



BILLINGS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA & CHORALE

CONCERT NOTES “Season Finale with Andrew von Oeyen” April 17, 2010

By Chris Morrison

Pavane, Op. 50
Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

After serving for years in various posts as an organist and teacher, Gabriel Fauré only started to make a name for himself as a composer around the age of forty. In 1897 he started teaching at the Paris Conservatoire, and served as its Director from 1905 to 1920. The pavane was originally a stately dance common during the Renaissance, and Fauré remains true to that model in his *Pavane*, composed in 1887. Pizzicato strings underlie the languorous main theme of the work, spun out first by the flute, later by other winds and violins. After a darker central section, the pizzicati return and, after another lovely contrasting idea, the main theme returns to conclude this meditative work.

La Valse
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Daphnis et Chloé was the first of two ballets Ravel wrote for the impresario Sergei Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes. The second was *La Valse*, subtitled “un poème chorégraphique” (a choreographic poem) and written in 1920 in the wake of World War I. Ravel described *La Valse* in the score’s preface: “Drifting clouds give glimpses, through rifts, of couples waltzing. The clouds gradually scatter, and an immense hall can be seen, filled with a whirling crowd. The scene gradually becomes illuminated. The light of chandeliers bursts forth. An imperial court about 1885.” But there are darker overtones in the work – a mood of seeming decadence and menace, perhaps related to the atmosphere of post-War Vienna – which composer George Benjamin has recognized: “Whether or not it was intended as a metaphor for the predicament of European civilization in the aftermath of the Great War, its one-movement design plots the birth, decay and destruction of a musical genre: the waltz.”

The music seems to arise out of a mist. Over rumbles of cellos and double basses, fragments of melody begin to take form, culminating in a graceful tune in the bassoons and violas. Harps, then violins, lead into the orchestra’s statement of the main waltz theme. A series of waltzes follows, by turns aggressive, tender, and dramatic. Unearthly glissandi become part of the texture as the

melodies recur, now with different instrumentation and changes in harmony. The waltz rhythm builds and builds towards what has been called a “danse macabre coda.”

An American in Paris

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

George Gershwin is one of America’s most beloved composers. His songs, orchestral music, Broadway shows, and his most ambitious work, the “folk opera” *Porgy and Bess* (1935), effectively bring together the worlds of classical music, jazz, and popular music. After the huge successes of *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and the Piano Concerto in F major (1925), Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Philharmonic, requested a new work from Gershwin. Trips to France provided inspiration – on one visit Gershwin even bought some authentic Parisian taxi horns to incorporate into what he was now calling *An American in Paris*. Premiered on December 13, 1928, *An American in Paris* quickly became part of the standard orchestral repertoire. It also inspired the Academy Award-winning 1951 film of the same name starring Gene Kelly.

Gershwin once said of *An American in Paris*, “This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I’ve yet attempted ... My purpose is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere.” Composer-critic Deems Taylor wrote of the work’s opening, “You are to imagine an American visiting Paris, swinging down the Champs-Élysées on a mild sunny morning in May or June ... Our American’s ears being open as well as his eyes, he notes with pleasure the sounds of the city. French taxicabs seem to amuse him particularly.” It’s a dynamic portrait of the city, highlighted by several “walking themes,” with the bustle of activity punctuated by the taxi horns.

This daytime music leads into a central section depicting nocturnal Paris. A short violin solo evokes the setting sun, leading into the famous blues, in which, according to Gershwin, “our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness.” We hear solo trumpet in the blues and the next, Charleston-like dance theme, along with the smoky sound of saxophones. Then dawn breaks, and we start to hear snippets from earlier in the piece as the visitor reflects on his Parisian experiences. As Gershwin summarized it, “Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.”

Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

Piotr Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Piotr Tchaikovsky began taking piano lessons at age four and showed great promise, but was directed by his parents toward a career in the civil service. Maintaining his desire for a life in music, in 1862 he started studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Within a few years he was teaching harmony at the newly established Moscow Conservatory and starting to win recognition

as a composer. He was hired at the Moscow Conservatory by its director Nikolai Rubinstein, to whom Tchaikovsky wanted to dedicate his Piano Concerto No. 1. Composed between November 1874 and February 1875, the Concerto No. 1, now one of the most popular of all piano concertos, had a rocky start.

Tchaikovsky hoped that Rubinstein would introduce the work at one of the 1875 concerts of the Russian Musical Society in Moscow, and to that end, on Christmas Eve 1874 Tchaikovsky played through the first draft of the Concerto for him. Tchaikovsky later vividly recounted the experience: "I played the first movement. Not a single word, not a single remark! ... I fortified myself with patience and played through to the end." Then Rubinstein let go, telling Tchaikovsky that his work "was worthless and unplayable; passages were so fragmented, so clumsy, so badly written that they were beyond rescue; the work itself was bad, vulgar; in places I had stolen from other composers; only two or three pages were worth preserving; the rest must be thrown away or completely rewritten." Alternating between heartbreak and anger, Tchaikovsky left the room. Rubinstein sought him out again, but "repeated that my concerto was impossible, pointed out many places where it would have to be completely revised, and said that if within a limited time I reworked the concerto according to his demands, then he would do me the honor of playing my thing at his concert. 'I shall not alter a single note,' I answered, 'I shall publish the work exactly as it is!' This I did."

The Concerto was instead offered to pianist-conductor Hans von Bülow, who premiered the work in Boston on October 15, 1875. It was rapturously received, so much so that the audience demanded a repeat of the entire final movement. (When Bülow sent a telegram to Tchaikovsky telling him this, it was apparently the first cable ever sent between Boston and Moscow.) The work soon took off in Europe as well, and by 1878 even Rubinstein had revised his opinion and was playing it.

Almost every music lover recognizes the Concerto's opening minutes. A horn call, punctuated by strong chords from the orchestra, leads into one of classical music's best-known melodies, played by strings and soon elaborated on by the pianist in a powerful cadenza. The melody is then repeated in its original form, with bold ascending chords from the piano. After the introduction, though, this famous theme (which was turned into a popular song, "Tonight We Love," by bandleader Freddy Martin in 1941) isn't heard again in the Concerto. The rest of the long first movement is dominated by two melodies. The first was supposedly based on a clarinet tune that Tchaikovsky heard played by blind beggars at a Ukrainian fair. After the second, gentler melody makes its appearance, the woodwinds return to the first subject, leading into an explosive development of the two themes. Tchaikovsky's words about the Concerto in general also apply to this development section: it pits against one another "two equal opponents: the orchestra with its power and color, opposed by the small but high-mettled piano which often comes off victorious." The development culminates in a big cadenza for the soloist, to be followed up a short time later by another virtuoso passage and a thunderous coda.

The second movement opens with quiet pizzicato chords, followed by a tender main melody from the flute that inspires a set of variations. The movement's central section turns into a waltz, as Tchaikovsky employs a French song, "Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire" (One must have fun, dance and laugh), that he had heard sung by Belgian soprano Désirée Artôt, whom he had

courted in the 1860s. Rushing strings and powerful timpani herald the fiery finale. Its main melody is a vigorous, rollicking Ukrainian dance, with constantly shifting rhythms. A second, more romantic theme provides contrast. Tchaikovsky returns to the opening dance theme for the work's exuberant conclusion.