

Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra

Program Notes for Concert October 11, 2014

by Geoffrey Decker

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis

by Ralph Vaughan Williams
(1872-1958)

Using melodies, or themes, written by their predecessors – and contemporaries – is not an unusual practice for composers. The great Bach did it, Beethoven did it, Brahms did it, and surely the practice continues even today. One of the most popular of these sorts of pieces, though, is the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* composed by 20th century British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Also simply known as the “Tallis Fantasia,” Vaughan Williams composed the work in 1910 and conducted the premiere to great acclaim at a choir festival at Gloucester Cathedral in September of the same year. After several revisions, the work entered the standard repertoire for string orchestra.

Having used English Renaissance composer Thomas Tallis’ (c. 1505-1585) 1567 *Third Mode Melody* in his editing of *The English Hymnal* of the Church of England, Vaughan Williams used the melody again, sculpting an Elizabethan-age “fantasy” for strings out of the work.

The *Tallis Fantasia* is unusual in that Vaughan Williams divides the strings into three separate entities. The first, orchestra I, is a full string orchestra, the second, orchestra II, is ideally placed away from the first and consists of two first violins, two second violins, two cellos and one bass, and the third is a string quartet. With this subdivision, the composer creates an organ-like sound effect in which the quartet comprises what is known to organists as the swell division, orchestra II comprises the choir division and orchestra I comprises the great division.

Whatever the effect, though, the piece is sumptuous. It is one of those works that finds popularity even among those who don’t listen to or even like classical music. Like the works of Sir Edward Elgar, it has a certain “English-ness” about it that cannot be pinpointed in the notes but rather is just accepted.

The Hedgehog's Dilemma

by Adam Silverman

(b. 1973)

Performing tonight's world premiere of *The Hedgehog's Dilemma* by American composer Adam Silverman is a great honor for the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra and our music director, Linc Smelser. Why does the title of this piece refer to a spine-covered mammal? The work is best described by the composer himself:

"The story of the 'hedgehog's dilemma' is an allegory for human relationships: the closer hedgehogs may huddle for warmth, the likelier one is to hurt the other. I thought about this when composing for two soloists from the same family, both as instruments (the violin and the cello) and as performers (sisters Elisa and Amy Sue Barston, for whom the piece was composed). In this piece, the soloists are almost always treated as intertwined partners, cooperating as joint soloists rather than being pitted against each other, and if they contrast in one phrase, they will almost always exchange roles in the next.

"The first movement is extremely lively, with a peasant-like stomping dance quality in its strongest sections. The second movement features gently flowing music and is divided into two (almost) perfectly symmetrical halves, the second of which embellishes the simple lines of the first with dizzying *apreggia* and swooping triplet runs. The third movement has a brisk tempo and has the soloists weaving in and out of a flurried orchestral texture, playing lyrical, singing counterpoint, and ending the piece with a vigorous spirit. 'The Hedgehog's Dilemma' was composed in 2014 for Elisa Barston and Amy Sue Barston, the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and its music director Linc Smelser."

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 74, "Pathétique"

by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(1840-1893)

We are struck by the dark tragedy and desolation of Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony from the very first notes throbbing in the low strings and solo bassoon. And there really aren't any rays of sunshine until the final low pedal notes of the basses disappear into the hall's rafters. The symphony's subtitle, "Pathétique", fits perfectly. Knowing some of his previous symphonies, we might ask why Tchaikovsky wrote this work of utter despair after the blazing and triumphal ending of his 5th Symphony?

There are biographies of artists throughout history filled with tragedy but that of this Russian composer is particularly heartbreaking. Besides what we read in books describing his long periods of depression, he laid bare his emotional ups and downs during the latter half of his short life beginning with his 4th Symphony and its powerful opening fate theme and manic final movement and ending with the 6th, his final orchestral work. His constant struggle with his homosexuality in a time when it could lead to an exile to Siberia was ultimately his undoing.

Like many symphonies since the time of Mozart and Haydn, Tchaikovsky's 6th has four movements. Things are a little different in this one, though. The usual and expected rousing ending comes at the end of the third movement and the quiet and introspective movement, usually second or third in the sequence, comes at the end! Tchaikovsky conducted the premier himself in St. Petersburg on 28 October 1893 and, in spite of his surprising the audience with a quiet ending, they enthusiastically called the composer back for several encores. The same cannot be said, though, for how the orchestra received the work; Tchaikovsky's good mood turned sour at their first rehearsal and did not improve over the course of the next nine days leading up to his death.

The hushed low strings and the moaning bassoon opening the first movement eventually give way to one of the most beautiful melodies that Tchaikovsky – perhaps the supreme melodist of all time – ever wrote. He fills us with a sense of melancholy mixed with a small degree of contentment. But, just as we feel almost at ease, he jars us from our seats with a bolt of lightning in the form of a full orchestral chord played as loudly as possible. A frantic and strongly rhythmic section ensues that, after some of the most gut-wrenching and despairing music ever heard, eventually slows to give us another peek at the beautiful melody heard earlier in the movement. After the trauma of what came before, this melody seems even more melancholy. It ends quietly and solemnly with a walking bass line and string pizzicatos with alternating brass and woodwind chorales.

After the weighty emotional intensity of the first movement, the strange "waltz" in five beats per measure – rather than the usual three – seems almost flippant. It's not, though, and once again one of those beloved Tchaikovsky melodies imprints indelibly on our minds. Although not marked in the score as a march, the third movement is indeed a hectic and

percussively powerful one, employing virtuosity from every section of the orchestra. The movement builds with alternating piquant woodwinds and brass and percussion. Hearing the work for the first time, one must certainly think that the symphony has come to an end but, of course, it hasn't.

The fourth movement, often begun even before the sound of the last four notes of the third die away, is even more tragic than what we heard in the first. At that time it seemed that there was perhaps some hope and even some fight left; here the protagonist is ultimately defeated and dies without hope. After a short and valedictory brass chorale, the symphony ends as it began but this time with even weaker throbbing heartbeat-like notes in the lower strings.

Since the work's premier over a century and two decades ago, the discussion continues regarding Tchaikovsky's private life leading up to and during the composition of his final work, the one whose premier immediately preceded his death by cholera, as said above, by only nine days. Did the composer unknowingly drink a glass of unboiled water during a cholera epidemic gripping St. Petersburg at the time or was it on purpose? Some even argue that he was given a choice by a "court of honor" in which the Tsar's authorities ordered him to end his own life or face a public trial for his homosexuality. The Soviets did such a good job covering the tracks to protect Tchaikovsky's reputation that we will probably never know for sure.

Suspicious of the circumstances surrounding his rather sudden death are piqued, though, when we read what he told the American conductor Walter Damrosch about the 6th Symphony during a dinner in Cambridge, England. He described the work as different in form from anything he had ever written and, when pressed for more information, went on to say, "The last movement is an *adagio* and the whole work has a program." When plied for more information about the program itself, Tchaikovsky replied, "No, that I shall never tell"