

KISHWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

May 8, 2021

PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey Decker

Grieg: Funeral March for Rikard Nordraak

Upon hearing of his young friend and fellow Norwegian composer, Rikard Nordraak's, premature death from tuberculosis in March 1866, Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), just a year younger than Nordraak himself, almost immediately composed a funeral march for piano in honor of Nordraak. Nordraak is best remembered by his countrymen as the composer of the Norwegian national anthem, *Ja, vi elsker dette landet* (*Yes, we love this country*).

Grieg, who considered it a good work, proudly took it along on his travels and even requested the work be played at his own funeral! The composer Johan Halvorsen responded to Grieg's wish, arranged it for orchestra and conducted it at Grieg's funeral service.

In A-B-A form, the work's first section begins quietly but soon ramps up to a powerfully dramatic and sorrowful dirge with some of the loudest brass playing you might ever hear in the concert hall. The dirge gives way to a middle section that sounds a lot more like Grieg. It doesn't last long, though, as the first section returns to finish out the work.

Grieg himself transcribed the funeral march for brass choir accompanied by wind ensemble and today, there are versions by more modern arrangers including the one played by the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra brass tonight by Geoffrey Emerson.

Gabrieli (arr. Higgins): Sonata pian' e forte

Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612) composed his *Sonata pian' e forte* in 1597. With this sonata, the very devout Catholic composer and organist created what many believe to be the first composition requiring a specific set of brass instruments.

Gabrieli was born, spent his entire life and died in Venice, and his compositions in the style of what was known as the Venetian School straddled the era during which the shift in musical idioms occurred between the Renaissance and the Baroque. A sonata as we recognize it in its more common form in works like Beethoven's Sonatas for Piano was, as originally conceived, a piece of music for a group of instruments and not just a solo instrument.

Sonata pian' e forte means, literally, a sonata that has a soft, or piano, section and a loud, or forte, section. And, in the style of much of the music he wrote for church services in the famed St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Gabrieli scored his *Sonata pian' e forte* for antiphonal sets of instruments. In this work, it is for eight instruments divided into two groups that were placed in opposing galleries of the basilica.

The brass of the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra plays an arrangement for modern instruments of Gabrieli's work by Timothy Higgins, trombonist and lecturer at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music in Evanston, Illinois.

Gounod: Petite symphonie in B-flat Major

France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 led to the downfall of Emperor Napoleon III's Second Empire and the rise of bloody insurrection and the Paris Commune. It also created a long-lasting wave of anti-Germanness in all things French, including its music. Wagnerian-like romanticism was rejected and interest in neo-classicism grew among composer Charles Gounod (1818-1893) and his contemporaries, an interest that lasted well into the early 20th Century.

One of the products of this new wave is Gounod's chamber-like *Petite symphonie*. Composed in 1885 for the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire and its conductor, Gounod's good friend and famous flautist Paul Taffanel who led its premiere in Paris the same year. Modeled on the wind instrument divertimentos of Mozart, the work calls for a single flute and pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns. Certainly the benefit of focus on a single flute part was to let Taffanel have his solo moments.

The work is in four movements with the first opening with a slow introduction not unlike a Haydn symphony and moves into an abbreviated sonata-allegro form with a main and several side themes, a rather longish development and eventual recapitulation of the main theme.

The second movement, an *Andante cantabile*, provides beautiful solos in various instruments but especially the flute, horn and oboe.

With some of the characteristics of a scherzo by Mendelssohn, the third movement is a rather quick-moving *Scherzo* with a folksy character and a slightly surprising minor-key moment in the *Trio*.

Much like Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev did later in his so-called "Classical Symphony", Gounod follows the model set by Haydn in the *Finale* of the *Petite symphonie*. Skipping along at a good clip, the accompaniment underneath supports a selection of wonderful melodies tossed from one group of instruments to another in a manner described by Gounod biographer James Harding as "a perfect example of intimate chamber music in which the scale of the work is absolutely right."

Bartok: Divertimento for String Orchestra, Sz. 113

Hungarian composer and ethnomusicologist Béla Bartók (1881-1945) established his expertise and originality in composing for stringed instruments with his six string quartets, all composed between 1908 and 1939. Considered by some as the most important – and far-reaching – works of the quartet genre of the entire 20th century, his Divertimento for String Orchestra of 1939 further confirmed his ability to expertly communicate and express an uncompromising seriousness through the medium of strings.

Enjoying a respite at a patron's Alpine cottage in Switzerland in summer 1939, Bartók composed the Divertimento in just two weeks, something very unusual for this unusually deliberate and meticulous composer. Just a few weeks later the Second World War broke out and the composer soon found himself escaping to New York City and finding a degree of solace in the composition of his last and most profoundly grief-stricken sixth and final string quartet.

In comparison to the last quartet, though, the Divertimento is a ray of light that gives a look back to the role of music as civilized social entertainment rather than an intensely personal statement like his final string quartet. Its three movements remind us of the genre of the concerto grosso where there is a full complement of strings that alternates with a small group of soloists. Bartók relished putting his distinct ability to utilize a wide variety of textures to use and did so in the Divertimento. He uses dramatic shifts in harmony, wide contrasts in dynamics (i.e., loud vs. soft) and rhythmic accents the listener – and

performer – do not expect. The work exhibits Bartók's unique unconventional musical language learned while researching eastern European folk music as an ethnomusicologist.

In this work, listen for the unusual versus the conventional. Especially in the final movement in which Bartók tests the limits of the string idiom in employing special effects. In places the concerto grosso style of Händel suddenly breaks into a folk dance and, in the final part of the movement, Bartók heats things up to reveal a final set of surprises for the listener.

© 2021 Geoffrey D. Decker