

Selections from *Peer Gynt*

Edvard Grieg
(b. 1843, Bergen, Norway; d. 1907, Bergen)

Edvard Grieg's beloved *Peer Gynt* music was the happy result of a collaboration between Norway's two greatest creative artists of the late 19th century. In January 1874, the renowned Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen contacted the composer to ask if he would be willing to compose incidental music for Ibsen's new drama *Peer Gynt*. Grieg at first hesitated, but ultimately threw himself into the task, creating 23 musical numbers for the play. Despite the fact that Grieg's and Ibsen's creative styles were extremely different — Grieg was a Romantic-era master of lyrical melody while Ibsen wrote starkly uncompromising dramas with an almost 20th-century viewpoint — their joint efforts were warmly received at the play's premiere on February 24, 1876 in Oslo. And Grieg promptly fashioned two suites from his dramatic score that soon rivaled in popularity his Piano Concerto.

With its fantastic globetrotting plot, *Peer Gynt* lends itself well to musical treatment. Peer is no solid, hardworking Norwegian, but an unreliable yet lovable scamp who gets into plenty of trouble in his home village and then abandons his sweetheart, Solveig, to seek adventure in the wide world. He narrowly escapes from the clutches of the ghoulish Norwegian trolls, visits the exotic deserts of North Africa, and wins and loses a fortune. Finally, after many years and a narrow escape from a shipwreck, he returns, older and wiser, to his Norwegian home and his faithful Solveig.

We will hear three selections from the First *Peer Gynt* Suite. Though "Morning Mood" may sound like morning dawning over a Norwegian fiord, this most famous of Grieg's lyrical melodies actually paints sunrise shimmering on the sands of Northern Africa at the beginning of Act IV. Built from a simple, poignant melody, "Aasa's Death" is the profoundly sorrowful music for the death of Peer's adored mother, Aase. Finally, "In the Hall of the Mountain King" commemorates Peer's frightening sojourn with the trolls. Starting pianissimo in the orchestra's lowest instruments, this relentless dance uses one menacing little melody to build a steady acceleration and crescendo to a wild triple-forte finish.

Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra

Nino Rota
(b. 1911, Milan, Italy; d. 1979, Rome, Italy)

Despite an impeccable classical pedigree, Italian composer Nino Rota (born Giovanni Rota Rinaldi) is far better known today for his countless superb movie scores than for his "serious" concert works. For 28 years — from 1951 until his death in 1979 — he was Federico Fellini's sole composer, producing a series of unforgettable scores for such film classics as *La Strada*, *8 1/2*, *Juliet of the Spirits*, and *La Dolce Vita*. So committed was Fellini to Rota's music as an integral part of his film vision that he would actually shoot scenes to the already completed music. Two other famed Italian directors, Luchino

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Visconti and Franco Zeffirelli, also embraced Rota's music; he created scores for Visconti's beautiful *The Leopard* and, most memorably, for Zeffirelli's beloved 1968 telling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. When in the 1970s American director Francis Ford Coppola wanted to create an authentic Italian atmosphere for his *Godfather* films, he went straight to Rota, who composed the scores for the first two films, winning a best-score Oscar for the second. In all, Rota created scores for an astounding 143 movies.

However, parallel to all this film activity, this prolific Italian was also writing a considerable body of classical works, including four symphonies, ten operas (his comedy *The Italian Straw Hat* is still in the active repertoire), numerous concertos, and chamber music. In fact, he was a composing prodigy, having written an oratorio *L'infanzia di San Giovanni Battista* at age eleven that was presented in Milan two years later. None other than Arturo Toscanini took an interest in him, and after Rota completed his degree at Rome's Santa Cecilia Academy in 1930, Toscanini arranged for him to go to America to study at Philadelphia's revered Curtis Institute. Rota was also a distinguished teacher and was director of the conservatory in Bari, Italy from 1950 until 1979.

We will hear Rota's *Bassoon Concerto in B-flat Major*, which is a late work written between 1974 and 1977. Like so many of Rota's concert works, it is an elegant, finely crafted work, lightened with impish humor. Movement one is a playful, quick-tempo "Toccata" with the character of a joking scherzo, like the Mendelssohn piece we've just heard. The gruff tone of the bassoon is beautifully set off by the very bright-toned orchestration emphasizing high woodwinds, sassy brass, and even a sparkling piano. Rota concocts a sequence of appealing tunes to show off the bassoon's comedic qualities; especially fine is a melody with a descending and ascending line that suggests a jaunty boulevardier sauntering around town.

Tantalizing in its brevity, the second movement has a more pensive atmosphere. It is marked "Recitativo," and indeed, the bassoon declaims in expressive speech-like phrases in the manner of an operatic basso.

The final movement is by far the longest: a graceful theme followed by six strongly contrasted variations in characteristic dance styles — Waltz, Polka, Siciliana, Scherzo, Sarabanda, and Galop. Sung first by the violins and then by the bassoon, the theme is smoothly undulating and slightly tinged with melancholy. Moving to B-flat minor, the third variation is a lovely Siciliana: a traditional Italian style with a lilting rhythm and a pastoral quality. Variation 5 is a Sarabanda: a slow-tempo dance in 3/4-time led off by the flute. The final variation is a vivacious Galop designed not only to showcase the soloist's agility and virtuosity but the orchestra's as well.

Overture to *Tannhäuser*

Richard Wagner

(b. 1813, Leipzig, Germany; d. 1883, Venice, Italy)

When Richard Wagner wrote the opera *Tannhäuser*, he was only in his early thirties and not yet the revered master of Bayreuth. In fact, he had just returned to Germany after two and a half years of

poverty and frustration in Paris, where he'd been forced to arrange other people's music in order to keep the wolf from the door. In these circumstances, the offer of the music directorship at the Dresden Court Opera House in 1842 was a gift from heaven.

As he traveled to his new post, Wagner glimpsed from his carriage window the imposing mountain-top Wartburg Castle; here, according to legend, were held the song contests of the medieval German minnesingers. His imagination stirred, Wagner began reading about them and also about the legend of the knight Tannhäuser, who dallied with Venus, the goddess of love, in her sacred mountain the Venusberg. When Tannhäuser finally tore himself from Venus' arms and traveled to Rome to seek absolution, the Pope told him he would never be forgiven unless the Pope's ceremonial staff should sprout living branches. Since this seemed impossible, the knight returned in despair to Venus. But three days later, the Pope's staff miraculously burst into bloom. In his opera completed in 1845, Wagner conflated these two stories into an epic struggle between the powers of sacred and profane love. To counterbalance Venus, he created the character of the saintly Princess Elizabeth, whose pure love wins Tannhäuser away from the goddess and ultimately secures his redemption.

The opera's overture embodies these two worlds. At its beginning and end, we hear the solemn, horn-dominated chorale of the Pilgrim's Chorus from Act III when Tannhäuser journeys to Rome to seek absolution. Its middle section incorporates some of the Venusberg music from the opera's first scene, in which Tannhäuser and Venus watch an orgiastic bacchanale in her magic grotto. Preparing for a revival of the opera in Paris in 1861, Wagner was able to intensify this music's eroticism with the lushly chromatic harmonies he had just discovered for *Tristan und Isolde*. The bold, upward-sweeping tune sung by the full orchestra is Tannhäuser's hymn to Venus from the Act II song contest, the song that scandalizes the other minnesingers and leads to Tannhäuser's expulsion from the Wartburg.

Scherzo from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Felix Mendelssohn

(b. 1809, Hamburg, Germany; d. 1847, Leipzig, Germany)

Among the countless composers who have been inspired by Shakespeare, perhaps no one else has succeeded as brilliantly as did Felix Mendelssohn in capturing the Bard of Avon's comic genius in music. As children, Mendelssohn and his three siblings were enraptured with Shakespeare's plays and delighted in acting them out as well as reading them. Family performances of their favorite, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the tale of four mismatched lovers benighted and bedeviled by fairies in an Athenian wood, led to his precocious Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, composed in 1826 when he was only 17 years old and yet one of the finest of all Romantic-era overtures.

Seventeen years later, Mendelssohn returned to the world of his childhood to recapture and expand this spellbound music into a complete set of incidental music for a court production of the play in Berlin commissioned by King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia. From this music we will hear the "Scherzo," which introduces us to Puck, the nimble elf who will create most of the mischief in the plot by unwary applications of his magic potions. Here Mendelssohn makes masterly use of bright woodwind colors and especially the solo flute. This is a superb example of the scherzo style that became one of this composer's trademarks: gossamer-light, high-speed music with intricate figurations for strings and woodwinds.

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Boléro

Maurice Ravel

(b. 1875, Ciboure, France; d. 1937, Paris)

It inspired Torvill and Deane to skate for perfect sixes and Olympic gold. Bo Derrick swayed through the surf to it and scored the perfect Ten. But its composer said, “I’ve written only one masterpiece — Boléro. Unfortunately, there’s no music in it.”

Maurice Ravel was speaking tongue in cheek here. He was astonished that a piece he called “an experiment in a very special and limited direction” should become the most popular of all his works. For with Boléro he took one propulsive rhythm — loosely based on the triple-meter Spanish dance of the same name — and two interwoven themes of exotic Arabic coloration and with his orchestral wizardry built from them a 15-minute piece of hypnotic power. Starting with just a snare drum, plucked low strings, and a flute, it builds the longest, most inexorable, and most thrilling crescendo in classical music.

Boléro was composed in 1928 as a short ballet for Ida Rubinstein, a fascinatingly sensual dancer and Ravel’s close friend. She had originally asked the composer for an orchestration of Isaac Albéniz’s Iberia, but Ravel found that another Spanish composer had already created an arrangement. During a vacation that summer near his hometown of Ciboure on the Spanish border, he played the undulating theme of Boléro on the piano for a friend. “Don’t you think this theme has an insistent quality?” he asked. “I’m going to try and repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra as best I can.”

Being one of the greatest orchestrators of the 20th century, Ravel achieved this goal with ease. A snare drum taps the unvarying boléro rhythm throughout, but it is enhanced by a changing ensemble of wind and eventually string instruments. An equally varied palette of instruments — strings, harp, even brass — imitates the strumming of a guitar marking out the three beats. Two closely related oriental melodies — sung by various wind soloists; exotic combinations like two piccolos, horn and celesta; and eventually the full orchestra — alternate over constant harmonies.

The ballet scenario takes place in a smoky Spanish cafe where a group of men are watching a beautiful woman dance provocatively on a tabletop. At the cataclysmic end, their lust has been so enflamed that knives are drawn and a bloody battle ensues.

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