

Overture to *L'italiana in Algeri* (The Italian Girl in Algiers)

Gioachino Rossini

(b. 1792, Pesaro, Italy; d. 1868, Passy, near Paris, France)

The year 1813 was a very fortunate one for Gioachino Rossini. In February, he premiered *Tancredi*, a serious opera with an aria “Di tanti palpiti” that everyone in Venice from the gondoliers to the aristocracy was soon humming. And in May, also in Venice, he unveiled *L'italiana in Algeri* (“The Italian Girl in Algiers”), an exuberant comic opera that is still in the active repertory today. With these two back-to-back hits, his reputation as the leading Italian opera composer of the day was made. He was only 21.

The plot of *L'italiana* takes the old imprisoned-in-a-harem plot, already made famous by Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, and stands on its ear. This time it is the tenor hero who has been abducted by Algerian pirates and the spunky mezzo-soprano title character that comes to the rescue. At the beginning of the opera, Isabella has been ship wrecked on the coast of Algeria, but this mishap hardly puts a dent in her plans. Conveniently, the Algerians carry her off to the court of the very same Bey Mustapha who is holding her lover, Lindoro. Mustapha, of course, makes eyes at the comely heroine, but the clever Isabella leads him a merry chase. At the end, she virtuously reunites him with his wife and sails triumphantly back to Italy with Lindoro, to the cheers of the Algerian populace.

Even before the bel canto revival brought back *L'italiana* and many other Rossini masterpieces to opera houses in the 1960s and '70s, their overtures were already staples of the concert hall. For Rossini was as inventive in his orchestral writing as in his arias and created a quicksilver style of overture that stands very well on its own. And indeed he often recycled these overtures from one work to another until they became connected with an especially popular work. However, *L'italiana*'s overture seems to have been used only for this opera, and its rambunctious high spirits make it a perfect match. Its slow introduction, with mincing pizzicato strings plus a surprise, suggests that high jinks are ahead. A faster section introduces two lively melodic elements and a splendid example of the excitement-building Rossini crescendo, all of which is repeated. In some editions of the overture, cymbals add exotic Middle-Eastern color to the full-orchestra passages, as they did for Mozart's *Abduction* and Beethoven's *Ruins of Athens* overtures, written not too long before.

Symphony No. 3 in A Minor, "Scottish"

Felix Mendelssohn

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

For a young artist of the Romantic era, what place could be more stimulating to the imagination than Scotland? Ruined castles, brooding, storm-lashed landscapes, a bloody and passionate history, and that most romantic of all sovereigns, Mary Queen of Scots — all these stirred the 21-year-old Mendelssohn on his 1829 tour of the British Isles and eventually yielded two masterpieces: the Hebrides Overture and the Scottish Symphony. But the *Hebrides* came first, drafted in 1829 and given its final form in 1832. The symphony, though Mendelssohn sketched its opening bars on the spot in 1829, would wait until January 1842 to be completed. The order of publication of Mendelssohn's

symphonies has given it a misleadingly low number; by rights it should be Symphony No. 5 since it was the last of Mendelssohn's mature symphonies.

We don't know why the composer took so long to follow up on his initial inspiration. Certainly he was caught in Scotland's spell from the moment he arrived in Edinburgh and climbed Arthur's Seat, the mountain that guards the city. "When God in heaven takes up panorama painting you can expect something terrific," he wrote of the landscape spread before him. "Everything looks so stern and robust here, even if it all is half obscured by steam or smoke or fog."

"Stern and robust" are adjectives that apply to the Scottish Symphony, though they are tempered by Mendelssohn's graceful style. The symphony's themes suggest the shape of Scottish melodies, but Mendelssohn used no genuine Scottish tunes. Actually, this most urbane of composers despised folk music, especially bagpipes! So we should listen to this symphony as a tribute to Scotland filtered through a very cultivated German sensibility.

First Movement: The dark orchestration — woodwinds and low strings — of the slow introduction's opening bars captures the "smoke or fog" of the Scottish atmosphere, along with a sense of its often tragic history. The composer has chosen a distinctive orchestral palette for this symphony: the poignant tones of the woodwind choir are especially exploited, and Mendelssohn's prominent use of four horns adds heroic/romantic resonance. The main *Allegro* section is marked "un poco agitato" ("a little agitated") and intensifies further as the full orchestra enters *fortissimo*, with the first of many passages suggesting the warrior mettle of the Highlander.

Following classical tradition, this entire exposition section is repeated before moving on to the development of the themes. The recapitulation is anticipated by a smooth, plaintive melody for the cellos, which continues to accompany the main melody's reprise, giving it new and subtle poignancy. The coda begins quietly, but soon is swept into a Romantic storm, with chromatically howling winds recalling the bad weather that plagued Mendelssohn throughout much of his Scottish summer. Finally, a reprise of the melancholy introduction rounds off the movement.

Mendelssohn instructed that all movements be played without pauses, and so we are promptly hurtled into the **second movement scherzo**. The composer is renowned for his fleet, gossamer scherzo movements, but this one is composed of more fire than fairy dust, propelled by crisply articulated rhythms. The clarinet introduces the whirling Scottish jig principal theme.

The *Adagio* **third movement** bears the expressive marking "cantabile" ("songlike"). First violins — and later cellos and horns — sing this soaring Mendelssohnian melody, accompanied by plucked arpeggios. This alternates with a contrasting theme of greater intensity and rhythmic bite, suggesting the stern pride of the Highlander.

"Allegro guerriero" or "warlike allegro" is the vivid tempo designation the composer gave to his fierce and impetuous **final movement**. In the home key of A minor, this is a *tour de force* of energy and forward momentum — one of the finest closing movements Mendelssohn ever composed. It is for this reason that critics have excoriated him for tacking on the rather conventional and thoroughly Teutonic *Allegro maestoso* close in A major. Bombastic it may be, but it also provides the kind of satisfyingly grand finish that guarantees an ovation.

Violin Concerto in D Major, opus 35

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(b. 1840, Votkinsk, Russia; d. 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia)

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto belongs to that illustrious group of masterpieces that were savaged by uncomprehending critics at their premieres. Nearly all the critics at its first performance — in Vienna on December 4, 1881 with Russian violinist Adolf Brodsky as soloist backed by the Vienna Philharmonic — gave the work negative reviews, but the one penned by the notoriously conservative Eduard Hanslick was so vicious it stung Tchaikovsky for years after. “Tchaikovsky is surely no ordinary talent, but rather, an inflated one ... lacking discrimination and taste. ... The same can be said for his new, long, and ambitious Violin Concerto. ... The violin is no longer played; it is tugged about, torn, beaten black and blue.” Hanslick demolished the finale “that transports us to the brutal and wretched jollity of a Russian church festival. We see a host of savage, vulgar faces, we hear crude curses, and smell the booze.”

Because of its flamboyant language and mind-boggling wrongheadedness, this is the review that has come down to us from a city that was generally unsympathetic to Tchaikovsky's Russian intensity. A much fairer judgment of the concerto's worth came from an anonymous critic for the *Wiener Abendpost*: “The first movement with its splendid, healthy themes, the mysterious, quiet middle movement (who could fail to be reminded by this of Turgenev's female characters!), and the wild peasant dance make up a whole for which we would claim an outstanding place among contemporary compositions.”

Today, this work holds an outstanding place among *all* violin concertos. One of the more demanding works for the violin virtuoso, it is more remarkable still for its unwavering melodic inspiration and passionate expression of human feeling. Here, Tchaikovsky speaks to us from the heart, using the communicative voice of the solo violin as his medium.

The concerto came in the aftermath of the composer's ill-conceived marriage to Antonina Milyukova in 1877. Eight months later in March 1878, his wanderings to escape his wife brought him to Clarens, Switzerland on the shores of Lake Geneva. Here, he and his brother Modest were visited by the gifted 22-year-old violinist Yosif Kotek, a composition pupil of Tchaikovsky's in Moscow. Kotek had been a witness at the composer's wedding and a confidante of his post-nuptial anguish; now, he provided both artistic inspiration and practical technical advice for Tchaikovsky's recently begun Violin Concerto. In less than a month, the work was nearly finished, and on April 3, Kotek and Tchaikovsky gave it a full reading at the piano. After the run-through, both agreed the slow movement was too slight for such a large work, and in one day flat, the composer replaced it with the tenderly melancholic *Andante* second movement it bears today.

So prodigal is Tchaikovsky's melodic inspiration that he can afford to begin the huge sonata-form **opening movement** with a lovely little theme for orchestral violins and then — just as he did at the beginning of his First Piano Concerto — never play it again. The orchestra next hints at the big theme to come and provides anticipatory excitement for the soloist. After a brief warm-up stretch, he launches one of Tchaikovsky's most

inspired themes, and one with a multiple personality. At first, it is gentle, even wistful, but when the orchestra takes it up a few minutes later, it becomes very grand: music for an Imperial Russian ball. Later still in the movement's development section, the soloist transforms it again with an intricately ornamented variation played in double stops (the violinist holding down the strings to play two or more pitches simultaneously). The violin's second theme, begun in warm lower register, retains its wistful nature. Tchaikovsky composed the soloist's cadenza, which explores new aspects of both themes, then leads to a poignant recapitulation in which the principal theme is beautifully appropriated by the solo flute.

The exquisite **second-movement *Canzonetta*** (little song) in G minor — Tchaikovsky's one-day miracle — blends the melancholy colors of woodwinds with the violin. Tchaikovsky scholar David Brown suggests that it reflects the composer's homesickness during his self-imposed exile from Russia. Rather than ending, it rises on a two-note sighing motive and then explodes into the ***Allegro vivacissimo finale***.

In this hearty rondo inspired by Russian folk dance, Tchaikovsky finally lets the soloist fly. He alternates two contrasting themes: the first a high-spirited scamper; the second a slower, downward-drooping melody that shows off the violin's earthy low register over a peasant-band drone bass and also features a nostalgic dialogue with woodwind solos. At the close, the dance keeps accelerating to a breathless finish.

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