

The incredible beauty of the British coast is dramatically and vividly described in Britten's Four Sea Interludes from his operatic masterpiece Peter Grimes. These depictions of the power of the sea are gripping throughout the opera.

SUZANNE KELLY, NCS VIOLIN

The Oceanides, Op. 73

JEAN SIBELIUS

BORN December 8, 1865, in Hämeenlinna, Finland; died September 20, 1957, in Ainola, Finland

PREMIERE Composed 1913-1914; first performance June 14, 1914, Norfolk Music Festival, Norfolk, Connecticut, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

Most of Jean Sibelius' tone poems were inspired by legends from the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, or from nature. The inspiration for *The Oceanides*, however, came from the ancient Greek poet Hesiod. Personifying springs, the Oceanides were the three thousand daughters of the Titan Oceanus and the sea nymph Tethys.

The work was preceded by two earlier versions: the first, a three-movement suite, is partially lost; the second, a shortened version, was only recently discovered in the Yale Library.

The Oceanides was written on commission for a trip to the United States, and Sibelius conducted the premiere himself.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

A delicate flute ensemble opens this work, above a nervous ostinato in the strings, suggesting a sirens' song. As the pace picks up, the music takes on a dance-like quality.

There is an increasing tension from the darker harmonies and orchestration that characterize the composer's style. It is as if a stormy ocean drowns out the gamboling of the nymphs. An oboe duet signals a quick end to the storm, but the nymphs are definitely more subdued.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion, two harps, strings

Poème for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 25

ERNEST CHAUSSON

BORN January 20, 1855, in Paris; died June 10, 1899, in Limay, France

PREMIERE Composed 1896; first performance December 27, 1896, Nancy Conservatory, Guy Ropartz conducting, with Eugène Ysaÿe as soloist

OVERVIEW

French composer Ernest Chausson was one of the few composers who came from a well-to-do family and was never compelled to work for a living. Perhaps because he never had to test his abilities as a professional musician, he suffered life-long feelings of insecurity and doubt. He was a student of Jules Massenet and César Franck and a friend of Debussy, all of whom influenced his style to some extent, but the strongest influence on his music was his own mysticism and his empathy with the sufferings of humanity. His compositions aim at emotional intensity and poetic expression rather than technical and formal display.

Poème, composed in 1896 for the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, was apparently inspired by a short story by the Russian writer Turgenev, in French translation, *Le chant de l'amour triomphant* ("The Song of Love Triumphant"), which was also *Poème's* original title. But Chausson's temperament was more suitable for the intimate than the epic, and he quickly pared the title down.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Poème's melancholy tone dovetails with Chausson's outlook on life. The composer's "amateur" status permitted him to exercise considerable freedom in handling form and structure. *Poème* is through-composed (with no exact repeats). Although Chausson presents three distinct melodies, most of the work is a free-flowing dialogue between violin and orchestra.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo violin, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, strings

D'un matin de printemps

LILI BOULANGER

BORN August 21, 1893, in Paris, France; died March 15, 1918, in Mézy-sur-Seine, France

PREMIERE Composed 1917-1918; first performance unknown

OVERVIEW

The younger sister of famed teacher, conductor, and composer Nadia Boulanger, Lili (Marie-Juliette Olga) Boulanger was one of the most innovative composers of the early 20th century. At age 19, she was the first woman to win the coveted Prix de Rome.

Unfortunately, a chronic illness cut her life short at age 25. Her songs and choral works, especially her three Psalm settings and Pie Jesu, were widely admired and performed.

Boulanger composed *D'un matin de printemps* ("Of a Spring Morning") in 1917-1918: first for violin and piano, then for orchestra. It was the last composition she completed, composed when she was near death. Its cheerful and lively mood contrasts with her grim personal situation.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion, harp, celesta, strings

Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33a

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

BORN November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft, England; died December 4, 1976, in Aldeburgh, England

PREMIERE Composed 1943-1945; first performance June 7, 1945, Sadler's Wells Theater, Reginald Goodall conducting

OVERVIEW

Growing up during and immediately after the carnage of World War I, Britten was a committed and lifelong pacifist. As World War II loomed, he followed poet W. H. Auden and other pacifists of his group to Canada and the United States, where he remained until 1942. He returned home in the midst of war to do his share for his country's morale, composing scores for concerts, radio dramatizations, and films. In the dreary

post-war atmosphere of 1945, the premiere of his opera *Peter Grimes* was a resounding success, despite its unrelentingly grim story.

Based on a barbarous character from *The Borough* by poet George Crabbe (1754-1832), Grimes is reclusive and driven to achieve success in fishing, a dangerous trade — shunning the close-knit and interdependent community in which he lives. In the opera, he is first seen on trial for the death of his apprentice — who, he claims, died of dehydration as they drifted for days without food or water after a storm. Although he is acquitted, the villagers continue to suspect him of abuse, and the court refuses to allow him to take on another apprentice. The schoolteacher Ellen Orford, however, tries to soften both Grimes' harsh nature and the townspeople's resentment by taking responsibility for the care and safety of a new apprentice. Despite her efforts, Grimes beats the new boy — a marvelous silent part for a boy actor. As his hut is surrounded by a mob of indignant villagers, Grimes forces the boy to escape with him to his boat, but the boy stumbles and falls down the cliff to his death. Grimes himself escapes out to sea, sinks his boat, and drowns.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Britten composed six interludes to facilitate scenery changes between scenes and acts. The interludes act as orchestral mirrors of the stage drama, crystallizing in pure sound the unfolding disaster. He assembled the Four Sea Interludes shortly after finishing the opera; their order, however, does not follow that of the opera but its own musical logic.

Dawn: Coming between the Prologue and Act I, this is a much bleaker view of the ocean at dawn than Debussy ever imagined in *La Mer*. The initial calm overlies an ominous swelling of the waves.

Sunday Morning: The opening of Act II, this interlude depicts a Sunday morning in Grimes' village. A brass choir imitates the church bells and later a high woodwind choir

portrays the faster bells. Included in this interlude is an orchestral version of Ellen's aria that opens the act.

Moonlight: The pulsing, brooding theme that opens Act III foreshadows the defeat of Grimes' plans and dreams.

Storm: This interlude occurs between the two scenes of Act I. It begins with the furious physical storm, morphing into Grimes' psychological turmoil, where violence lashes out against loneliness and hopelessness. His brooding is drowned by the increasing fury of the storm.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two piccolos, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, strings

La Mer

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

BORN August 22, 1862, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France; died March 25, 1918, in Paris

PREMIERE Composed 1903-1905; first performance October 15, 1905, Paris, with the Orchestre Lamoureux, Camille Chevillard conducting

OVERVIEW

"Perhaps you do not know that I was destined for the fine life of a sailor and that it was only by chance that I was led away from it. But I still have a great passion for it," Claude Debussy wrote to a friend at the time he began work on *La Mer* in 1903. Shortly before the premiere in 1905, he commented to his publisher: "The sea has been very good to me. She has shown me all her moods." Ironically, Debussy composed most of *La Mer* far

from the sea, in the hills of Burgundy, believing that countless recollections were worth more than “a reality whose charm generally weighs too heavily.”

The sea itself was not his only inspiration. Together with many late-19th-century painters, Debussy greatly admired Japanese art, especially the prints and drawings of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). One print in particular, *The Hollow Wave off Kanagawa*, portrays three boats and their terrified crews almost swallowed by a giant wave, the curve of the wave breaking into spray and foam. Debussy chose the detail of the wave as a cover for the score of *La Mer*.

The three movements of *La Mer* are titled Symphonic Sketches. There are numerous memorable melodic motives, which appear in more than one movement; like the sea itself, there is an unpredictable quality in how Debussy uses them.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first sketch, “From Dawn to Noon on the Sea,” opens with a gentle murmur on the strings and harp, portraying the usual early morning calm, eventually joined by the woodwinds. As the sea gradually awakens, flexing its immense power, the brass introduce a melodic motto that will recur at the end. Imitating the interplay of sunlight and waves, fragments of melody reappear with constant shifts of rhythm and orchestral color, reflecting the irregularity of the water’s surface. Near the end, a chorale evokes the splendor of the midday sun.

The second sketch, “Play of the Waves,” tosses musical fragments around until, hesitantly, the wind and the motion of the waves picks up. The water becomes choppy before subsiding again into calm playfulness, then gradually fading away. The many solos in this movement illustrate the infinite variety of the waves. Its principal musical theme is a trill motive in the woodwinds.

“Dialogue of Wind and Sea” is by far the most turbulent of the three sketches. The approaching storm growls ominously, growing in strength, then subsiding — as if

the music lingers in the eye of the storm. Slowly the violence picks up again — but Debussy’s storm, while powerful, is never a force-five gale. The main theme in this section is a surging motive in the oboes, but the movement repeats and transforms melodies from the first movement as well.

La Mer initiated a change in Debussy’s style from the shimmering, melodically and structurally amorphous “symbolist” style epitomized in his opera *Péléas and Mélisande* to the more conventional one that seemed to its critics less immediately evocative of nature. There erupted around the composer a rash of polemical articles, and even a book published in 1910: *Le cas Debussy* (“The Debussy Case”). Today, the arguments are of only minor interest, but the fact that critics and the public could get so exercised over a matter of musical style continued a centuries-long tradition in French aesthetics.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

© 2019 Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn