



Cheyenne  
Symphony  
Orchestra

Masterpiece 5 – *Sun, Moon & Stars*

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**Overture to *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*), WWV 63—Richard Wagner**

The works of Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi together largely dominated the important world of nineteenth-century opera. But the two could not have been more different in almost every regard—save that of musical excellence. Verdi built simply upon the traditional elements of Italian opera and took them to new heights of dramatic artistry and coherence, gradually incorporating some progressive reforms of the medium as he grew into old age. Wagner, on the other hand, after his early attempts, and some real successes thereafter, embarked upon an unprecedented, new theoretical thrust in opera composition that changed forever the history of music. While Verdi had long Italian tradition to draw upon, Wagner took upon himself to build upon Carl Maria von Weber’s seminal work, *Der Freischütz* (1823), and create a German romantic opera tradition, more or less from scratch. To be sure, his time in Paris as a young man exposed him to the French grand operas of Meyerbeer and others, and they played an important part in his development, notwithstanding his later contempt for, and denial of that obvious fact. Wagner is the poster boy for great artists who are reprehensible human beings. His notorious antisemiticism—especially towards Meyerbeer, to whom he owed much—was only one of his moral failings. The Nazi Party famously made hay with that.

After completing his two early operas—now of historical interest only—in 1837 he took a position with the opera company in Riga. With his new bride, Minna, during his time there he compounded his earlier bankruptcy with even greater debts, a lifelong problem. Their passports were confiscated, and their solution was simply to sneak out of town with their giant Newfoundland dog, Robber, leaving their creditors in the lurch. They fled by ship in 1839, across the Baltic and North Seas, during which tumultuous storms battered their ship, and which seem to be the inspiration for the first of his middle period operas, *The Flying Dutchman*. The couple soon found themselves in Paris for a few years, and there he completed *The Flying Dutchman* and *Rienzi*. And, of course, in the meantime, more poverty and indebtedness ensued.

The story of *The Flying Dutchman* finds its origin in Heinrich Heine’s version of the legend, in an 1833 novel. A simple tale, it is the story of a blasphemous sea captain who is doomed to spend eternity sailing the seas for invoking the Devil. Somewhat enigmatically, he can only be released from his fate by the love of a virtuous, faithful woman. We’ll ignore the complex gender issues implied by that. And so, he gets a chance once every seven years to go ashore and find such a woman. There are few roles in the opera; the three principal ones are “The Flying Dutchman,” his paramour, Senta, and her previous lover, Erik.

The Flying Dutchman bribes Senta’s father for her hand, and he agrees. She falls for him and all seems well. But, after The Flying Dutchman mistakenly assumes that Senta will return to Erik, he sails off in despair, Senta throws herself into the sea and drowns—in equal despair at his departure, and the opera ends with the both of them

ascending in heaven. Her faithfulness to death by suicide has redeemed him, a truly nineteenth-century romantic opera dénouement.

The overture was composed after the opera was complete and is largely comprised of musical elements from the opera proper. The principal ingredients are the inimitable, deft depictions of oceanic storms; the dramatic fanfare-like theme of the “Flying Dutchman,” himself; the soft, tender music of Senta, and the jolly Norwegian sailor’s chorus. *The Flying Dutchman* is the first of Wagner’s works to have found a secure place in the repertory and displays many of the elements that would go on to distinguish his contributions to music drama, as well as the larger musical world. But its audiences today inevitably enjoy and focus on his adroit evocation of the ocean’s stormy seas. That musical depiction has gone on in innumerable dramatic references, and we rather expect it even in today’s movie scores. But, Wagner was first.

### **“Un bel di, vedremo” from *Madame Butterfly*—Giacomo Puccini**

Verdi, Mozart, and Puccini are the triumvirate of surely the most beloved opera composers of all time. And *Madame Butterfly* is by most accounts on the top ten listed of most frequently performed operas. It, and Puccini’s other three evergreen works—*La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Turandot*—are all central to the operatic repertoire.

Giacomo Puccini was born in 1858 in Lucca, Italy to a family long established in church music. They were a family of composers, with a few operas to their credit. Young Giacomo received a substantial musical education, first at the local music school, and then at the Milan Conservatory. After graduation he soon achieved success as a budding young composer. An opera was suggested, and his first work was of sufficient quality to be performed at La Scala in Milan. That led to a second, better known work, *Edgar*. It had a checkered reception, even with copious revisions. His third opera, *Manon Lescaut* (1893) was his first big success, and of course, has remained an opera favorite. That year was the date of Verdi’s last opera, the masterpiece, *Falstaff*, and it seems a propitious passing of the baton between Italian operatic geniuses. The next ten years saw the composition of three of his “big four,” culminating in 1904 with *Madame Butterfly*. The previous opera, *Tosca* (1900) was his first in what is known in opera parlance, *verismo*. That style, which loosely means “true,” became associated with important Italian opera composers of the time, including Giordano, Leoncavallo, Mascagni, and Puccini. Stemming from an Italian literary movement, it sought to address a greater naturalism in its subject matter, including the poor, the seamier side of life, even violence. There’s more, but that is the essence, and *Madame Butterfly* continued that atmosphere.

The story of *Madame Butterfly*, originally part of a novel, then a short story, and subsequently a New York play in 1900—which Puccini saw in London. The libretto appealed for its dark tragedy and the worldwide fascination with “orientalism” that swept all the arts at the *fin-de-siècle*. But, things did not go well at first. The première was a disaster, and Puccini ended up by writing five different revisions. It nevertheless soon was a smash hit, garnering performances all over the world in the elite opera houses, including at the Metropolitan in New York City with Caruso and in Buenos Aires with Toscanini.

The story is a simple one of infatuation, hopeless dreams, betrayal, and profound, deadly cultural differences. Pinkerton, the dastardly American naval officer, marries the very young, naïve Cio-Cio-San (Japanese for butterfly), intending to divorce her easily as

soon as he finds a suitable American wife. Soon after the wedding night he leaves for America, leaving behind Butterfly expecting their child. Three years go by, Butterfly forlornly awaiting Pinkerton. Attempts are made to dissuade her from her hope that he will return. But, *mirabilis dictu*, he does—but with his American wife. A profound coward, he can't face Butterfly, leaving others to tell her of his cruel deceit. Crushed, she agrees to give the child to the American couple if her beloved Pinkerton will just come to see her. She bids goodbye to child, blindfolds him, pitifully putting a little American flag in his hands. She then exits and commits ritual suicide in traditional Japanese fashion. Pinkerton comes to see her, but of course, it's too late in every respect.

A dismal tale, sordid and tragic. “Un bel di, vedremo” (One fine day we shall see) is sung by Butterfly at the beginning of the second act. In it, despite the convictions of others, she dreams of Pinkerton's long-awaited return. She vividly imagines a thin wisp of smoke that will herald the arrival of his ship. And lo, in her fantasy he does arrive, to her unimaginable joy. But in the reality, the dénouement is devastatingly otherwise.

### ***We Seven*—Derek Jenkins**

Jenkins is a young composer whose primary focus has been music for bands, although he has written a body of chamber music, as well. His compositions have been widely popular in the band and wind ensemble world, garnering him numerous prizes and broad recognition. A recipient of degrees from the University of Missouri-Kansas City and Rice University, he presently is a member of the music faculty at Arkansas State University.

*We Seven* was commissioned by Joseph Parisi and the University of Missouri-Kansas City Wind Ensemble, and received its première in 2014. In addition to the wind ensemble version, there is also an arrangement for brass band; the version for symphony orchestra receives its première tonight with the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra. The work was conceived as a tribute to the well-known early efforts of the United States in the space race, Project Mercury, upon the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its completion in 1963. It takes its name from the title of a contemporary book written by the seven original astronauts.

There two aspects of the work that are rather unusual, one being the generation of musical motifs from cryptograms that “encode” the astronaut's names and initials. Musical cryptograms have a long history on the periphery of the history of music and have been generated by a number of esoteric methods. Generally, the musical notes of the scale have been put into matrices that associate them either with numbers or other notes of the scale. Perhaps, the most famous of them is Bach's generation of a short melodic motif—Bb A C H (H is B natural in Germany)—from the letters of his name. (There's even a vintage short clip on YouTube of a group of jazz musicians creating a boogie-woogie tune based on that). Historically there have many complex schemes for the kinds of codes that can produce cryptograms. Sometimes, a text or name is generated with specific solfège syllables. But the intent is the same: generating musical ideas (or hiding them!) by recondite means. So, in *We Seven*, abandon hopes of hearing an obvious allusion to an astronaut's name or initials. Like so many aspects of musical composition over the centuries, it's a device part of the composer's private aesthetic, technique, and pleasure—not the audience's.

The other rather usual aspect of *We Seven* is the quotation of bits of Puccini's great aria, "Un bel di, vedremo" from *Madame Butterfly* near the middle of the composition. If you are at all familiar with the opera, you'll hear it! Apparently, John Glenn would relax from intense preparations for the missions by listening the opera. So, it became part of the mix of musical elements.

*We Seven* opens with the lightest of gossamer-like textures in the highest register—completely appropriate for our idea of musical metaphors for outer space. Gradually, the texture thickens as more instruments enter, lower and lower. Aphoristic fragments of intervals bounce around as everything becomes denser. The "high altitude" chattering is gradually joined by a sonorous, low foundation that sounds almost like something tonal. After the resumption of the high atmospherics, we hear in the lower instruments fragmented allusions to "Un bel di," which gradually become more powerful and strident. And lo, the attractive, but nonetheless dissonant clusters give way to broader, richer, less dissonant sonorities that gradually subdue. As it all winds down, various short melodic motifs are traded around—and this brief rumination on early experiences by the "Mercury Seven" is over—ending with a sonorous grand peroration that gradually dissipates.

### **"Song to the Moon" from *Rusalka*—Antonín Dvořák**

Dvořák is the preeminent Czech composer of the nineteenth century, and perhaps of all of his successors, as well. This is no small achievement, considering the number of great musicians--Mozart, for example—who thought of Bohemia as the most musical country in Europe. Even today, one can hardly get on a streetcar in Prague without stepping around a double bass. Americans today, if they think of Czech music at all, other than two works by Smetana, it is of the music of Dvořák. They know little of the other composers of the incredible musical wealth of Bohemia—including Fibich, Ostrčil, Janáček, Foerster, Hába, and Martinů—just to name a few. Dvořák is merely "first among equals" in the history of Czech music, and many more of the compositions of "the conservatory of Europe" need to reach our own concert stages.

Dvořák owed his initial recognition to Johannes Brahms, who encountered his music somewhat early in Dvořák's career, and saw to it that he was enabled to spend time in Vienna for further study. While Dvořák's fundamental stylistic orientation is similar to the older composer in its classical restraint and dedication to traditional forms and procedures, his compositions are unmistakably Czech in myriad subtle ways. Turns of harmony, melody, and rhythm firmly establish Dvořák's ethnicity, even within the disciplined tradition of musical composition leading back to, say, Beethoven. Like Brahms, Dvořák wrote stunningly well in the genres of string quartets, sonatas, and symphonies. But unlike Brahms, he also wrote tone poems, and was an active and successful opera composer, composing eleven works for the stage. Opera was a central focus of Dvořák, and he saw it as the primary means of expressing nationalist musical aspirations. Cherished by the Czechs, his operas find only rare performances outside of the Czech Republic—that is, with the exception of his beloved *Rusalka*, performed frequently, all over the world.

The ninth opera of Dvořák, it was composed in 1901, and is based upon a familiar story from many cultures—the hopeless love between a human and a young woman from a different physical world. Everyone is familiar with Hans Christian Andersen's *The*

*Little Mermaid*, ubiquitous in American culture today. There are many other variants as well, including *Ondine* (made into a Broadway play in 1954, starring a young Audrey Hepburn).

In Dvořák's opera, the title character, Rusalka, is a water sprite, or nymph, who lives in a woodland lake. Her father, the water goblin, Vodník, reigns over the lake, and she tells him of her love for a human prince who frequents the forest. As in all the versions of the story, she wants to become human and become his lover. Naturally, as a father, he futilely tries to dissuade her, but directs her to a witch who may help the transformation. The witch can affect that end, but, of course, there are fatal complications. Failing to gain the love of the prince will result in his death and her eternal damnation. So, with the stakes high, she pours out her ardor and hopes in the universally admired aria, "Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém" (Song to the Moon).

### ***Helios Overture, op. 17—Carl Nielsen***

Carl Nielsen is now acknowledged as Denmark's most distinguished composer, and more than deserving to take his place with Grieg and Sibelius in the pantheon of Scandinavia's long-revered composers. It was not always so, of course, and it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that his music enjoyed broad admiration, study, and performance. Not that he ever languished in obscurity, for by his forties he was regarded as Denmark's leading musician. He grew up in modest circumstances—certainly not a prodigy—studied assiduously, played in several unpretentious ensembles on various instruments, and began composing in small forms. He was intellectually curious, reading and pondering philosophy, history, and literature, and it must be said, was profoundly aided in his overall growth as a composer and in general intellectual sophistication by his long marriage to a remarkable woman.

His wife, Anne Marie Brodersen, was a recognized major sculptor, a "strong-willed and modern-minded woman" who was relentless in the pursuit of her very successful career as an artist. Her independence—and penchant for frequently leaving the family to pursue her own career—impacted the tranquility of the marriage, without doubt. But she was a stimulating, strong partner that unquestionably aided in his development into an artist of spiritual depth and sophistication.

Nielsen's reputation outside of Denmark is largely sustained by his six symphonies—Leonard Bernstein was an influential international champion of them—but he composed actively in almost all major genres. From song and choral music to chamber works, he left behind a rich musical legacy. His musical style, rooted early on in the model of Mozart and Beethoven, and later, Brahms, evolved with the times, as the nineteenth century yielded to the twentieth. By the nineteen-twenties his works explored many of the progressive harmonic and structural innovations of late-Romanticism and Neo-Classicism. But, it was only after the hegemony of Schoenberg and his disciples waned after World War II that his works began to be respected internationally, and not dismissed as hopeless examples of naïve, of out-of-date musical style.

In 1902 Nielsen completed his second symphony, which was inspired by seeing a painting in an inn that depicted the four temperaments (choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic, and sanguine). This influence of extra-musical ideas upon his compositions was a concept with which he was philosophically uncomfortable, but nevertheless it was a temptation for him. And it surfaced again soon the next year with the composition of

*Helios Overture*. Nielsen's wife, Anne Marie, had achieved the distinction of being one of the first to be given permission to make copies of the statues in the Acropolis Museum and Nielsen wangled a stipend from his publisher to support his accompanying her in 1903 for an extended visit to Athens. While his wife beavered away at the Acropolis, he was able to spend time at the city conservatory of music in a room with a piano. The salubrious warmth and beauty of the Aegean Sea must have stirred his northern blood, for in about two months in the spring, he composed *Helios Overture*.

The plan and intent of the concert overture is simple and clear: to depict the rising of the sun, its journey overhead through the day, and its setting in the evening. The title, of course, refers to the Greek god, Helios, who personified the sun. In art he is often depicted driving a chariot across the sky. Nielsen thoughtfully shared his lyrical feelings about his work in an epigraph that he included in the score:

Stillness and darkness—Then the sun rises to joyous songs of praise---  
Wanders its golden way—quietly sinks in the sea.

Nielsen's musical approach was to open the overture with a serene sunrise that almost imperceptible grows from darkness and quietude, yielding to a vigorous depiction of the brilliance of the Aegean summer day, and ending with the gentle waning of the day into night. An orchestra sunrise, of course, had already been executed with spectacular success in Richard Strauss' *Also sprach Zarathustra* (the ubiquitous "2001," you know), seven years earlier. And Nielsen began his work in a somewhat similar fashion, but then how many options were really possible?

So, we initially hear—after an opening low G in the basses—soft low Cs that lead to the horns' leaping intervals, announcing the sun's first rays. Rather like Strauss—C major pedal and brass—but in Nielsen's own fashion, horns, not trumpets. The slow, gradual rising of the sun in the music finally leads to what Nielsen called a "morning song." That done, a fanfare from the trumpets heralds the arrival of the faster, middle section. We're now in the quintessential romantic key of up a major third—E major—and the vigorous first theme is announced by the strings.

The tempo ultimately relaxes and softens considerably for "second theme" ideas, and the 'cellos take it first. The first idea is the source for the motif that ultimately informs the ending sunset, later on. A kind of fanfare in the brass leads to a busy fugato in the strings, each solo entrance of the scurrying contrapuntal theme is clear to hear, as each section enters with surging eighth notes. But wait! Clever (and well educated) Nielsen turns this fugato into a double fugue—with the brass, led by the trombones, jumping in with their own powerful idea. After hearing the second theme again the inevitable sunset begins, with slippery chromatics sliding down with the sun, with the woodwinds playing the little extract from the second theme, as everything softens. Most of the opening material now bookends our musical day with Helios, and the string basses have the almost imperceptible last say.

#### ***Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes—Benjamin Britten***

Benjamin Britten is one of the last century's most respected composers, and unquestionably the most influential and admired British composer from WWII until his death in 1976. Fantastically gifted from an early age (almost a thousand compositions

before his first mature, published one!), he was blessed with the early attainment of an authentic personal “voice” in his musical style. That style was at once perceived as modern, fresh, and non-derivative—and yet generally accessible and popular with the broad public for art music. From the beginning he was practically contemptuous of the main stream of revered British composers—Elgar, Vaughan William, Holst, and others, many of whom he snarkily dubbed the “pastoralists.” Their utilization of traditional English folk music as an important stylistic source was substantially criticized by Britten as evidence of a lack of imagination and a reactionary step in a century whose art was moving rapidly into the future.

It is clear that he had a special gift for vocal music, and there are hundreds of works in various genres as evidence. But it is specifically in the field of opera and stage works that he made perhaps his most important contribution, starting with his first big success, *Peter Grimes*. That opera was finished in 1945, and he went on to compose well over a dozen more works that collectively place him with Richard Strauss, Puccini, and Janáček as the giants of twentieth-century opera. Nevertheless, Britten was an active and successful composer of instrumental music—the list is long, one only has to think of such works as *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge*, film scores, and several important solo concertos as apt evidence of his talent, there. And from his important opera, *Peter Grimes*, are the *Four Sea Interludes*, now an important addition to the standard orchestral repertoire.

Britten was born near the sea in Suffolk and spent much of his life close by. His opera, *Peter Grimes*, is centered on the sea and the townspeople of an isolated little fishing village. Based upon an early nineteenth-century narrative poem by George Crabbe, it is a dark, grim story of gossip, communal fear, and the persecution of an individual by society—some of the issues that Britten and his partner suffered in their own lives. The fisherman, Grimes, is suspected of murdering his young apprentices; his reputation is not aided by his conflicted, belligerent, and generally off-putting personality.

There are six interludes in the opera, to facilitate the changing of scenes, and Britten extracted four of them as the orchestra suite. In the opera, a prologue sets the gloomy mood, wherein Grimes is unconvincingly cleared at an inquest of the death at sea of his apprentice. “Dawn” ominously opens the first act, introducing the song of the chorus, who drearily lament their life of labor. A birdlike solo flute alternates with majestic brass chords that not only evoke dawn over the sea, but then grow into a sinister evocation of the tragedy to come. The second act begins with “Sunday Morning,” a herky-jerky affair of conflicting musical ideas that appropriately portend the clashing events: a mob of angry neighbors storm the putative murderer’s house, and then ironically, the second apprentice dies—ostensibly an “accident.”

“Moonlight” segues into the grinding dénouement of Act III, with the discovery of the second apprentice’s body, and Grimes’ flight to apparent suicide at sea. The fourth interlude, “Storm,” is the literal maelstrom that engulfs the tense events in the pub of the first act, and is a fit conclusion to this sordid little drama of death, distrust, and social isolation.