

The Roussel Bacchus & Ariadne ballet has some of the most beautiful and exciting music ever written for orchestra. Yet it is rarely played, so I'm very happy for our audiences to get to hear it!

PAUL RANDALL, NCS PRINCIPAL TRUMPET
THE GEORGE SMEDES POYNER CHAIR

Roman Carnival Overture, Op. 9

HECTOR BERLIOZ

BORN December 11, 1803, in La Côte Saint André; died March 8, 1869, in Paris

PREMIERE Composed 1843; first performance February 3, 1844, at the Salle Herz in Paris

THE STORY

Hector Berlioz was a gifted and innovative orchestrator. He freed the brass from its role as mere accompaniment, making it the equal of the other orchestral sections. He experimented with new instruments, such as the bass clarinet and the valve trumpet. And he virtually put the English horn on the map as the solo instrument par excellence for conveying musical melancholy. He was equally innovative in musical form and in stretching the limits of classical tonal harmony.

But one of Berlioz's great fiascoes was his opera *Benvenuto Cellini*. A brilliant musical score could not hide an impossible libretto with fatal dramatic flaws. The premiere at the Paris Opera in 1838 survived for just three performances and an attempt at a revival a few years later failed as well. Only its lively overture, using themes from the opera, has survived in the repertoire.

Never one to waste good music, six years later Berlioz took two of the most fetching musical segments of Act I of the opera and fashioned from them the *Roman*

Carnival Overture, originally meant as the introduction to the opera's second act. In contrast to the opera, the premiere of the overture, under the composer's baton, was an instant success and had to be encored.

LISTENING TIPS

This overture is an orchestral showpiece beloved by orchestra players, especially the brass. Berlioz took the gentle love duet between Benvenuto Cellini and Teresa, here played by the English horn, and pitted it against the irresistible choral carnival scene with its *saltarello* dance rhythm. The dance becomes wilder and wilder as the overture progresses. Only in the last few bars, with brilliant and unpredictable brass, did Berlioz digress significantly from the opera theme.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, timpani, percussion, strings

Piano Concerto in G Major

MAURICE RAVEL

BORN March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, France; died December 28, 1937, in Paris

PREMIERE Composed 1929-1931; first performance January 14, 1932, by the Lamoureux Orchestra, conducted by the composer with Marguerite Long as soloist

THE STORY

In the annals of classical composers, Maurice Ravel was in a lucky minority. Born into a cultured middle-class family, he is one of the few composers — along with Mozart and

Mendelssohn — whose parents encouraged his professional musical ambitions from the start. From the time Ravel turned seven, his father provided him with the best private musical instruction; at 12, he went on to the preparatory school for the Paris Conservatory, graduating into the regular course of study at 14. In a surprisingly single-minded manner, the youthful Ravel marched to his own drummer in terms of his musical language. He could not — or would not — conform to the rigorous, and by then dated, strictures of the Paris Conservatory. Repeatedly, composition prizes were awarded to other young composers, who have now pretty much lapsed into oblivion.

In 1929, Ravel began work on the Piano Concerto in G Major at the same time as the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand (commissioned by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in World War I). At the time of its conception, Ravel intended the G-major concerto for his own use. But by the time he completed it in 1931, his health was not up to the physical rigors of practicing. French pianist Marguerite Long played the premiere with the composer conducting and the two recorded the concerto soon after in January 1932 — a performance now reissued on CD.

LISTENING TIPS

First movement: Because of the concerto's light-hearted mood, Ravel originally wanted to call it a "*divertissement*." It opens with a crack of the whip, or slapstick, followed by a perky tune on the piccolo, which is taken over by a trumpet solo, all the time accompanied by gossamer arpeggios on the piano. In an exaggeration of the convention of a contrasting second theme, Ravel switches into a languid blues style making use of a short jazz refrain for the clarinet, which he appends as a cadence figure throughout the movement. While the piano, with its jazzy, syncopated rhythm, is clearly the dominant instrument, Ravel provides abundant solo opportunities for the orchestral instruments, especially the winds.

Second movement: According to Ravel, he modeled the graceful slow movement *Adagio* on the *Larghetto* from Mozart's Clarinet Quintet. It opens with a long piano solo, an "unending melody," resolving only after many bars into the orchestral part. Ironically, the seemingly easy and natural spinning out of the melody, with its inherent tension born of delayed resolution, belies the difficulties the composer had with it: Ravel said he pieced it together bar by bar.

Third movement: The dazzling Presto finale is a virtuoso piece for the soloist, the drumming of repeated notes suggestive of a Baroque toccata. But this is no Baroque imitation, punctuated as it is by jazz riffs for solo winds and "blue notes."

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, flute, piccolo, oboe, English horn, clarinet, E-flat clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

"I Got Rhythm" Variations

GEORGE GERSHWIN

BORN September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn; died July 11, 1937, in Los Angeles

PREMIERE Composed 1933-1934; first performance January 14, 1934, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Charles Previn conducting with the composer as soloist

THE STORY

George Gershwin was the first American composer to make jazz acceptable to the classical music audience in America. The son of poor Jewish immigrants in lower Manhattan, he was a natural-born pianist and left school at 16 to play with a Tin-Pan Alley firm, plugging their new songs.

He soon commenced writing songs himself, eventually teaming up with his brother Ira as lyricist to become one of the most successful teams of song and musical comedy writers on Broadway. The brothers mounted a string of hit musicals from *Lady Be Good* in December 1924 to *Let 'em Eat Cake* in October 1933. The opening night of a George Gershwin musical comedy was a social and media event, with Gershwin himself usually leading the orchestra.

Composed in 1930, *Girl Crazy* served as the stage debut of Ethel Merman and contained one of Gershwin's most memorable songs, "I Got Rhythm." The song was also one of Gershwin's favorites, and when drifting to the piano at parties, he inevitably played it. In 1933, while in one of his stretches of studying classical music composition, he wrote the variations on "I Got Rhythm" and orchestrated them, dedicating the work to Ira.

LISTENING TIPS

Gershwin's oral program notes — recorded and broadcast over the air in the folksy radio style of the period — can't be surpassed:

"Good evening. This is George Gershwin speaking...now I'm going to play you my latest composition that I wrote a few months ago down in Palm Beach, Florida. This is a composition in the form of variations on a tune, and the tune is 'I Got Rhythm.'

"I think you might be interested to hear about a few of the variations we are going to play. After an introduction by the orchestra the piano plays a theme rather simply. The first variation is a very complicated rhythmic pattern played by the piano while the orchestra fits in the tune.

"The next variation is in waltz time, and the third is a Chinese variation in which I imitate Chinese flutes that play out of tune as they always are. Next the piano plays a rhythmic variation in which the left hand plays the melody upside

down while the right hand plays it first, on the theory that we shouldn't let one hand know what the other is doing. Then comes the finale.

“Now after all this information about variations on ‘I Got Rhythm,’ how about hearing it.”

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo piano, one flute (doubling piccolo), one oboe, (doubling English horn), three clarinets, bass clarinet, two alto saxophones (each doubling soprano saxophone), tenor saxophone (doubling soprano saxophone), baritone saxophone, one bassoon, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, strings

Suite No. 2 from *Bacchus and Ariadne*, Op. 43

ALBERT ROUSSEL

BORN April 5, 1869, in Tourcoing, France; died August 23, 1937, in Royan, France

PREMIERE Composed 1931; first performance of Suite No. 2 February 2, 1934, at the Salle Pleyel, Pierre Monteux conducting

THE STORY

While many composers owed their careers to the early support and teaching of a close family member, Albert Roussel was orphaned by the age of ten and continually shifted to the care of other family members. Born into a wealthy family of manufacturers of home decorating textiles, he showed early musical talent but also loved the sea, finally deciding on a naval career. He graduated in 1889 and served the navy for five years, mostly in North Africa and Indochina. While on shipboard, he wrote his first composition, *Fantasie* for violin and piano, and some short pieces reflecting an interest in Indian music that remained with him throughout his career. In 1894, he resigned his

commission in order to pursue his interest in music — a career change enabled by his inherited wealth.

A student of Vincent d'Indy, he took over his teacher's counterpoint classes from 1902 to 1914, where he taught future composers as divergent as Eric Satie and Edgar Varèse. World War I interrupted the composition of two of his major works, the ballet *Le Festin de l'araignée* (The Spider's Banquet) and the opera *Padmâvatî*, based on a Hindu legend. With the end of the war, he began to “modernize” his style, producing a variety of orchestral, operatic, ballet, and chamber works that brought him international recognition.

The ballet *Bacchus and Ariadne*, composed in 1930, tells the story of Theseus' landing on Naxos, after rescuing Ariadne from the Minotaur in the Labyrinth. The god Bacchus appears and abducts the sleeping Ariadne, beginning a passionate dance around her sleeping body. When she awakens alone, she sees Theseus' departing ship and in panic, flings herself into the sea, but lands in the arms of Bacchus instead. He kisses her and the whole island around them is transformed. In the end, Bacchus leads her to the top of the mountain, crowning her with stars.

LISTENING TIPS

Roussel extracted two orchestral suites from the ballet, each encompassing the music of one of the two acts. Suite No. 2 opens with a viola solo portraying Ariadne's awakening, followed by Bacchus' dance, the dramatic kiss, and *pas de deux*. It concludes with the expected bacchanal and Ariadne's coronation. The suite progresses without pause, so it is important to use your imagination to follow the trajectory of the story. Note, however, that the sections involving the god are always — well — Bacchic.

INSTRUMENTATION

Two flutes (one doubling piccolo), piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, two harps, strings

An American in Paris

GEORGE GERSHWIN

BORN September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn; died July 11, 1937, in Los Angeles

PREMIERE Composed 1928; first performance December 13, 1928, by the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall, Walter Damrosch conducting

THE STORY

Gershwin composed *An American in Paris* in 1928 on a commission from the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York. It is a jazz-based tone poem inspired by the composer's trip to France, where he attempted to study with, among others, Maurice Ravel and Igor Stravinsky. Both declined, with Ravel saying, "Why be a second-rate Ravel when you are a first-rate Gershwin?"

An American in Paris has had a strong influence on a certain type of American music. (Leonard Bernstein's musical *On the Town* is an expanded version chronicling a day in the lives of two American sailors on leave in New York during World War II.) Gershwin's hustle-bustle evocation of busy Parisian life has been used so often in film scores, TV, and advertising that it has become iconic "city" music.

LISTENING TIPS

The work captures the sound and spirit of post-World War I Paris, where such American bohemians as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway — and their fictional characters — went to lose (and rediscover) themselves.

According to the composer, “The piece is really a rhapsodic ballet, written very freely ... to portray the impressions of an American visitor as he strolls around the city ... the individual listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him.” For the program book at the premiere, with Gershwin’s approval, composer Deems Taylor wrote a different scenario involving a detailed description of the tourist’s day adrift in the City of Light, proving that the music came first, the explanation later.

One of the work’s best-known effects is its taxi-horn blows; to add authenticity to the sound, Gershwin purchased Parisian taxi horns for the New York premiere.

INSTRUMENTATION

Three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, baritone saxophone, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, strings

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