Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 4 Notes

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Born 12 October 1872; Down Ampney, England
Died 26 August 1958; London, England

Flos campi

Composed: completed 1925
First performance: 10 October 1925; London, England

Ralph Vaughan Williams was the most important English composer of his generation – that between Elgar and Britten – and a key figure in the revival of English music. His voluminous compositional output includes nine symphonies and other orchestral pieces, operas, songs, choral music, film and theatre music, and chamber music, as well as Christmas carols and hymn tunes. Among his best-known works are *The Lark Ascending*, *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, *Fantasia on " ==,"* and the Symphony No. 1 ("A Sea Symphony").

Scored for solo viola, wordless chorus, and small orchestra, *Flos campi* (Flower of the Fields) is one of the most unusual pieces in Vaughan Williams's catalogue. Completed in 1925, the same year that saw the composition of his oratorio *Sancta civitas* (The Holy City), its very title can be misleading: It has nothing to do with "buttercups and daisies," as the composer once irritably explained. Rather, the reference is to the "Rose of Sharon" – as in, "I am the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley."

Taking verses for *The Song of Solomon* as his inspiration, Vaughan Williams created a free-flowing rhapsodic work that is exotic, evocative, and even erotic. The harmonic language and colorful instrumentation owe something to his teacher Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). It's seemingly a subtle irony that RVW chose to use human voices instrumentally and to cast the viola – one of his favorite instruments – as the singer. He divided the piece into six sections, each headed by a quotation from the Latin Vulgate. Here are the English translations of those verses, along with a brief description of the music:

1. *As the lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters... Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.*
   A bitonal duet for oboe and viola opens the work, then we hear a lush orchestral passage before the choir's ardent first entry. Herbert Howells called this section a "rhapsodic prelude."

2. *For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.*
   The soloist plays a long-breathed melody that is taken up by the choral voices in unison. Note the alluring use of harp and celesta.

3. *I sought him whom my soul loveth, but found him not... "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him that I am sick of love."... "Whither is my beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither is my beloved turned aside? that we make seek him with thee."*
   The forlorn viola dialogues with the women's voices.

4. *Behold his bed* [palanquin]*, which is Solomon's, three score valiant men are about it... They all hold swords, being expert in war.*
   A "moderato alla marcia," presumably depicting the masculine Beloved. Composer Phillip Cooke likened this dance to "something like a 1930s film score of a medieval banquet."

5. *Return, return, O Shulamite. Return, return, that we may look upon thee... How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O Prince's daughter.*
   The modal polyphony of the second section returns, with a side drum beating the earlier dance rhythm.

6. *Set me as a seal upon thy heart.*
   "Diatonic fulfillment of longing" (Herbert Howells). Toward the end, there's a restatement of the oboe/viola duet, but the soloist has the last word, and the final dissonant chord remains unresolved.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born 1 April 1873; Semyonovo, Russia
Died 28 March 1943; Beverley Hills, California

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43

Composed: 1934
First performance: 7 November 1934; Baltimore, Maryland

With his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Sergei Rachmaninoff harkened back to the Romantic-era role of pianist-composer. It was a work he wrote for himself to perform, dashing it off in only seven weeks in the summer of 1934. At this point in this life, the 61-year-old master spent much of his energy making extensive tours as a concert pianist. In the 1934-35 season alone, he played 69 dates. In a letter written not long after the completion of the *Rhapsody*, he worried about such a grueling schedule: "Shall I hold out? I begin to evaporate. It's often more than I can bear just to play. In short, I've grown old."

By this time in his career, Rachmaninoff had composed four piano concertos and at first was unsure of what to call his Opus 43. Though he settled on the title "rhapsody" – a term that implies a loosely organized structure – the work follows a distinctly taut form: a set of 24 variations. The theme is taken from the last of Nicolò Paganini's (1782-1840) *Twenty-Four Caprices for Solo Violin* (*c*1805). In his exhaustive book on Rachmaninoff, Barrie Martyn explains why this theme (also appropriated by Brahms, Liszt, Blacher, Lutoslawski, Lloyd Webber, et al.) works so well for variations: "It enshrines that most basic of musical ideas, the perfect cadence, literally in its first half and in a harmonic progression in the second, which itself expresses a musical aphorism; and the melodic line is made distinctive by a repetition of a simply but immediately memorable four-note semi-quaver [16th note] figure." Indeed, it is a theme that is easily remembered, even hummable.

As several writers have pointed out, the variations essentially fall into three groups that correspond to the fast-slow-fast layout of a traditional three-movement concerto:

- Introduction
- Variation 1
- Theme (violins)
- ariations 2-10 (fast)
- Variation 11 (transition)
- Variations 12-18 (slow)
- Variations 19-24 (fast)
- Coda (two measures)

The "Dies irae" motif, from the Gregorian chant melody in the Mass for the Dead, first appears in Variation 7, recurring in Variations 10, 22, and 24. In Variation 18, some of the most heart-on-the-sleeve music Rachmaninoff ever set down, Paganini's theme is turned upside-down.

Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, on tour in Baltimore, joined the composer for the work's premiere. It has since become a central repertory piece, admired by concert-goers and professional musicians alike. It presents Rachmaninoff's late style at its radiant and quick-witted best, and affords the audience the pleasure of hearing a pianist put through their paces – with distinctly satisfying returns.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born 17 June 1882; Lomonosov, Russia
Died 6 April 1971; New York, New York

The Rite of Spring

Composed: 1911-12
First performance: 29 May 1913; Paris, France

Stravinsky was in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1910, putting the finishing touches on *The Firebird*, when he received his inspiration for *The Rite of Spring*. He later wrote: "I had a fleeting vision, which came as a complete surprise... I saw in my imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of Spring."

The Firebird had been commissioned by the Ballet Russe impresario Sergei Diaghilev for his company's 1910 season in Paris. Its great success would alter the course of Stravinsky's life. The following year, *Petroushka* – begun as a concert piece for piano and orchestra, but converted to a ballet score at the urging of Diaghilev – was just as popular with the public and critics as *The Firebird* had been.

Following *The Firebird*'s 13 June 1911 premiere in Paris, Stravinsky began work on *The Rite of Spring* in earnest; by early 1912 the first half of the score was almost complete. It was obvious, however, that the work would not be ready for the summer, so its production was postponed a year. This allowed the composer to work more deliberately on the rest of the ballet.

The premiere of *The Rite of Spring* – 29 May 1913; Theatre des Champs-Elysees, Paris – is enshrined in all the music textbooks because of the scandal it caused, surely one of cultural history's most cherished riots. Apparently, the audience was just as infuriated by Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography – the composer later derided Nijinsky's dancing maidens as "knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas" – as they were by Stravinsky's music. The master was relieved when, at performances in Paris and London that summer, those in attendance behaved with the usual decorum, but the first-night kerfuffle had been a traumatic experience for him, putting him in the hospital for two weeks.

What was it about this work that triggered such visceral reaction?

Was it the rhythm? It has been said that *The Rite of Spring* frequently treats the orchestra like a giant percussion instrument. That is nowhere more apparent than the famous passage in the Augurs of Spring, when a single massive chord (an E-flat-seventh chord atop F-flat major chord) is repeated over and over, its accents shifting unpredictably. In another audacious treatment of rhythm, Stravinsky often superimposes multiple ostinatos (repeated melodic fragments) with different rhythmic values and unequal total durations. A further important rhythmic feature is apparent in passages whose time signatures change almost continuously, a characteristic that can strike fear in the hearts of even the most seasoned conductors. This is especially evident in the opening bars of the Sacrificial Dance, where the meter changes in almost every measure; it begins 3/16, 2/16, 3/16, 3/16, 2/8, 2/16, 3/16.

Was it the melody? The harmony? Frequently, *The Rite* utilizes short, simple motives that Stravinsky sometimes drew – say the scholars – from Russian and Lithuanian folk music. These are combined to create larger units and, though normally diatonic in themselves, usually are treated chromatically. Chromaticism and dissonance often contribute to the harshness of the piece, as illustrated by the previously mentioned chord in the Augurs of Spring; the same chord, though, operates as an integrated sonority and provides a pitch reference, both melodically and harmonically.

Though we may not know for certain what set off that Parisian audience 107 years ago, we do know that *The Rite of Spring* remains undiminished in its ability to rouse – and even electrify – us today. Leonard Bernstein called it "the most important work of the 20th century." Pierre Boulez took that a step further, writing: "*The Rite of Spring* serves as a point of reference to all who seek to establish the birth certificate of what is still called 'contemporary' music. A kind of manifesto work, somewhat in the same way and probably for the same reasons as Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, it has not ceased to engender, first, polemics, then, praise, and, finally, the necessary clarification."

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.