

A Dance with Spanish Guitar – November 16 & 17, 2019

Overture to *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), K. 620

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
1756-1791

Public taste is fickle.

By the late 1780s, Mozart's star in Vienna was dimming rapidly. The change in popular musical taste, general economic decline and his own inability to manage his finances combined to make him emotionally frantic and scrambling for commissions.

Since there was no more demand for Mozart's *Akademien* (self-promoting subscription concerts), and his most successful librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, had left Vienna, he turned for a joint operatic venture to one of the most colorful (and successful) dramatists and theater directors of the era, Emanuel Schikaneder. Mozart and Schikaneder knew each other both professionally and as fellow Freemasons. Schikaneder's libretto contains many elements of the Freemason philosophy and ritual in its emphasis on human enlightenment. It promotes its high-minded ideology through a fairytale plot and characters, in addition to moments of incredible silliness.

The Magic Flute is a dramatization of the battle between the forces of good (light) and evil (darkness), symbolized by the high priest of Isis, Sarastro, and the Queen of the Night. In order to win the hand of the Queen's daughter, Pamina, whom Sarastro has abducted and detained "for her own good," Prince Tamino must undergo trials by fire and water. He succeeds with the aid of a magic flute, while his companion, the comic bird-catcher Papageno, bungles through lower level trials to win himself a wife, Papagena.

Concierto de Aranjuez

Joaquín Rodrigo
1901-1999

Like his fellow Spanish composers Enrique Granados and Manuel de Falla, Joaquín Rodrigo traveled to Paris to study composition and piano. Although he lost his eyesight to a severe illness at age three, he became an accomplished pianist and a star composition student of Paul Dukas (composer of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*). In the early 1930s Rodrigo had to return to Spain when the family's wine business went bankrupt, but he succeeded in obtaining a scholarship and returning to Paris for further studies. During the Spanish Civil War he traveled extensively in Europe, especially through France and Germany, finally returning home in 1939 to settle in Madrid. The premiere in 1940 of his *Concierto de Aranjuez* catapulted him to world recognition. In 1947 the Manuel de Falla chair was created for him at Madrid University where he composed and taught for the rest of his long life.

The *Concierto de Aranjuez* has remained Rodrigo's most popular work. While he maintained that there was no program implied, the title refers to a famous royal enclave on the road to Andalusia on the Tagus river near Madrid. According to the composer, the music "...seems to bring to life the essence of eighteenth-century court life, where aristocratic distinction blends with popular culture. ...The Concerto is meant to sound like the hidden breeze that stirs the treetops in the parks; it should only be as strong as a butterfly and as delicate as a *veronica* [a pass with the cape at a bullfight]."

The guitar solo that opens the Concerto sets up a series of strummed chords that promise, but delay, the arrival of the principal theme. Only a full minute later, after the orchestra has repeated the pattern, does the theme actually appear.

The *Adagio* is the heart of the Concerto, capturing for the concert hall the brooding Flamenco strains in a late-night bar. The guitar sinuously, even lovingly, embellishes a melody like an example of fine decorative Moorish calligraphy.

The final movement comes like a splash of cold water on a sunburn. The movement is a series of free variations based on a lively sixteenth-century folksong.

Symphony No. 7 in D minor, Op. 70

Antonín Dvořák
1841-1904

Dvořák wanted to bring Bohemian nationalism to international awareness, and he strove to make his compositions worthy of world recognition. In 1883 his *Stabat Mater* became a sensation in the English world of choir festivals. The Royal Philharmonic Society invited him to London to conduct his music in 1884, nominating him as an honorary member, and commissioning him to compose and conduct a new symphony for the following season.

Dvořák considered the invitation a great honor and gave considerable thought to the composition of the Symphony, resolving to do his utmost to make it an outstanding work. "I am occupied with my new symphony (for London) and wherever I go I think of nothing but my work, which must be such as to make a stir in the world, and may God grant that it will," he wrote to a friend. He started on the Symphony on December 15, 1884 and finished the full score on March 17 the following year. Although Dvořák was a fluent composer, he spent twice the time on this Symphony as it took him to write his previous one.

While the London audience at the premiere was enthusiastic, applauding after every movement, the Symphony is among the most somber of Dvořák's works. Mainland European audiences were frankly astonished to hear this mood from a composer whom it had always associated with optimism. It took them a number of years to warm up to the work.

In the first movement especially, the dark opening theme prevails although a second theme breaks the mood to a limited extent. In this symphony, Dvořák uses the flute to recreate fanciful birdcalls. The second movement is no less intense, but in this case, the opening is gentle, giving no hint of the emotional turmoil to follow in the contrasting middle section.

The Scherzo is a *furiant*, a fast Bohemian dance in triple time that recalls the Slavonic Dances. In the Trio, the flute again supplies “sounds of nature.” Yet even in this dance movement, there is a dark undertone.

The stormy Finale is a fitting conclusion to this dramatic work. After considerable time, Dvořák introduces a new theme that vies unsuccessfully with the opening theme to lift the Symphony out of its dark mood. Only the Cello Concerto, in which Dvořák mourned in music the death of his secret love from his youth, matches the grand tragedy of the Seventh Symphony.

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