way,
And sinks quietly into the sea.

Written on a trip to Greece in 1903, the overture depicts the movement of sun across the Aegean Sea over the course of the day. Nielsen described it to a friend in a letter he wrote while in Greece: “My overture is in praise and honor of the sun. It begins very softly with some low notes in the bass, then joined by several more instruments, and the horns give out a rather solemn morning hymn. Now the sun rises higher in the sky until the midday light is almost blinding and everything is bathed in a sea of light, making almost all living creatures feel sleepy and lazy. Finally it sinks slowly and majestically behind the distant blue mountains, far down in the west.”

We hear the sun rising from the darkness of the basses in the opening as long quiet brass intonings, awakening the strings, blossoming into the woodwinds and finally enlivened in the full glory of orchestral tutti. The brass are triumphant, the strings energized, the winds playful, leading into a quietly contented second theme first hummed by the cellos. There is only joy and life in its many aspects throughout the work, until the sun sets again into the gloaming basses.

Morawetz, *Divertimento for Strings*

Oskar Morawetz was one of Canada's leading composers of contemporary music. In a career that spanned more than 50 years, he composed over 100 orchestral and chamber works which have been performed on five continents, and by prominent artists such as Zubin Mehta, Seiji Ozawa, Glenn Gould, Yo-Yo Ma, Maureen Forrester and Ben Heppner.

Morawetz's compositions have been commissioned by internationally acclaimed artists such as Mstislav Rostropovich, the Orford String Quartet, Jeanne Baxtresser, Dorothy Maynor, James Campbell, Julian Milkis and Angela Hewitt. They have been recorded by the leading labels and have been broadcast numerous times on CBC, and many American networks.

Part of the *Divertimento for Strings* consists of themes from a *Serenade for Strings* written in 1947; but their 1954 re-working is so extensive as to constitute a fresh piece, with a fresh title. The title suggests lightness of content and by tradition a relaxed "open-air" mood. Several details confirm this, notably the freedom of the form, the bouncing rhythms, the caressing effect of doubling melodies in thirds and sixths (or sometimes in complete triads), and two passages of open-string sounds distinctly suggestive of the tuning-up of a country dance-band. There is an influence of the lively rhythmic motifs characteristic of Slavonic and Czech music, and an extensive use of polyphony, including a double canon in the last section.

The *Divertimento* is in one continuous movement in ternary form with a short introduction before the exposition - allegro. Three ideas are heard in fairly rapid succession near the start, the first rhythmically active and like a flourish, the second employing timpani-like fourths, the third a gem of a tune which extends itself into a fuller restatement. A motif, heard in the violins in the introduction, recurs at the coda in the double basses. All three ideas recur and are developed in a fairly easy-to-follow manner. The "fourths" idea expands to incorporate the passages of rustic tuning-up mentioned. An andante cantabile provides a brief lyrical episode, after which further recurrences of the three themes are heard, in varied order, and with a climactic feeling generated by increased contrapuntal activity. The coda gives a richly festive completion to the work.

Tchaikovsky, *Violin Concerto in D Major*

It is difficult to imagine Tchaikovsky's violin concerto – easily one of the most well-known, well-loved and frequently programmed concerti in the repertoire – as having been refused by its dedicatee, hissed at its premiere, and famously reviewed as “stinks to the ear.” But in the way that new works have been historically received, that is precisely how Eduard Hanslick, one of history's most influential music critics, described the concerto upon its premiere in 1881 – not to mention “long and pretentious,” and (in typical 19th-century pro-Viennese snobbishness) “odorously Russian.”

It is also difficult to think that this concerto was written during a period described by the composer to his brother as dissociative, without sense of self, and marked by “weak and rotten little themelets.” Tchaikovsky had fled to Clarens, a Swiss resort on Lake Geneva, to escape his two-month marriage to Antonina Miliukova, and slowly recover from his ensuing depression. Compositionally, he attempted to find creative inspiration and coherence in

bravura, in shorter works with poetical texts and titles. Iosif Kotek, a talented young violinist who had studied composition with Tchaikovsky at the Moscow Conservatory, visited the composer and brought a score of Eduard Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* for violin and orchestra. The two played through it, and it seemingly provided the composer with the inspiration to write his own concerto.

Tchaikovsky finished his three-movement concerto quite quickly, the second movement scrapped and rewritten in a day. Kotek would aid Tchaikovsky by playing through the piece as it took shape; indeed the composer may have initially wished to dedicate the work to him, but feared the rumors such a gesture might infer about their relationship. At month's end, Tchaikovsky sent the completed manuscript to Leopold Auer, a friend who headed the violin department at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and who was also Court Violinist to the Czar, dedicating the concerto to him and hoping to have him premiere the work. But Auer demurred, and the premiere was delayed. Adolf Brodsky, a former colleague from the Moscow Conservatory, would spend two years learning the concerto before premiering it in 1881.

(Auer would later speak of this incident, in a 1912 *Musical Courier* article: "My delay in bringing the concerto before the public was partly due to this doubt in my mind as to its intrinsic worth, and partly that I would have found it necessary, for purely technical reasons, to make some slight alterations in the passages of the solo part. This delicate and difficult task I subsequently undertook, and re-edited the violin solo part, and it is this edition which has been played by me, and also by my pupils, up to the present day.")

The first movement is introduced by a pastoral melody in the orchestra, which quickly foments to an improvisatory flourish by the soloist, gracefully melting into the balletic first main theme of the movement. The entire movement has the lovely grace and lyricism for which Tchaikovsky is perhaps best known, and hints at the importance which ballet and theater played in the composer's sensibilities. So too does the movement have the flash of virtuosity in the soloist's fiery build-ups and mid-movement cadenza, as well as the grandeur of nationalism in the anthemic orchestral interludes. The middle movement, the epitome of Russian dolor and passion, lightens from minor key to relative major, returning to minor before exploding into the third movement finale. An exuberant and athletic introduction leads into a rhythmic dance-movement, interspersing folk elements with lyrical moments, varied by changes in tempo and texture, always returning to the original opening dance theme which closes out the movement triumphantly.

Dvořák, Symphony No. 9 "From the New World"

If European audiences of Carl Nielsen's time went back to their folk music roots in reaction to the austerity and dissonance of the avant-garde, the nationalist-music movement of a previous generation, in the late 19th Century, arose from the political upheavals of those decades. The revolutions and unrest, whose roots lay in the French revolution and the writings of Karl Marx, had as unintended consequences the sincere and patriotic compositions of the various National styles, perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the symphonies of Antonin Dvořák.

Although he was a proud Czech, and the music of that country informs all of his great works, Dvořák was inspired by the traditional music of all the cultures he encountered. With the promise of a salary twenty times what he was making in Prague, he was lured to New York in 1892 to direct the city's new National Conservatory of Music – a pioneering venture which opened its doors in 1888 to promising African-American musicians. Dvořák took the opportunity to immerse himself in a study of American song:

"I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them."

Much of Dvořák's time in America was occupied by his academic and administrative duties. But above all else he was a composer, and in his first winter in New York he began to write the symphony that would become his most cherished. Formally, the work falls solidly within European tradition, with a sonata-form opening, a meditative largo broken by restless outbursts, a lusty scherzo with bucolic trios and a vigorous, triumphant finish. In keeping with the emerging trend of cyclical form, its themes all germinated from a common seminal motif and returned in the finale. But beginning with its hugely successful premiere that December, its subtitle *"From the New World"* generated considerable confusion over its inspiration and thematic content.

The composer himself derided as "nonsense" claims that he used actual Indian- or African-American tunes and insisted that he only wrote "in the spirit" of native American music. In a 1956 lecture Leonard Bernstein examined each of the themes, traced their origin to French, Scottish, German, Chinese and, of course, Czech sources, and concluded that the only accurate assessment was to consider the work multi-national. But as New York critic James Huneker pointed out in a discerning review of the premiere, the *"New World" Symphony* was distinctly American in the sense of being a composite, reflecting a melting-pot society. And so when Dvorak returned home in 1895, he left behind a great legacy – the very first piece of serious music that, regardless of its traditional form and disputed sources, somehow managed to embody and convey the American spirit. Wildly popular, Dvořák's *"New World" Symphony* served as an ambassador to legitimize American music to a skeptical world.