Overture to *The Bartered Bride*
Bedrich Smetana
(b. 1824, Litomysl, Bohemia; d. 1884, Prague)

Antonín Dvořák may be the most famous of Czech composers, but Bedrich Smetana, his senior by 17 years, was the man who first brought the distinctive Czech folk idiom into the concert hall and opera house. The son of a well-to-do brewer, Smetana in his early years found little opportunity for his musical ambitions in Bohemia — then a backwater of the Austrian Empire and utterly dominated by Austro-German musical traditions and artists — and moved abroad to pursue his career. But when a competition for an opera in Czech was announced in 1861 as well as plans for the Provisional Theatre in Prague, he felt the time was ripe to return from Sweden where he'd become a successful pianist, conductor, and teacher.

In 1863, he won the competition with his first opera, *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, and swiftly moved on to a second, *The Bartered Bride*. The story is a warmly comic slice of life in a rural Czech village. Marenka and Jeník are in love, but Marenka's ambitious parents favor a match with the witless and unattractive Vasek, son of the wealthy farmer Mícha. The village marriage broker induces Jeník to renounce his sweetheart for the substantial sum of 300 gulden; Jeník agrees, with the proviso that Marenka shall marry no one but a son of Mícha. Marenka's parents are delighted while the girl is broken-hearted at her lover's apparent betrayal. But Jeník has the last laugh. He reveals that he is the long-lost son of Mícha, Vasek's elder half-brother, and is recognized joyfully by his father. Meanwhile, Vasek finds his true calling as a circus clown and runs off with a pretty tightrope walker. True love triumphs after all — with a bonus of 300 gulden!

Premiered on May 30, 1866 (with the 24-year-old Dvorák playing viola in its orchestra), *The Bartered Bride* initially displeased the wealthy Prague audience, who found its rural tale too down-market for their cosmopolitan tastes. But after a number of revisions, Smetana's engaging score, inspired by the earthy songs and dances of Bohemia, won favor not only in Prague but also throughout Europe. Today, along with *Má vlast* ("My Homeland"), his set of tone poems celebrating the Czech countryside and history, it is his best-loved score internationally.

Its vivacious overture, composed in 1863 before Smetana had written the opera, is surely one of the most popular of all curtain-raisers. From its opening gesture of a jubilant crowd on carnival day to its bustling string fugues suggesting the village gossips at work, it perfectly establishes the mood of the high-spirited comedy to follow.

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**Nocturne in B Major, opus 40**
Antonín Dvořák
(b. September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, Bohemia, now Czech Republic; d. May 1, 1904, Prague)

Though he composed with great ease, Antonín Dvořák liked to tinker with his pieces, revising them until they satisfied his exacting standards. And he also never liked to waste a good musical idea. His exquisite *Nocturne* for string orchestra illustrates both these
facts. It was born, probably in the late 1860s, as a slow section for his experimental String Quartet in E Minor in one movement and was labeled “Andante religioso.” In 1875, Dvorák revised the music, adding a more animated middle section and a bass part, as the slow movement for his String Quintet in G Major; in this version, it was called “Intermezzo — Nocturno.” But Dvorák felt that this lovely music made the Quintet too long and ultimately removed it. Finally in the early 1880s, he re-created it as a six-minute independent piece, the Nocturne we hear in this concert, first in an arrangement for string orchestra and later for violin and piano. In its string orchestra version, it was premiered in Prague on January 6, 1883, under the composer’s baton.

Rocking gently on a 12/8 meter, this enchantingly beautiful piece has an unusual expressive feature: for much of its length, it is harmonically becalmed by a sustained pedal on F-sharp (the dominant of its B-major key) in the cellos.

Czech Suite in D Major, opus 39  
Antonín Dvorák

Until he was well into his thirties, Antonín Dvorák was a composer struggling to earn enough money to support his burgeoning family. Then in the late 1870s, Johannes Brahms discovered him and urged his Austrian publisher Simrock to take him on. In 1878, Dvorák’s vivacious Slavonic Dances became an instant favorite and earned him and Simrock a considerable sum. Simrock then signed the composer to a contract in which he would give the publisher first rights on everything he wrote in the future.

But now, other publishers were also clamoring for Dvorák’s music. So the composer indulged in a little subterfuge: in order to sell his new Czech Suite, probably written in April 1879, to the Berlin publisher Schlesinger (who was offering more money), he gave the work a lower opus number — 39 — than it should actually have had, thus implying to Simrock that it had really been written before their agreement. He played this trick with some other compositions, as well, and Simrock went along with the ruse.

Though it is far less often played today than the ever-popular Slavonic Dances, the charming Czech Suite continues their colorful, folk-inspired style. Three of its five movements are based on traditional Czech dances: the polka, the sousedská, and the furiant. Scored for a chamber orchestra of strings with pairs of woodwinds, it also resembles Dvorák’s serenades for smaller ensembles, such as the Serenade for Winds, opus 44, of 1878. Each movement features a different combination of woodwinds to produce a distinctive color for the music, while two trumpets and timpani are added for the boisterous final movement.

In the home key of D major, the first movement is called both Preludium and Pastorale and is not specifically a dance movement. It is built around one gracefully undulating theme, anchored by sustained pedal notes that mimic the drone of the Czech dudy or bagpipes. The music’s pastoral or rural character is emphasized by the prominent part for oboe, an instrument traditionally associated with the pastoral genre.

In D minor, the second movement is a polka with an initially genteel and laid-back manner reflecting its Allegretto grazioso tempo marking. But it soon grows livelier,
embellished with impish trills. A more effervescent middle section in D major is quicker in tempo and gives strong accents to the first beat of the measure.

The brighter, fruitier tones of flutes and clarinets replace the oboes for the **third movement**: a sousedská or Czech couple dance with a stately processional character. Little imitative canons between the parts enrich this music’s grace.

Poised on a gently rocking 9/8 beat, the **fourth-movement Romance** is not a dance but rather a ravishingly beautiful slow movement with a haunting, slightly melancholic mood. Beginning and ending with a dialogue between a flute and an English horn, it emphasizes the shifting colors between all the woodwinds in the orchestra, save the clarinets: pairs of flutes, oboes, bassoons, and horns. It is one of Dvorák’s loveliest creations.

**Finale**: The vivacious furiant, with its characteristic rhythmic battle between three beats and two, was perhaps Dvorák’s favorite Czech folk dance. This one opens quietly with a solo oboe singing a modest, cheerful melody. But what power and energy Dvorák will be able to create with this little theme! With all the instruments, including the trumpets and timpani, now in full cry, the last moments of this dance are as fiery and thrilling as anything this composer ever wrote.

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**Piano Concerto in A Minor**  
Edvard Grieg  
(b. 1843, Bergen, Norway; d. 1907, Bergen, Norway)

When the adolescent Edvard Grieg showed exceptional musical promise, he was sent off at age 15 to Leipzig, Germany because Norway — not yet an independent country — had no conservatories to train him. Although he chafed at Leipzig's rigid pedagogy and at German music in general, Grieg did eventually find a sympathetic teacher in Ernst Wenzel, who had been a friend of Robert Schumann. Wenzel passed on his love of Schumann's music to the young Norwegian, and when in 1858 Edvard heard a performance of Schumann's Piano Concerto played by Clara Schumann herself, he was enthralled by the work. Ten years later, while composing his own Piano Concerto in the same key of A minor, he would draw on Schumann's concerto for inspiration.

Although Grieg's Piano Concerto followed the traditional form of the Romantic, central-European concerto, it was the subtle use of Norwegian folk influences plus his own genius that kept the work from being a clone of Schumann's. The Concerto was the product of youth and happiness: composed during the idyllic summer of 1868, which the 25-year-old composer, his young bride, Nina, and their infant daughter spent in rural Denmark. It was a notable success at its first performance in Copenhagen in April 1869. A year later when Grieg shyly showed it to the great virtuoso Franz Liszt, the Hungarian pianist dashed it off — orchestral part and all! — at sight, exclaiming all the while about the work's beauties. Finally, he turned to Grieg and, with great emotion, told him, “Keep on, I tell you! You have what is needed, and don't let them frighten you.”

This is a work that glories in its multitude of appealing themes — very personally Grieg's own — and its highly successful blending of tender lyricism with virtuoso display. Its **first movement** dispenses with the customary orchestral exposition; just a dramatic timpani roll galvanizes the soloist into action. His vertiginous three-octave
plunge begins with a three-note melodic pattern — a descending half-step, following by a descending third — that is common in Norwegian folk music and became known as the “Grieg motive.” Woodwinds then introduce the folkish principal theme, animated by crisp dotted rhythms. It also has a smoothly lyrical second idea, which the piano makes more rhapsodic with swirls of arpeggios. In a slightly slower tempo, cellos then sing a warm, romantically melancholic second theme. After a brief development, the opening music is reprised, coming to a sudden halt for a big cadenza for the soloist, composed by Grieg. It is a perfect cadenza: an imaginative mediation on the folk theme, complete with a rich assortment of virtuosic figurations and octaves work.

The slow movement travels far from the home key of A minor into the very distant D-flat major. Muted strings open with a weary theme, saturated in sorrow; notice the eloquent contributions here from the solo horn and cello. The piano's wistful response is woven of exquisite fast figurations. In a new phase, the piano passionately declares the pain implied in this melody before the movement dies out in elegiac beauty.

A short bridge passage intervenes to return the key of D-flat to A minor before the piano launches the finale's stomping main theme in the style of the Norwegian folk dance, the halling. Providing an interlude of repose, the solo flute sings a hauntingly lovely melody in a slower tempo; the piano gives it sensitive treatment with downward slip-sliding chords. Reprising his opening dance music, Grieg builds excitement to a brief solo cadenza of double-handed octaves. Then the soloist transforms the 2/4 halling dance into a sparkling 3/4 waltz. But Grieg has an even better idea for his finish. He brings back the haunting second theme, now in a splendid apotheosis in A major. As annotator Michael Steinberg points out, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff in their concertos would later imitate this device to enrapture the audience, but Grieg did it first.

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