

Program Notes

Siegfried Idyll

Richard Wagner

Imagine the following scenario: you've just given birth to your first son (gentlemen, you'll have to use some extra imagination) and it's the morning of your birthday, which also happens to be Christmas Eve. You awaken in your villa that sits on the banks of Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, to beautiful original music being played by a chamber orchestra at the foot of your steps. This is exactly what happened to Cosima Wagner in 1870 when her husband, Richard, surprised her both in honor of the birth of their first son and her birthday.

Today, what was written as a private gesture from husband to wife has become Wagner's most played non-operatic work. Wagner did give a detailed program with the piece that describes a mother singing a boy to sleep and then contemplating what her son will become as he becomes a young man. The work captures the beautiful effect of dreams yet to be realized by combining themes from Wagner's *Ring* cycle with a German lullaby that sings, "Sleep, Baby, Sleep." (It is our hope that you are not put to sleep.)

Hamlet – Suite for small symphony orchestra

Dmitri Shostakovich

The Soviet production of *Hamlet* that Shostakovich wrote his 1932 incidental music for was banned after its first performance. According to the composer it was the "most scandalous production in the history of Shakespeare." The stage director, Akimov, had some funny ideas for this production of *Hamlet*: Hamlet (who wasn't even the main character in this production) was an obese drunken man who made up the story of the ghost to scare his mother and uncle, Ophelia was quite a lady of the night, and the plot was terribly twisted. Predictably, the production was immediately banned and all that has remained is the music that you will hear tonight.

Shostakovich's music matches Akimov's dark ideas for the production. It is parody in every sense of the word: parody of the light in movements like *Ophelia's Song* and the *Feast Music* and parody of the dark with the *Funeral March* and the *Requiem* (utilizing the *Dies Irae*). The suite is a tour de force of ironic farce for Shostakovich.

Adagio for Strings – from String Quartet in B minor

Samuel Barber

Barber's *Adagio for Strings* originated as the second movement to his 1936 String Quartet No. 1, Op. 11. Its place in that quartet should be noted: it comes after a furiously violent first movement and before a short reprise of that same music. The story goes that Barber sent the score to Arturo Toscanini, but it was returned only a few days later without any comment. Barber was annoyed by the gesture but was put at ease when he learned through a friend that Toscanini (who had a notoriously strong memory) had simply already memorized the score and was planning on programming it soon. Toscanini and the NBC orchestra premiered the work on November 5, 1938 in New York.

The work is a landmark in American composition and as such Toscanini's original 1938 world premiere is permanently preserved in the National Recording Registry of the United States Library of Congress. It has worked its way into pop culture as part of the soundtrack to movies like *Platoon*, *The Elephant Man*, and *Amélie*.

Peter and the Wolf

Sergei Prokofiev

Prokofiev's work for children, *Peter and the Wolf*, has become an iconic symbol in classical music. Many adults who now love classical music point to it as their introduction to music and their love for it remains with them.

Prokofiev, growing up in Russia, but leaving to spend time abroad (in Western Europe and the United States) returned to the Soviet Union in 1935. This was not necessarily an easy time for him, being an artist, to do so. The Soviet government had recently formed the 'Composer's Union' and began to change its policies towards artist, limiting their mobility and artistic freedom – essentially isolating them from the rest of the world.

Because of these circumstances, he chose *Peter and the Wolf* as his first composition written back home. He figured the subject matter and the idea that the piece was written in order to mold the “musical tastes in children from the first years of school” was a safe bet in a rather hostile climate. The story, narrated tonight by Ocala’s Basil Bristow, was essentially an old Russian tale but Prokofiev updated it a bit to include Peter as a Soviet *Young Pioneer* (similar to an American Boy Scout) and wrote the text himself.

Unfortunately for Prokofiev the piece was not successful on the first performance for children in 1936. Ironically, a performance just a few days later at a Russian Arts Festival mainly attended by foreign journalists and tourists was a huge success. Already in 1939, just two and half years later, the Boston Symphony Orchestra had recorded it and history was sealed.

Notes by Matthew Wardell