

# KISHWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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## PROGRAM NOTES

by *Geoffrey Decker*

### **Zoltán Kodály:** *Dances of Galánta*

Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) spent his first 18 years in several different towns in the Hungarian countryside as his father, a stationmaster for the state railways, was transferred from one post to another. In elementary school in Galánta (now in Slovakia), Kodály heard his classmates singing local folk tunes and never forgot what he heard. In fact, what he heard helped kickstart his interest in ethnomusicology and the folk music of his country.

After the 1923 success of his oratorio for tenor, choir, and orchestra, *Psalmus hungaricus*, and that of his 1926 opera *Háry János* (and the popularity of the six-movement suite drawn from it), Kodály's stature in the world rose. His guest appearances as conductor throughout Europe did not deter him from his work, and between 1924 and 1932, he published voice and piano arrangements of 57 folksongs and ballads in ten volumes. He also orchestrated his piano work "*Marosszéki táncok*" (*Dances of Marosszék*) in 1930; and, with the encouragement of Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini, he reworked his early work, *Summer Evening*.

At about the same time, the Budapest Philharmonic Society commissioned a work from Kodály to help celebrate the orchestra's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Remembering what he heard during his seven formative years half a century before in Galánta, he composed one of his most colorful scores, "*Galántai táncok*" (*Dances of Galánta*). About the piece and the folk songs he heard as a child, Kodály said, "At that time there existed a famous Gypsy band. ... This was the first 'orchestral' sonority that came to the ears of the child. ... About 1800 some books of Hungarian dances were published in Vienna, one of which contained music 'after several Gypsies from Galánta' ... the composer has taken his principal themes from these old publications." The pieces he chose from that publication are in what was known as a *verbunkos* style, a style that was originally developed as military recruiting music but is based on the Hungarian folk tradition of the early 1800s.

Kodály's *Dances of Galánta* was premiered in Budapest on October 23, 1933, with fellow composer/conductor Ernő Dohnányi conducting the orchestra of the Budapest Philharmonic Society. It is in five sections divided into four continuous movements lasting about 16 minutes and is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets in A, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, triangle, glockenspiel, snare drum, and strings. As you will hear, the principal clarinet plays a very special part in this, one of Kodály's most popular works. In fact,

the clarinet part is often included in clarinet orchestral audition repertoire. In other words, it ain't easy to play and requires a lot of freedom – and restraint – of musical expression.

### **Wojciech Kilar:**

#### ***Orawa***

Although Polish composer Wojciech Kilar (1932-2013) composed many more traditional compositions, he is most famous among his fellow Poles for his film scores. He composed the score for Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* in 1992 and *The Ninth Gate* in 1999; he won the César Award for Best Film Music in 2003 for his score for *The Pianist*, work for which he also received a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) nomination; and he really should be better known outside Poland.

In his later years, Kilar did manage to focus on symphonic compositions, chamber works, and solo instrumental works. One of his late classical works is the 1986 symphonic poem, *Orawa*, for chamber string orchestra. Like Kodály and Bartók in Hungary, Kilar interested himself in regional folk music of Poland. *Orawa* is the fourth in a series of works creating a kind of “Kilarian Tatra polyptych,” all four of which refer to the traditional music of the people of the Tatra Mountains, or Podhale region, of extreme southern Poland.

Conductor Wojciech Michniewski led the Polish Chamber Orchestra for the work's March 10, 1986, premiere in idyllic Zakopane, Poland, a town surrounded by the Tatra Mountains. Since its first performance, *Orawa* has been a hit in concert halls, delighting audiences with its spontaneity, energy, and temperament. In an interview, Kilar said that he had “dreamed of creating a piece inspired by a highlander band and realized this dream in *Orawa*. It is pretty much a piece for a magnified folk band and one of the rare examples where I've been happy with my work.” If one described the work as exuberant, it would be an understatement.

The work exists in transcriptions for accordion, for eight cellos and, in 2009, for 12 saxophones. And, most surprising of all, it was transcribed and used in the Santa Clara Vanguard Drum and Bugle Corps' 2003 production titled *Pathways*.

### **Dmitri Shostakovich:**

#### **Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47**

On January 22, 1905, Czarist troops massacred thousands of peaceful, unarmed demonstrators outside the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg in the Russian Empire. Only there to ask the Czar for food, the troops fired on them. As a small child, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) heard this story, and it forever affected him. On top of that, Joseph Stalin, his successors, and the Soviet government, came down hard on him his entire professional career. Knowing this, it's obvious to us why Shostakovich is very rarely seen smiling in photos. And according to his sometimes questionably accurate memoirs, *Testament*, Shostakovich revealed to its editor, Solomon Volkov, that he had spent most of his life in terror in a country that he believed to be a cross between an asylum and a slaughterhouse, and that he only saw “mountains of corpses” at the end of his life.

Shostakovich's war with the Soviet government reached a boiling point only a few days after Stalin attended a performance of the composer's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in January 1936. Even though it was highly acclaimed before this, the Soviet-controlled newspaper *Pravda* condemned the work as "muddle instead of music" and as "formalist." In other words, the opera was elitist, incomprehensible, and too modern. Soviet composers were expected to deliver "Socialist Realism," something described as music "directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic, bright, and beautiful, which distinguishes the spiritual world of Soviet man and must be embodied in musical images full of beauty and life-affirming strength." After this criticism, an icy, gnawing fear crept into the composer's life, and it never left him. Stalin's purges began in summer 1936 and, after the composer's friend, Mikhail Tukhachevsky, one of the most powerful men in the Red Army, was arrested and summarily executed, Shostakovich had a good reason to be fearful.

Shostakovich felt hopeful after the premiere of his Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47, in the Leningrad Philharmonic Hall on November 21, 1937. Annotator Jörg Handstein wrote of the occasion, "Thirty-five bars of jubilant D major, broad fanfares, booming timpani: the music triumphs, one audience member leaps up, and soon the whole hall is on its feet. Amid the storm of applause, the conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky waves the score above his head: the standing ovation is for this work, and for its creator." An ovation lasting more than half an hour left Shostakovich reason to believe it might be a happy ending to follow all the recent terrible events. Sadly, his elation was only temporary.

To create his new symphony, Shostakovich conformed to the rules of "Socialist Realism." The symphony's forms are traditional and reasonable, and its themes and their development are easily understood. About the work's content, the composer wrote, "The theme of my symphony is the development of personality. I see a man himself, with all his experience, as being central to the concept of the work." As described by Handstein, Shostakovich "employs the special language of classical instrumental music: it can arouse associations, but it eludes clear interpretation." It was a means by which to protect himself from official criticism.

The Fifth Symphony's first movement, marked *Moderato – Allegro non troppo*, is in D minor and in sonata form. What is Shostakovich getting at with the melodramatic gesture that opens the whole work? Is it defiance or is it foreboding some sort of disaster? Whatever it's doing, it is a powerful motto, tragic and serious. At the *Allegro*, we are met with a frightening intensity to whatever confrontations seem to be happening. We are left wondering who is fighting whom and why. When the movement ends quietly and lyrically, we ask what Shostakovich was trying to tell us, but he's left it open.

The second movement, in A minor and marked *Allegretto*, is interpreted as an expression of "joie de vivre." But it is really a lumbering and humorous *Ländler* that reveals a connection to Gustav Mahler's own ambiguous *scherzi*. Mahler exposed cheerfulness as the stupidity of a drunken, trivial, and incorrigible society. Taking his cue from this, Handstein says Shostakovich's "*Scherzo* makes ironic fun of the mass culture desired by officialdom." He then adds, "Fortunately, the Soviet cultural elite were not all that familiar with the music of Mahler."

The third movement, marked *Largo*, begins in F-sharp minor and reveals Shostakovich's closeness to Mahler's fragile and sensitive *Adagio* symphonic movements. Handstein says, "The music travels through three thematic areas that constantly take on new forms – a richly developed spiritual landscape in special orchestra colors." Here, Shostakovich divides the strings into three sets of violins, three sets of violas, and two sets of cellos. The woodwinds add only touches of chamber music and the brass are unheard. Shostakovich's own official explanation as to their silence was, "The brass players catch their breath and gather strength for the fourth movement, in which they have a lot of work to do."

The fourth movement, marked *Allegro non troppo*, begins in D minor and, like the first movement, in sonata form. And yes, the brass need to take a deep breath from the start. Trumpets and trombones blast out the main theme like this will be the final battle although they are sure of victory. After the development is driven breathlessly towards a euphoric climax, the theme knocks everything down. When things calm down again, and the main theme resumes eventually coming to a huge and brightly lit D-major climax. Shostakovich himself described the climax saying, "I attempt to resolve the tragic motifs of the earlier movements into optimism full of life." In other words, "an optimistic tragedy" that even appealed to party functionaries. The composer is quoted later in *Testament* as having described it as forced rejoicing: "as if someone were beating you with a stick and insisting you 'Rejoice! You have to rejoice!' You would have to be a complete idiot not to hear that!"

This explanation is plausible. As Handstein writes, "A chord with a powerful fifth sounds hollow, and the fifth (A) is repeated here relentlessly, indeed almost compulsively. The high, circling figure at the end of the quiet passage also gives the ending a hidden, subversive meaning: It is a quotation from the song 'Rebirth' (op. 46.1) and seems to be a subtle barb against Stalin himself. In the song's lyrics, by Alexander Pushkin, an 'art philistine' appears and defaces a painting by a genius – but his daubed-on additions eventually fall off again until what was created by the genius shines forth once more in its former beauty." The artist has to be beaten and bludgeoned – but art itself does not admit defeat.

The symphony is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and a whole host of percussion, two harps, celesta, piano, and strings.