

Fanfare to *La Péri*

Paul Dukas

(b. 1865, Paris; d. 1935, Paris)

Paul Dukas would undoubtedly be chagrined to know that he is largely remembered today for that classic of children's concerts *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, delightful as that little tone poem is. For this very serious musician was one of France's most influential figures in the first decades of the 20th century, especially as a renowned teacher of composition and orchestration at the Paris Conservatoire training such stellar pupils as Manuel de Falla, Joaquín Rodrigo, and Olivier Messaien.

A masterful writer of prose as well as music, Dukas became a music critic of the highest discrimination and ideals. Unfortunately, such refined critical faculties did not help his work as a composer. Despite the pleas of friends, he destroyed more of his pieces than he published, leaving at his death a very slender musical legacy of beautifully crafted music.

Besides *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, his two other works that have lasted in the international repertoire to some extent are his opera *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* and his ballet *La Péri*. Premiered in Paris in 1912, *La Péri* was created for the Russian ballerina Natalia Trouhanova. A lovely work in impressionist style, it sadly became the last work that Dukas permitted to be published, and it was only saved by the intervention of his friends. At the last minute before its premiere production, Dukas added the brilliant fanfare prelude for brass instruments that we'll hear tonight. And today, this two-minute prelude is far more often heard than the ballet score as a whole.

In Persian mythology, a *péri* is a fairy creature descended from fallen angels who cannot re-enter paradise until he or she has done penance. Many 19th-century Romantic composers were fascinated by these legends, and Robert Schumann wrote a large-scaled oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri*. In Dukas' scenario, the youth Iskender encounters a *péri* while searching for the lotus flower that will grant immortality. After many journeys, he discovers the flower in the hand of a female *péri* sleeping in a bejeweled bower. She is very beautiful, and Iskender falls in love with her. He seizes the lotus from the sleeping fairy, but when she awakens, she wins the flower back from him in exchange for a kiss. She then melts into the golden light of sunset, and Iskender realizes that he has lost her forever and given up his own life in the bargain.

Adagio for Strings

Samuel Barber

(b. 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania; d. 1981, New York City)

Like most American music lovers in the 1930s, Samuel Barber was mesmerized by Arturo Toscanini and his fiery interpretations of the great symphonic and operatic literature. In 1933, the 23-year-old composer used his status as nephew of the celebrated operatic contralto Louise Homer, one of Toscanini's favorite singers, to pay a visit to the maestro at his summer retreat on Lake Maggiore in northern Italy. To his delight, they struck up an immediate friendship, and the old conductor expressed interest in performing a work by Barber despite the fact that he generally avoided contemporary music like the plague. But Barber was by no means a typical contemporary composer.

Although only recently graduated from Philadelphia's Curtis Institute, he was a precocious artist who had already found his own creative voice — lyrical, deeply expressive, and rooted in the harmonic language of the late 19th century — a voice even the conservative Toscanini could love.

Barber was eager to seize on this magnificent opportunity, but it took him several years to produce two works he thought worthy of Toscanini's attention. His uncle, the composer Sidney Homer, gave him excellent advice: "The thing now is to write something for Toscanini that expresses the depth and sincerity of your nature. ... You know as well as I do that the Maestro loves sincere straight-forward stuff, with genuine feeling in it and no artificial pretense and padding." Finally, early in 1938, Barber sent the maestro his newly completed *First Essay for Orchestra* and the *Adagio* for string orchestra he had fashioned from the slow movement of his String Quartet of 1936.

Toscanini's selection of the *Essay* and the *Adagio* for his evening radio broadcast with the NBC Symphony on November 5, 1938 was the ultimate promotional coup for Barber's career. As older audience members may recall, the Toscanini radio concerts had a passionate nationwide following that PBS's "Live from Lincoln Center" broadcasts cannot begin to match today. By the next morning, Samuel Barber was a household name for American music lovers.

Barber had truly embodied his uncle's advice, especially in the *Adagio*, which remains his most beloved and frequently performed composition. Using the simplest of musical means, it is a work whose sincerity and depth of feeling shoot directly to the heart. Called our "national funeral music," it has eloquently expressed Americans' grief at the ceremonies for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945 and John F. Kennedy in 1963. In 1986, it moved a new generation as the music of the Academy Award-winning film *Platoon*, mourning the young lives snuffed out by the Vietnam War.

Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

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

Now more than 400 years old, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* still reigns as the most compelling of all love stories. And it holds as much allure for composers as for movie directors. "God! What a fine subject!" wrote the French composer Hector Berlioz. "How it lends itself to music!"

In 1869, the 28-year-old Tchaikovsky was just recovering from the breaking off of his only romance with a woman — the fascinating Belgian opera singer Desirée Artôt — when he was urged to use this subject to transform his pain into art by his fellow Russian composer Mily Balakirev. This renunciation had been difficult for Tchaikovsky, and soon after, he was seen at the opera house listening to Artôt with tears streaming down his face.

A member of the five Russian nationalist composers known as the "Mighty Handful," Balakirev became more famous for the compositions he inspired in others than for his own works, and the young Tchaikovsky was one of his protégés. On a long walk together, he suggested *Romeo and Juliet* as the perfect program for a symphonic poem and followed that up with a letter detailing how the work should be laid out. Tchaikovsky

latched onto the idea immediately, but used his own artistic discretion about Balakirev's suggestions. The first version of his "Fantasy-Overture" was written in just six weeks at the end of 1869. But when he heard it performed in Moscow in March 1870, Tchaikovsky decided it needed considerably more work. In revisions made soon after, he added the brooding opening that so perfectly establishes a mood of tender pathos, and before publishing it in 1880, he devised the startling conclusion, confirming the tragic denouement with eight searing B-major chords.

The musical events of Tchaikovsky's first masterpiece convey virtually all the dramatic elements of Shakespeare's play except the scenes of comic relief. Some commentators have linked the dark chant-like theme that opens the work with the character of Friar Laurence, who marries the young lovers. This theme plays an important role in the middle development section — striving in the horns against the jagged principal theme representing the battles between the Capulets and Montagues, just as in the play Laurence tries vainly to bring the families together. Notice how craftily Tchaikovsky introduces his famous love theme, one of the most inspired this great melodist ever wrote. He first presents it with very subdued scoring — an English horn solo over violas — saving its full passion for later when it returns soaring aloft in the violins.

Symphony No. 5 in D Minor

Dmitri Shostakovich

(b. 1906, St. Petersburg, Russia; d. 1975, Moscow)

For most of his career, Shostakovich had "to walk a tightrope blindfolded without a safety net" (in the words of Russian-music scholar Laurel Fay), and this was especially true during the reign of Joseph Stalin, who fancied himself the Soviet Union's supreme arts critic as well as supreme leader. While precariously maintaining his balance, Shostakovich constantly heard the thud of other leading Soviet artists falling to their deaths, among them the great director Vsevolod Meyerhold and the celebrated writer Maxim Gorky. His mission impossible was to remain true to his inner creative voice while paying sufficient lip service to the regime to stay alive.

The years 1934 to 1938 were the era of the great Stalinist purges, during which millions of Soviet citizens, from peasants to generals, lost their lives. Early in 1934, the 27-year-old Shostakovich premiered a daring new opera, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, whose harsh dissonances mirrored a lurid tale of lust and murder. For two years, *Lady Macbeth* was a popular hit, until one evening in January 1936 Stalin paid a visit to the opera house. The opera's gritty musical and theatrical drama infuriated the Soviet leader, who left the theatre before the curtain fell. A few days later, a lead article in *Pravda* denounced the opera under the heading "Muddle Instead of Music," and a second scathing article followed in February. Shostakovich instantly became a non-person. Fellow composers spoke out against him, while acquaintances crossed the street to avoid him. The composer lived in constant fear of the knock in the night summoning him to his doom; like many Soviet citizens, he kept a suitcase packed in readiness.

But the knock never came. And, strangely, in 1937 Shostakovich was given a chance to rehabilitate himself by writing a suitably triumphant symphony for Leningrad's

celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. As Ian MacDonald explains in his *The New Shostakovich*, the composer realized that much of the problem caused by *Lady Macbeth*, aside from its downbeat plot, stemmed from its advanced, modernist musical language, denounced by *Pravda* as "fidgety, screaming, neurotic music." For his new symphony, he determined to simplify his language, making it more consonant and tonal, more melodic, and more pleasing in its instrumental sonorities.

Indeed, the Fifth Symphony is much easier on the ears than many of Shostakovich's earlier works, and this surely contributed to its success in 1937 and its enduring popularity today. But in the fierce drama of its first movement, the biting sarcasm of its second, the emotionally wrenching sorrow of its third, and the complex "triumph" of its finale, it is as uncompromisingly outspoken as any of Shostakovich's works. In *Testimony*, the controversial memoirs purportedly dictated to Solomon Volkov, the composer vehemently denied there was any real triumph at all. "I never thought about any exultant finales, for what exultation could there be? I think that it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in [Mussorgsky's opera] *Boris Godunov*. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.' "

First movement: One of the most powerful of symphonic openings launches the work. Played in canon between lower and upper strings, this rugged theme is the seedbed of the movement. Contained in it are two important motives: descending three-note twists and the initially gentle repeated notes at the end. Both will be developed with great power, and the repeated notes will dominate the entire symphony. From this, Shostakovich builds a long melancholy melody sung by first violins. After this music is developed, the second major theme appears: a very hushed sustained melody high in the violins over a pulsing rhythmic accompaniment.

Baleful horns and an aggressive piano hammering out the second theme announce the development section, and the music accelerates into vigorous but slightly mechanical activity. Military snare drums propel a brash march. The music builds to great intensity, and the opening theme returns at a frenzied, driven tempo. But this manic energy eventually dies out into a quiet, haunting coda.

A sardonic sense of humor has saved Russian sanity throughout a brutal history, and it animates the **second-movement scherzo** with its insolent trills, satirical slides, and crude brass outbursts. This is a rough peasant dance in the style of one of Shostakovich's favorite composers, Gustav Mahler. Bright, shrill scoring, tongue-in-cheek pizzicato strings, and a tipsy solo violin leading the middle trio section suggest defiant mockery — perhaps a jibe at Stalin himself.

The magnificent **third-place slow movement** is as sincere and heartfelt as its predecessor was flippant. Shostakovich once said, "The majority of my symphonies are tombstones," and this may be a requiem for the many Russians who died in the purges. At the Fifth's premiere, audiences wept openly during this music. The strings, divided into many parts, dominate; they seem the voices of communal mourning. In the middle section, solo woodwinds raise their plaintive voices, expressing individual loss. The music reaches a famous climax of pain as the strings rise to a chorus of repeated notes, intensified by sharp stabs from the xylophone. The great Russian soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, Shostakovich's friend and Rostropovich's wife, described this as "like nails being pounded into one's brain."

Now the forgotten brass and percussion race into action to launch the **finale's** resolute march theme. If this is a triumphant conclusion, it is more convincing in its gestures than its spirit. First we hear much frenetic musical busyness, then a poignant reminiscence of the third movement's sorrow. Music of Slavic grandeur recalls the Coronation Scene in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. At the end, disturbing the proudly pounding timpani and pealing brass are those obsessively painful repeated notes that have dogged the entire work. "Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing."

Notes by Janet E. Bedell copyright 2010