

Concert 3

January 27, 2018

Soirées musicales, Op. 9—Benjamin Britten

Benjamin Britten is one of the last century's most respected composers, and unquestionably the most influential and admired British composer from WW II 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 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, in point of fact, it is 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*, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, *Four Sea Interludes* from "Peter Grimes," film scores, and several important solo concertos.

Scores for films played an important part of his early career, for in 1935 the young twenty-one year old composer obtained a job with a government film entity, charged with providing music for various informative documentaries about the post office and other government activities. The practical, no-nonsense demands of the job were a boon to honing rapidly his mastery of the orchestra and writing to deadline. Soon, he was given the task of providing music for a short film (*The Tocher*) about a young Scot's quest to win a maiden and her dowry. For the film Britten turned to a composer whose compositions he admired, Gioachino Rossini. The latter, had "retired" from a spectacular career in opera composition at the young age of thirty-seven, upon the success of his masterpiece, *Guillaume Tell*. The rest of his life, Rossini only sporadically composed, mostly minor vocal and piano works. Several of these compositions were published under names such as *Les Soirées musicales*. It is this modest and checkered repertoire to which Britten turned as his source for background music for *The Tocher*.

Arranging for a small chamber group, he "borrowed" some of these pieces, as well as a few things from *Guillaume Tell*. But, rather than simply writing out a straightforward orchestration of the short movements, Britten exercised his growing, formidable skills as an orchestrator to give them a new, twentieth-century brilliance and color. That trait, of course, was a life-long virtue in his work; he was perhaps Britain's greatest master of the orchestra. A couple of years later, in 1937, he drew upon this score, choosing three of the movements, adding a couple more, and arranging the lot for a

larger orchestra. Alluding to Rossini's title, he called the five-movement suite, "Suite of Five Movements from Rossini," or *Soirées musicales*. It received its première that year, performed by the BBC Orchestra.

The opening "March" is from *Guillaume Tell*, the "Pas de soldats" in Act III. It's a brief and lively affair, less of a quick march than music for a cavalry pass by, and absolutely typical of sparkling French ballet music—which, of course, the opera is full of. The second movement, *Canzonetta*, is just that: a plaintive little song, with woodwind solos over undulating strings, fully redolent of say, sunset over Lake Como in northern Italy. A song from the Tyrolean Alps follows, and almost every commentator enjoys pointing out the "yodeling" effect in the tune, first heard in the solo trumpet. Its rustic charm and stomping, "hiccupping" fun perfectly evoke the traditional Alpine "slapping" dance (you may remember Chevy Chase's unfortunate encounter with this rough dance in the movie, *European Vacation*). The ensuing, sensuous *Bolero* employs the customary castanets, but the real attraction is the sparkling, luminous orchestration, with luxurious, cascading timbres. The final movement, a driving *Tarantella*, actually seems to be from a religious choral work, but here is transformed into the frenetic Sicilian dance, popularly associated with dancing to ward off the poison from a spider bite. Well, never mind that, but it is a feverish, cheerful way to end this charming example of Britten's early genius at handling the orchestra: in this case, "old wine in new bottles."

Andantino from Concerto for Flute, Harp, and Orchestra in C Major, K. 299/297c—
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

There is some evidence that Mozart really didn't care that much for the sound of the flute as a soloist, although he wrote beautifully and convincingly for it in ensemble. And, there is that although a prolific composer, he only wrote one piece that included the harp—the present one. But, it doesn't matter, Mozart being Mozart, the result is masterful, elegant, and more than pleasing.

The young Mozart spent much of his time traveling, and April 1778 found the twenty-two year old in an extended stay in Paris, visiting at the home of the Duc de Guînes, an amateur flautist. This time was probably a low point in the composer's life. Paris was expensive, Mozart hated French music, and in July his beloved mother died.

The duke's daughter was studying composition with Mozart—evidently not too successfully. But, in a letter home he praised both the father's ability on the flute and the daughter's skill as a harpist. The Duke commissioned the double concerto from Mozart, and it is assumed that they performed it. Without the fee, it is doubtful that Mozart would have thought of writing such a work, for it was an unusual combination of instruments. As it turned out, the duke stiffed him, and he was never paid for the composition. The harp, especially, was not a common instrument in ensembles as it is today, but rather an elegant instrument for solos in magnificent homes. Also, keep in mind that the lush, colorful, and varied sound resources that make the instrument almost requisite in imaginative orchestra scoring today, were to be explored only in the future. Thus, the part for the harp in Mozart's "concerto" is rather straightforward—it could reasonably be played easily on the piano.

While he called the work a concerto, it could also logically be considered a little symphony for chamber orchestra with important parts for the flute and the harp. The genre, *sinfonia concertante*, was rather common at the time, and was an outgrowth of the earlier Baroque *concerto grosso*. So, in both, soloists were woven in and out of important ensemble sections, without the dominant rôle for the former that we have come to expect from concertos of the Romantic era and later. In the *Andantino*, after the presentation of the main theme by the orchestra, the flute and harp alternate with solo sections, with and without each other, in an evolving series of variations. Mozart had to write out the cadenza for the two amateurs, but it has not survived, so various performers have left ones to choose from.

Notwithstanding the amateur status of the duke and little duchess, Mozart's dim view of the solo instruments, and the relatively accessible nature of the key and technical demands, the composer threw himself into the work, and produced what the great Mozart scholar, Alfred Einstein, called "an example of the finest French salon music." He compared the *Andantino* to a painting by Boucher: "decorative and sensual but not lacking in deeper emotions." And so it is.

Concierto pastoral for Flute and Orchestra—Joaquín Rodrigo

For composers not of the ranks of the immortals it is rare to have the privilege to create the one composition that--almost alone of their works—seems to take on a life of its own, and becomes cherished by the whole world. We can think of Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, for example, and perhaps Alford's *Colonel Bogey March*, for another. Certainly, Joaquín Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* for solo guitar and orchestra falls into this category. Rodrigo, of course, is not an unknown, for during his lifetime he became one of the most honored composers that Spain has ever produced, along with Albéniz, Falla, Granados, and Turina. Born in Valencia, he contracted diphtheria when he was three years old and permanently lost his eyesight. He studied piano and violin early, and then advanced subjects at the conservatory in Valencia. In 1927 he moved to Paris where he became a composition student of Paul Dukas. He also studied musicology, which prepared him for his career in Spain as a professor of music history, as well as that of a music critic. He and his wife lived in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland until the events leading up to World War II forced their return to Spain, where they settled permanently in Madrid. For the rest of his life he was active as a composer, and was showered with honors and recognition. His musical style is steeped in traditional Spanish harmonic and melodic elements, and deep evocations of Spanish cultural elements. His education in Paris exposed him to Ravel, and the sophisticated subtleties of his own style reflect this. There is a sheen and beauty to his music that stems directly from his melding of French and Spanish characteristics.

In addition to his evergreen *Concierto de Aranjuez* for guitar, Rodrigo wrote ten other concertos. Nearly as popular as the iconic *Concierto de Aranjuez* is his *Fantasia para un gentilhombre*—also for solo guitar and orchestra, written in 1954. The latter served as a springboard for the *Concierto pastoral*, for the distinguished Irish flute virtuoso, James Galway, taken with the composition, asked Rodrigo for permission to transcribe it for flute. Rodrigo responded by composing a flute concerto for Galway, who gave its world première in 1978.

Cast in the familiar three movements, the composition is a tour-de-force for flute virtuosity. All three movements, while clearly rooted in twentieth-century modern musical idioms, cannot escape the strong flavor of native Spanish traditions that so thoroughly characterize most of Rodrigo's work. The first movement is a dizzying showcase for the flautist's technique—right from the opening; it's a high wire act all the way through this frenetic scamper. Seemingly nonstop wild *arpeggios* and dashing scales in the flute—with the lightest of orchestral accompaniment—are a showpiece for the performer. Leaping, pointed intervals and ambiguous harmonies dominate the opening section, but eventually yield to a rather bucolic evocation of a folk tune with a simple rustic rhythmic accompaniment. The flute and various woodwinds “trade” the material back and forth. Soon the solo French horn seems to sound a village coach horn call. But, inevitably, the hyperactive madness returns, and careens to the abrupt end—interspersed with the simpler, rustic elements.

The middle movement is another kettle of fish, entirely. In his best lyrical voice—and reminiscent of his other concerto slow movements—Rodrigo crafts a meditative opportunity of rare beauty for the soloist. Over shifting minor harmonies, the flute spins out a long, reflective lyrical line. Various members of the woodwind section engage in a dialogue with the flute as the spacious movement takes its time to unfold. Harmonies that suggest Rodrigo's native Spain support plunging and soaring scales that seem right out of flamenco guitar style. The middle, contrasting section is in a brisk, rather galloping tempo, and the “chugging” accompaniment again suggests rustic native dances. Slowing down, the episode develops new, bucolic ideas—the title of the whole work really finds its origin in this movement, for it is nothing if not pastoral in mood. An impressive cadenza ends this pleasant diversion into what surely is the Iberian countryside, capped off by a brief return of the opening ideas.

The *Rondo* last movement is a happy dance, and, as in all rondos, is fundamentally an alternation between a main idea and a parade of new and interesting, contrasting ones. So, there's a constant change in ideas, textures, colors, and moods as we go along. Unlike the first movement, this last fast one is much less frenetic and more lyrical, despite its dancing along to an abrupt end. Supremely difficult, yet with a charm and appeal that is familiar from Rodrigo's other works, the *Concierto pastoral* reminds us that there's far more to Rodrigo than the *Concierto de Aranjuez*.

Suite No. 1 from *The Three-Cornered Hat*—Manuel de Falla

The triumvirate of composers Granados, Albéniz, and Falla, are the most important composers of twentieth-century Spain, without question. But, many would award the palm of “first among equals” to Falla. American audiences know him primarily for three relatively early works: The “Ritual Fire Dance” from his ballet, *El amor brujo*; the symphonic suite for piano and orchestra, *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*; and, of course, the music for *The Three-cornered Hat*. All of these compositions are tuneful, accessible, and either rooted in Spanish folk elements, or French impressionism. However, he went on from the 1920s to explore imaginative and challenging elements of modernism in his stimulating and influential works.

Achieving a modicum of success as a young composer in Madrid from the turn of the century, he turned early on to works for the stage—not only for their practical popularity, but also because he had shown from an very early age a flair for literary and dramatic interests. After composing a series of successful *zarzuela* (popular Spanish musico-dramatic entertainments), he hit the big time in 1905 with his first major opera, *La vida breve*, which incorporated significant elements of traditional Gypsy music. A promised performance that was part of the prize that it won never materialized, so in disappointment, the young Falla left Madrid for Paris. It changed his life. There he met and hobnobbed with the luminaries of French artistic life, including Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Dukas, and the impresario, Diaghilev. Later, insular Spanish music critics harped on the “impressionisms” in his subsequent compositions, at the expense of Spanish elements, but never mind. At the onset of World War I he moved back to Spain, and achieved much greater recognition as a composer than in his earlier period. *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* dates from this period. His association from that time with the theatrical personage, Gregorio Martínez Sierra and his wife, Maria, resulted in his writing in 1916 the ballet, *El amor brujo*, and the incidental music for a modest pantomime, *El corregidor y la molinera* (The Magistrate and the Miller’s Wife).

The latter work was immensely successful, and a fateful visit to Madrid by Igor Stravinsky and the acclaimed impresario of the Ballets Russes, Segei Diaghilev, led to Diaghilev’s encouragement of Falla to extend and enlarge the music to a complete ballet. The little farce, *El corregidor y la molinera*, was based on the novel, *El sombrero de tres picos*, and the expansion of the concept by Falla took the original title. The combination of native Spanish musical material by Falla, Léonide Massine’s choreography, and Pablo Picasso’s cubist sets and costumes received rave reactions at the première.

The risqué story is a bit complicated, but the essence is that a village magistrate (whose uniform includes a traditional tricorn hat) tries foolishly to seduce a miller’s wife, and ends up making a complete fool of himself. The lecherous magistrate has the miller arrested on trumped up charges, inadvertently falls in the river, jumps into the Miller’s bed. Clothes are surreptitiously exchanged, resulting in mixed up identities and competing seductions—you get the idea. But, in the end virtue triumphs and the ridiculous magistrate is suitably humiliated.

Falla extracted two suites for orchestra from the ballet, one from each act. The first suite opens with a very short fanfare for the curtain rise, and we see the mill. Following that is a leisurely depiction of the warm, sleepy afternoon and the magistrate’s pretentious procession near the mill (the droll bassoon depicts the latter). The miller, taking a dislike of the magistrate, has his wife tantalize him with a swirling, seductive *fandango* to lure him on. Upon the conclusion of the dance the bassoon/magistrate returns. A tender moment in the music depicts the miller’s wife disingenuously teasing him with an offer of some grapes; she then coquettishly runs away. Pursuing her, he’s led into an ambush, and the angry husband jumps out of the bushes and frightens away the clownish magistrate with a stick—ending act one.

The success of the ballet came after all Falla, Massine, and Diaghilev had taken time and trouble to tour the country and research the native Andalusian materials. That took a while, but paid off handsomely a few years later, at the London première, in 1919. Its Spanish tunes, dramatic storytelling, and brilliant orchestration have made it an

audience favorite ever since—even if, like Aaron Copland’s populist music of the 1930s—it represents only one facet of the composer’s musical style.

Suite from *Pulcinella*—Igor Stravinsky

Stravinsky’s reputation as one of a handful of the most respected and influential composers of the twentieth century has been secure almost from the beginning of his career. Yet, as he grew older, the bold changes in the nature and sources of his musical style stand as almost unique among his peers. We may speak of Brahms’ or Tchaikovsky’s “style,” and although both certainly showed clear evidence of musical growth from youth to maturity, most folks have a rough idea of what any particular composition by either of them may sound like. Sure, Beethoven, went through his stylistic “periods,” but his artistry evolved from beginning to end more or less as a continuum of advancing growth and mastery in a coherent personal voice. Not so, with our Stravinsky. The fundamental conceptual and technical basis for his compositions underwent distinct and radical changes as he moved from one “period” to another, from youth to old age. His smashing early successes with the Russian ballets, *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*, were followed shortly by a more severe, experimental style around WWI. By about 1920 he turned to neo-classicism, which dominated his approach until around 1950, followed by more experimental changes until the last decade of his life, during which he astounded all by adopting a personal approach to twelve-tone and serial procedures. The latter style, of course, had been championed by Schoenberg and his followers for almost half a century, but certainly not by Stravinsky—until he did! He cheerfully confessed to his musical “kleptomancy.” The real Stravinsky wore many guises, but they all represented a unique musical genius, who regardless of style and labels, always shone through as perhaps the singular composer of the century.

Pulcinella stands at the beginning of the major shift in his musical thinking that occurred a few years after the end of WWI. It was a marked departure from the works that had secured his reputation, and a harbinger of the new, spare style that looked back to the music of the eighteenth century for many of its precepts. When art has “gone about as far as it can go” in one style, it simply flops over into something radically different. And that is roughly what happened to the works of late romanticism, with their extended tonality and growing length—to name only a few traits that simply suffered little further evolution. This is as true of Stravinsky’s three early ballets as it is of, say, Mahler’s symphonies. Hemlines go up, and then they go down. Representational art is followed by abstract art, and then by representation again. Simplicity and complexity always seem to alternate.

In 1920 Stravinsky was living with his family in Switzerland, in difficult financial straits, and in the midst of a deep quarrel over contracts with the great impresario of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev—his collaborator in the big early successes. About this time, Diaghilev had found some music in the Naples Conservatory supposedly by the baroque composer, Pergolesi (1710-1736). We currently know that many of the attributions were incorrect—but it really doesn’t matter, now. The upshot was that Diaghilev more or less made peace with Stravinsky by commissioning him to compose a brief ballet based on these short works (Falla had turned the commission down).

Stravinsky wasn't sure that he wanted the project, but finally assented, and responded with a score that was a startling throwback to the simple, graceful harmonies and rhythms of almost two centuries earlier. Picasso provided stage and costume designs, based upon a re-interpretation of old, traditional Italian themes, and the choreographer did likewise, using eighteenth-century ballet steps. Stravinsky preserved much of the nature of these old pieces, simply adding some pungent harmonies here and there, displacing the beats, and orchestrating them with a distinctly modern feel. But, all in all, the winsome, conservative, and charming result was a far cry from what the world then knew as Stravinsky. What is more, the startling simplicity of *Pulcinella* clearly was a harbinger of the composer's major shift into what would be called "neo-classicism." He stayed with the approach for decades, melding concepts from two different centuries into a personal style.

Pulcinella (the name is that of Punch or Polichinelle from seventeenth-century Neapolitan *commedia dell'arte*) was given its première in Paris in May of 1920, with the orchestra suite receiving its first performance two years later by Monteux and the Boston Symphony. It opens with a little "sinfonia," essentially a miniature overture, and perhaps the most well known of the movements. After a "serenata"—a graceful interpretation of the traditional *siciliano* rhythm—there follows a scherzo in two brief contrasting parts. The tarantella is a vivacious Neapolitan dance (said to ward off the effects of a tarantula bite) that leads right into the "toccata." Toccatas customarily are instrumental showpieces and this one features the winds, especially the two brass players, ending with a "blat" from the trombonist. The Gavotta is our friend from the Bach orchestra suite, with the usual accents—although this one is unusually pastoral in nature. After two variations the brass noisily start the "Vivo," which doesn't last long, but is interesting for the "scratchy" solo in the double bass, and notorious for the constant rude interruptions from the trombone—smearing away in a most un-classical style. The Horns and bassoons begin the graceful minuet, which includes an elegant solo in the trombone, but as it approaches the end, Stravinsky's modern harmonic tendencies come to the fore, as some pungent dissonances prepare the arrival of the finale. It's a scurrying mad dash, familiar to those who know *Histoire du soldat*, from about the same time. All in all, it's easy to understand the positive reception accorded *Pucinel* in Paris at its première; it was tuneful, unassuming, imaginative, and a new breeze in music for the times. It remains so today.