

Program notes
October 2023 concert
TPO

In the Steppes of Central Asia by Alexander Borodin (1880)

Alexander Porfiryevich Borodin was born in St. Petersburg on November 12th in 1833. He was the illegitimate son of the Georgian Prince Gedeonov and his 24 year old mistress Madame Antonova, and for the sake of his father's reputation was registered as the son of Porfiri Borodin, one of the household servants. He showed considerable diverse talents as a youth speaking several languages, and learning the flute, piano and cello. At the age of nine he wrote his first musical composition: a piano duet. In 1850 at the age of 17, he entered the Medico-Surgical Academy at St. Petersburg, where he studied anatomy, botany, chemistry, crystallography and zoology. He developed both his interests in music and chemistry, and qualified in medicine in 1856. On graduation he spent a year as a house surgeon in a military hospital, followed by three years of more advanced scientific studies in western Europe specializing in chemistry.

Throughout his life music was subordinate to his research and lecturing at the Academy in St Petersburg. He never had enough time for composing and he joked that his musical friends wished he were chronically sick, since he worked in his laboratory when healthy and wrote music only when ill. He became part of a group of composers known as the "Mighty Handful". They were pioneers of a new nationalistic approach to Russian music favoring folk idioms and simple lyrical beauty and opposing the cerebral approach of Wagner and the other contemporary German composers.

In the Steppes of Central Asia was intended to be one of a set of tableaux vivants to celebrate the silver anniversary of the reign of Alexander II of Russia. In the event it was the only piece completed. At the time of its composition the Russian Empire had grown to its largest extent, stretching from the Baltic and the Black sea over to the Pacific Ocean. The nationalist movement in the arts depicted the Russians as bringing peace, civilization and prosperity to the empire. Borodin's piece is a particularly good example of this idealistic standpoint.

He wrote:

"In the silence of the monotonous steppes of central Asia is heard the unfamiliar sound of a peaceful Russian song. From the distance we hear the approach of horses and camels and the bizarre and melancholy notes of an oriental melody. A caravan approaches, escorted by Russian soldiers, and continues safely on its way through the immense desert. It disappears slowly. The notes of the Russian and Asiatic melodies join in a common harmony, which dies away as the caravan disappears in the distance."

The vastness of the Steppes is depicted by a high harmonic note on the violins, which persists through most of the piece. The Russian theme is heard first on the clarinets, then on the horns. The oriental theme is played first by the Cor Anglaise - an instrument often used by Russian composers to symbolize the exotic east. The work was first performed on the 8th April 1880 in St. Petersburg and was conducted by Borodin's close friend Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov. From then on it has remained a popular work in the concert repertoire.

Clarinet Concerto No. 1 in f minor by Carl Maria von Weber (1811)

Carl Maria von Weber is widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of German romantic music. Although now primarily remembered for his development of romantic opera, he was also a prolific composer for the concert hall, writing major concertos for bassoon, clarinet and horn, each skillfully exploiting the full potential of the instruments. Although single reed instruments were known throughout the medieval and baroque periods of European music, the clarinet in its modern form did not evolve until the second half of the eighteenth century. By Mozart's time it had eight finger holes and five keys which enabled the player to play chromatic scales with good intonation and consistent tone. With the success of Mozart's Paris and Haffner symphonies it soon became an established member of the symphony orchestra.

Weber came to know the clarinet through the playing of Heinrich Baermann (1784-1847) and admired his evenness of tone from the top to the bottom of the instrument. The two musicians worked together, going on tours through Austria and Germany. Weber wrote a concertino for Baermann early in 1811, for a performance in Munich which was attended by King Maximilian I of Bavaria. The King was so impressed that he immediately commissioned Weber to write his two clarinet concertos. The first was completed in one month, and performed shortly after. The concerto is in a conventional three movement form. The first is a dramatic stormy piece with furious orchestral tutti contrasted with more reflective passages for the solo clarinet, and combined passages where the soloist plays brilliant virtuosic material above secondary themes in the orchestra. The movement ends quietly and mysteriously.

The second movement is a complete contrast. It is an adagio with a beautiful gently lyrical melody played by the soloist over a simple orchestral accompaniment. A more dramatic central section disturbs the mood of tranquility, but only for a short while. It is followed by a passage of remarkable beauty for the soloist and horns. The first idea is restated before the soloist and horns bring the movement to a gentle close.

The final movement is a lively rondo with plenty of virtuosic work for the soloist. The episodes provide interesting contrasts. The first is in a minor key slightly recalling the turbulent first movement. The second contains a delightful exchange between the oboe and the soloist. The work concludes in a lively optimistic mood.

Appalachian Spring Suite by Copland (1945)

Aaron Copland was born on the 4th November 1900 in New York City, of Lithuanian Jewish descent. He was brought up in a flat above his father's Brooklyn store in a family of enthusiastic amateur musicians. His composition career began at the age of 15 with a correspondence course on harmony writing, but only really took flight at the age of 21 when he went to the Fontainebleau school to study with the famous Nadia Boulanger. His first major work was a Symphony for Organ and Orchestra, and was dedicated to her.

Copland's compositions are typical of the musical melting pot of America in the twentieth century. They use folk and jazz idioms, percussive orchestration, changing meter, polyrhythms, polychords, and the tone rows of Schoenberg. He gained great popularity in the 1930s and 1940s by combining these elements in a simple easy to understand musical language. His later works were often more radical and less popular.

Copland stopped composing in 1970, though he continued to lecture and conduct through the 1980s. In 1986, he was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal for "creating a uniquely American style of composition". He died on the 2nd December 1990 in Tarrytown, New York, after suffering from Alzheimer's disease for several years.

Appalachian Spring was originally called "Ballet for Martha" and was scored for a chamber orchestra of 13 players. It was commissioned by the choreographer and dancer Martha Graham who danced in the premiere which took place on Monday 30th October 1944, at the Library of

Congress in Washington DC. The name Appalachian Spring was suggested by Martha Graham shortly before the premiere and alludes to a poem by Hart Crane:

O Appalachian Spring! I gained the ledge;
Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends
And northward reaches in that violet wedge
Of Adirondacks!

The phrase in the poem is a metaphor for inspiration, and bears no relation to the story of the ballet. Copland found great amusement from the critics who credited him with "capturing the beauty of the Appalachians", and who thought that "Spring" referred to the season rather than a source of water. In 1945, Copland made an orchestral suite from the original ballet, containing most of its music. This later version was to become one of his most popular works. The ballet is set in Pennsylvania in the 1800s, and describes a newlywed couple, their neighbors, a revivalist preacher and his followers. The orchestral version is divided into eight parts as follows.

1. Very slowly: Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.
2. Allegro: A sudden burst of unison strings in A major evokes a scene of religious elation.
3. Moderato: A dance for the bride and her fiancée full of tenderness and passion.
4. Quite fast: A description of the revivalist and his congregation in a country folk idiom.
5. Presto: A solo dance for the bride expressing extremes of joy, fear and wonder.
6. Very slowly: A brief reminder of the opening section.
7. Calm and flowing: Scenes of daily activity for the bride and her farmer husband. This is a set of five variations on a shaker song called "Simple Gifts". (The shakers are a Christian group who believe that God is found within the self, rather than through clergy or rituals.) Copland had come across the tune in a collection of shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and found that it perfectly matched "the kind of austere movements associated with Graham's choreography." Since the composition of Appalachian Spring the melody has become highly popular and has appeared in many popular arrangements.
8. Moderato: The newlyweds are seen "quiet and strong in their new house." Muted strings intone a hushed prayer-like chorale passage.

The Moldau from *Má vlast* (My Fatherland) by Smetana (1874)

Bedrich Smetana (1824-84) was a Czech composer and conductor, and wrote the symphonic poem *Má Vlast* (My Fatherland) in 1874. Smetana was well-known for his nationalistic compositions, and was best known for the following two nationalistic works: *The Bartered Bride*, an opera, and *Má Vlast*, a cycle of six symphonic poems. Smetana was born in a small town in Bohemia (known today as the Czech Republic), the seventh child of a wealthy brewer (his father was also an amateur violinist). Smetana played the violin and piano from an early age, and began composing when he was eight.

Smetana studied music composition with Josef Proksch in Prague from 1843-47 (Proksch was noted for his progressive style of teaching, and was the founder of a Prague music school called *Musikbildungsanstalt*). In addition to being a composer and a strong supporter of nationalistic Czech music, Smetana was a conductor, pianist and teacher. For over

twenty years, he supported his family by teaching music, including a six year stay in Sweden, where he composed, conducted and taught. Smetana's orchestral music, particularly his symphonic poems, were influenced by Liszt (while living abroad, Smetana was befriended by Liszt).

In 1866, Smetana was appointed the conductor of Prague's Provisional Theatre, and while there, he was able to include the works of many Czech artists in the repertory played by the orchestra. Operas were also performed at the Provisional Theatre, including some by Smetana (most of his operas had a nationalistic theme and used the Czech language). Out of the eight operas Smetana completed, his most successful was *The Bartered Bride*, an opera based on folk material and Bohemian legends. Smetana also composed songs, music for orchestra and chamber ensembles, and music for piano. Many of his works were programmatic with a nationalistic theme.

Like Beethoven, Smetana became deaf towards the end of his life. He continued to compose during this time, and wrote two string quartets, his last three operas, and completed *Má Vlast*, a cycle of six symphonic poems. A symphonic poem (also known as a tone poem) is a programmatic orchestral work that expresses extra musical ideas such as emotions, scenes or events through the music. *Má Vlast* is an example of nationalistic music and program music, and represents Smetana's deep love for his country. Smetana employed programmatic elements in *Má Vlast* to evoke the beauty of the country, legends of the past, and great moments in Bohemian history.