

Little Suite for Strings, Op. 1

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931)

The seventh of 12 children in a working class family on a picturesque Danish island, Carl August Nielsen pursued his musical interests alongside his amateur musician father. He distinguished himself enough to attract the attention of local dignitaries who sent him to study at the Royal Music Conservatory in Copenhagen. Nielsen forged a multifaceted career as a performer (on violin), conductor, teacher, and composer but his international reputation was overshadowed during his lifetime by his Finnish contemporary Jean Sibelius. In fact, the program notes accompanying the first performance of this *Suite* in 1888 described the composer as “Mr. Carl Nielsen, whom nobody knows.” While he did achieve recognition in Denmark during his productive years, only in the 1950s and 1960s did prominent international conductors begin to perform his six symphonies and other works, including the *Suite for Strings*.

This early work clearly was recognized as a sign of musical successes to come. One review at the time noted, "The young man obviously has a great deal on his musical mind that he wants to say, and what he told us on Saturday was presented in a beautiful, concise form, modestly and attractively, with excellent part-writing and an appealing fullness of sound that reveals an excellent eye for the string material." The short Prelude is the most dramatic while the Intermezzo, a wonderful waltz, is considered the jewel of the *Suite*. The *Finale* opens in a solemn manner which moves into an animated sonata which reintroduces the opening theme.

Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Early in January, 1924 the NY *Tribune* announced an upcoming concert entitled “An Experiment in Modern Music” to be presented the following month in New York City by bandleader Paul Whiteman. The article noted also that George Gershwin would present a new “jazz concerto.” Surprised by the announcement and especially the timing, Gershwin took on the challenge, despite the fact that he was working on a show that was opening on Broadway on January 21. In fact, it was during a train ride to Boston, where his show was previewing, that the rattles and rhythms of the train stimulated his creative juices. The composer later wrote, “... And there I suddenly heard—and even saw on paper—the complete construction of the rhapsody, from beginning to end.... I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.””

On January 7, Gershwin began notating a score for two pianos—one representing the solo part, the other the orchestra (including certain suggestions about possible instrumentation). Given the short timeframe, Whiteman had assigned his staff arranger, Ferde Grofé to work on the orchestration.

The famous opening clarinet opening preceded the *Rhapsody* itself. Clarinetist Ross Gorman had mastered the trick of playing a two-octave upward *glissando*, something that had previously been believed impossible. Early on Gershwin thought of it as the perfect opening for the new work. Also, because time was so short, he left a number of the solo piano spots blank, to be improvised during the performance. Whiteman’s score simply said “wait for nod.”

Symphony No. 3, Op. 36

Henryk Górecki (1933-2010)

II. Lento e Largo –Tranquillissimo

Premiered in 1977, Górecki's *Symphony No. 3, Op. 36*, "*Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*" provides a moving musical experience (it is achingly beautiful) that is also historically interesting. Each of the three movements is a lament based on the theme of mother-child love and loss. It is not about the tragedy of war though two of the texts refer to war-wrought loss. It is not a political statement; it does not demand vengeance; it is simply an expression of unbearable sadness. The composer sought to share feelings of grief and sorrow and loss impossible to convey with mere words. In each movement a solo soprano voice voices a heart-rending text in Polish accompanied by an orchestra playing a somewhat minimalist dirge-like background—almost like a rocking cradle.

The first movement is taken from a 15th-Century "Lament of Mary, Mother of Jesus." The third aria "Where has he gone, my dear young son?" is based upon a folk song from the Silesian Uprisings—an early twentieth-century revolt in the Western region of modern Poland against the German occupiers.

The lament on today's program, the second movement, was scrawled on the wall of a Gestapo cell during WWII by an eighteen year-old inmate. She inscribed the opening words of "Ave Maria" in Polish and signed her name and date of imprisonment: "Oh Mamma do not cry—Most chaste Queen of Heaven, Support me always." According to the composer, "...I wanted the girl's monologue as if hummed ... on the one hand almost unreal, on the other towering over the orchestra."

Symphony No. 2 in C minor, Op. 17

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

"Little Russian Symphony"

One of Tchaikovsky's joyful compositions, the *Little Russian Symphony* was written during a summer vacation in the Ukraine (known during czarist times as Little Russia) that the composer spent with his sister's family. His great affection for the place probably resulted in his extensive use of Ukrainian folk tunes in this symphony he wrote while in residence at his sister's estate.

The atmosphere for the first movement is created by a solo horn playing a Ukrainian variation of "Down by Mother Volga." The tune reappears throughout the movement. The second movement was originally a bridal march that Tchaikovsky wrote for an unpublished opera, *Undine*. It also contains excerpts from the folk song "Spin, O My Spinner." While the third movement does not feature a specific folk song, it sounds like folk music in its all-over character—maintaining the flavor of the whole composition. In the fourth movement, in addition to an opening fanfare and a rousing conclusion, Tchaikovsky quotes extensively from the well-known "Crane." Referring to the latter tune, he once wrote, in jest, that the real credit for the final movement should have gone to the elderly butler in his sister's household who regularly hummed "The Crane" throughout the house as Tchaikovsky worked on his symphony.