

Piotr TCHAIKOVSKY **Cossack Dance, from *Mazeppa*** (1884) (Arranged by Sandra Dackow)

Dating from 1884, *Mazeppa* is the seventh of the eleven operas composed by Piotr Tchaikovsky (1840-1893). Based on Aleksandr Pushkin's 1829 narrative poem, *Poltava*, the plot is drawn from the real-life exploits of Ivan Mazepa (1639-1709), a controversial Ukrainian diplomat and military leader who became a Cossack Hetman (Chief Commander) during the reign of Peter the Great. To Russians Mazepa is a traitor to the Tsar, defeated in the 1709 Battle of Poltava after conspiring with the King of Sweden in an attempt to gain independence for Ukraine. Tchaikovsky's opera reflects this pro-tsarist view, but it also focuses on the doomed love between Mazepa and his goddaughter, Mariya. Here's the plot in a nutshell: Mariya's father refuses his consent to a marriage between his 20-year-old daughter and her 63-year-old godfather, so the lovers elope. Amid much political intrigue, a greedy Mazepa tortures and beheads his father-in-law, but soon is righteously defeated by the Tsar's army. Meanwhile Mariya, unable to cope with the death of her father, goes insane. The *Cossack Dance*, or *Hopak*, comes from the opera's first scene, just before Mazepa asks for Mariya's hand. The dance conjures images of acrobatic Cossacks squatting, kicking and leaping about as they celebrate the coming together of good friends. Only in this case the party doesn't last very long.

Léo DELIBES **March and Procession of Bacchus, from *Sylvia*** (1876) (Arranged by Merle Isaac)

French composer Léo Delibes (1836-1891) wrote over two dozen works for the stage, including the opera *Lakmé* (1883), from which the *Flower Duet* is universally known, thanks to British Airways commercials. He composed *Coppélia* in 1870, creating what is generally regarded as the first ballet since the days of Lully and Rameau substantial enough to compete seriously with opera. Six years later, *Sylvia, ou La nymphe de Diane* hit the stage, but the ballet's lackluster scenario has kept it from gaining a lasting foothold in the repertoire. The music, however, has always been greatly admired--Tchaikovsky himself confessed that had he seen Delibes' score beforehand he would have been too intimidated to write *Swan Lake*. Set in ancient Greece, *Sylvia* is an acolyte of Diana, Goddess of the Hunt. When *Sylvia* is kidnapped by the hunter Orion, Eros, the God of Love, intercedes and helps her escape. *The March and Procession of Bacchus* opens the last act, during which a crowd gathers at the Temple of Diana awaiting *Sylvia*'s reunion with her sweetheart, the shepherd Aminta. The "*March*" is replete with brassy fanfares, while the "*Procession*" offers a more lyrical approach. Orion disrupts the reunion, but in the end Love prevails, happily ever after.

William WALTON **Viola Concerto. I. Andante comodo** (1929)

In "Music Appreciation 101," British music history from the Renaissance into the 20th Century is often summarized: Madrigals, fa-la-la -- Purcell -- Elgar (maybe) -- Vaughan Williams and Holst -- Britten. William Walton (1902-1983) might only get a footnote glimmering faintly through Britten's shadow, but this doesn't diminish the luminous quality of Sir William's best music, including *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931), lately performed by the J-Sym Orchestra and Chorus. For his popular *Viola Concerto* (1929), Walton looked to Elgar and Prokofiev as models, as well as to German composer Paul Hindemith. The latter was literally instrumental in the initial success of the concerto: Hindemith appeared as soloist for the premiere after violist Lionel Tertis rejected the work. The concerto was a big hit, Walton and Hindemith became great friends, and a regretful Tertis soon added the masterful piece to his repertoire.

Richard STRAUSS **Horn Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op. 11. I. Allegro** (1883)

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) was the most famous German composer during the late Romantic and early Modern eras, and one of the period's most famous conductors. Among his best-known works are his operas, including *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Salome*, and his tone poems, including *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* and *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Strauss's father, Franz, was much admired for his artistry and technique as the principal horn player of the Munich Court Orchestra, and a teen-aged Richard composed the *Concerto in E-flat* with his father in mind. But Papa Franz soon discovered that he couldn't comfortably negotiate the concerto's wide range, so for the premiere they found an alternate soloist better able to meet the challenges of one of the most difficult horn concertos in the repertoire. The first movement alternates between heroic agitation and warm lyricism. Taking the concertos of Mendelssohn as a model, the soloist enters immediately following a single introductory chord from the orchestra, and when the second movement is performed it flows seamlessly from the first movement.

George ENESCU **Roumanian Rhapsody No. 1 in A major, Op. 11, No. 1** (1901)

If you ask musicians to name a Romanian composer, unless they draw a complete blank they almost certainly will answer "George Enescu" (1881-1955), or, as the French say, "*Georges Enesco*." As fate would have it, Enescu was born the same year as the Kingdom of Roumania (the "u" was dropped later), and he became a national hero in his fledgling homeland. Enescu's compatriots have named an international airport after him, and changed the name of the village where he was born to "George Enescu." Young George's extraordinary musical gifts were recognized early. He earned the silver medal for his prodigious virtuosity when he graduated from the Vienna Conservatory at age 12, and entered the Paris Conservatory at 14. Among the greatest masters and teachers of the violin, Enescu also was so highly regarded as a conductor that he was considered as Toscanini's replacement for the New York Philharmonic, and he just as easily could have become a leading piano virtuoso. At age 19 Enescu produced the brilliantly-orchestrated *Roumanian Rhapsody No. 1*, his most famous composition. In the span of about 13 minutes the piece dances through a dozen or so folk and folk-like tunes, beginning gently, but growing more feverish as it progresses. Although Enescu would complain that this early effort was just a trifle that detracted from the appreciation of his later compositions, he continued to conduct the delightful showpiece through the five decades of his illustrious career.

Gustav HOLST **The Planets, Op. 32** (1914-1916)

*Mars, the Bringer of War* - *Venus, the Bringer of Peace* - *Uranus, the Magician*  
- *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age* - *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*

Given that his father, grandfather and great grandfather were all professional musicians, it's neither surprising that English composer, conductor, trombonist and teacher Gustav Holst (1874-1934) likewise entered "the family business," nor that he passed it on to his only child (and chief biographer), Imogen. But it might be surprising to realize that Holst wrote over 200 works, because *The Planets* is pretty much his only big composition that gets serious exposure.

Thanks to the generosity of composer and impresario Balfour Gardiner, the first performance of *The Planets* was during a private concert on September 29, 1918. World War I had been raging for four painful years, so when Holst's *Mars, the Bringer of War* came barreling over the listeners they must have felt that the composer was responding to the horror consuming them. But the *Mars* movement actually had been finished by Easter 1914, before war was declared in August, and the genesis can be traced back even a year earlier. As the story goes, in the spring of 1913 Balfour took Gustav on a trip to Majorca along with the Bax brothers, composer Arnold and writer Clifford. Clifford introduced Gustav to astrology, which became Holst's "pet vice," as well as the inspiration for the seven-movement suite that brought the shy composer international recognition.

Concerning the five movements featured on this concert, *Mars, the Bringer of War* is dominated by a relentless rhythmic pattern in 5/4 time, and illustrates the brutal "stupidity" of war, as Holst put it. In complete contrast, *Venus, the Bringer of Peace* paints a picture of serene tranquility, forgoing blaring brass and beating drums for delicate woodwinds and solo strings interlaced with harp and celesta. *Uranus, the Magician* is a boisterous scherzo reminiscent of the sometimes menacing magic of Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Moving like solemn clockwork, in *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age* we find ourselves dragged along by the inevitable passage of time, eventually emerging from anxious confusion into resignation and acceptance; among all the movements *Saturn* was Holst's personal favorite. The favorite of nearly everyone else is *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*, which enters like a generous Santa bearing gifts of folk-like tunes, with a big, very English hymn in the middle.

Like Enescu, Holst came to resent the work that eclipsed the rest of his output--but boo-hoo. Most composers would give their *tutti* for a work still popular a century after it's written, and that gets them mentioned in Music Appreciation 101. Rather than complaining, Holst really should have thanked his Lucky Stars.

Notes ©2014 by Edward Lein