

Echoes

Saturday, November 20, 2018

**Program Notes by Susan Wingrove-Reed,
ASO Education Consultant**



Dmitri Shostakovich

Born: 1906

Died: 1975

Festive Overture, Op. 96

Last ASO Performance September 2008

No other composer of the twentieth century experienced the wild fluctuations of acclaim and denunciation that profoundly affected Shostakovich's personal life. His amazing resiliency is an inspiration - a gifted artist was driven to pursue his work in spite of political persecution and personal tragedy. His music fell in and out of favor with the Stalinist regime. He lost many friends to the government's purges, yet all of this horror was balanced by strange periods of enthusiastic, contradictory praise.

Described as an "all-powerful and remote deity", Stalin was one of the most dominant political figures of the twentieth century. Under his leadership, the Soviet bureaucracy kept watch on every citizen resulting in the deaths of millions of people who were deemed guilty of inappropriate political and cultural actions. Millions more were tortured or sent to labor camps. Many artists and intellectuals did not survive and it is miraculous that Shostakovich survived, much less remained creatively productive, although he was deeply haunted by the loss of friends and acquaintances.

In March, 1953, Stalin died. In the following year, Shostakovich's life had not yet noticeably improved. His newest compositions were being performed, but everything written prior to the purge of 1948 was still banned. He was still officially "unpersoned" and could barely pay his living expenses and bills.

In November, 1954, Vasili Nebolsin, the conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre, did not have a suitable opening piece for an important concert, a celebration of the 37th anniversary of the 1917 Revolution. When he approached Shostakovich with an urgent deadline, the composer created the *Festive Overture* in an astonishingly fast three days. Annotator Daniel Maki shared that he "gave the parts, still wet with ink, to couriers who delivered them to copyists at the theater." Shostakovich later said that he was inspired by Mikhail Glinka's 1842 Overture to the opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*; Glinka (1804-1857) was regarded as "the father of Russian music."

Musicologist David Brown speculates, “Do we glimpse here the opposite side of the coin – an eruption of rejoicing at the passing of a tyrant? Whatever the case, this vivid, vibrant morsel, innocent of that irony which so often tinged (and sometimes saturated) Shostakovich’s more vigorous music, is a potent reminder of a side of his musical personality scarcely known in the West.”

Festive Overture opens with a rousing brass fanfare; followed by winds and strings running at breakneck speeds. A lyrical section is explored and developed, and a reprise of the fanfare leads to a fiery coda. This lively, delightful music was later used as the official theme song for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. A close friend, Lev Lebedinsky, perfectly described the overture as “a brilliant, effervescent work, with its vivacious energy spilling over like uncorked champagne.”



Felix Mendelssohn

Born: 1809

Died: 1847

***Hebrides Overture (Fingal's Cave),
Op. 26***

Last ASO Performance October 2008

Felix Mendelssohn was just twenty years old when he enthusiastically began an extensive trip from Berlin to Naples, Vienna, Paris, London, and on to the Hebrides; Fingal's Cave is one of several remarkable caverns on a tiny island called Staffa, one of the Hebrides Islands off the coast of Scotland. According to music historian Edward Downes, this cave is two hundred twenty-seven feet long, "richly decorated with green and gold seaweeds and lichens, flecked here and there with a pure snow-white of lime that has filtered through the walls. When the sea is smooth, visitors can be rowed directly into the cave, where there is a constant murmuring sound of the waves, giving it a Gallic name that means 'the cave of music'".

Mendelssohn's friend Karl Klingemann accompanied him on the boat trip to the cave in August, 1829, writing, "The Atlantic stretched its tentacles around us with increasing roughness, knocking us all over the place.... The ladies went down like flies and so indeed did the gentlemen; I only wish my traveling companion had not been among them, but he's on better terms with the sea as an artist than as a human being with a stomach." In a letter to Fanny, his beloved sister, Mendelssohn wryly referred to "the most fearful sickness." More philosophically, he added, "In order to have you understand how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me, the following theme came into my mind there..." and he noted the tune which became the opening motive of his new overture.

He drafted the composition in 1830, stating that he was working daily to complete it as a birthday present for his father. However, "I am too fond of the piece to perform it in an imperfect state...." In 1832, he wrote from Paris to his family, "I cannot present the 'Hebrides' here because I do not consider it ready. The whole so-called development tastes more of counterpoint than of whale-oil and seagulls and cod-liver oil and it ought to be the other way around."

He revised the manuscript once again for the premiere at Covent Garden in May, 1832. Mendelssohn recorded, "It went splendidly, and sounded so droll among all the Rossini things." Queen Victoria was a huge fan of the work! This stand-alone concert overture is a masterful, evocative scene painting of the sea. Sixteenth notes and arpeggios suggest the wind and waves splashing against the cave walls; an increase in agitation indicates the arrival of a storm. The overture concludes by evaporating into silence, portraying a musical image of tides that recede and will inevitably return.



Richard Strauss

Born: 1864

Died: 1949

***Tod und Verklarung*
(Death and Transfiguration),
Op. 24**

**Last ASO Performance November
1998**

In 1894, Strauss wrote a letter to his friend Friedrich von Hausegger recalling the ideas behind his remarkable tone poem *Death and Transfiguration* (1889): “The sick man lies in bed breathing heavily and irregularly....friendly dreams bring a smile to the sufferer...fearful pains once more begin to torture him....when the pain recedes, he recalls his past life....while the pains return, there appears to him the goal of his life’s journey, an ideal he was unable to perfect. The fatal hour arrives. The soul leaves his body, to discover in the eternal cosmos the magnificent realization of the ideal that could not be fulfilled here below.” It is astonishing that a 25-year old man had such a clear concept of death and dying. When Strauss was on his deathbed in 1949 (60 years after composing this music) he allegedly said to his daughter-in-law: “Funny thing, Alice, dying is just the way I composed in *Death and Transfiguration*.”

Strauss asked poet Alexander Ritter to create an explanatory set of verses enhancing his verbal sketch of the four major sections. The poem is published with the score: **Largo**. “In a small bare room, dimly lit by a candle stump, a sick man lies on his bed. Exhausted by a violent struggle with death, he lies asleep. In the stillness of the room, like a portent of impending death, only the quiet ticking of a clock is heard. A melancholy smile lights the invalid’s pale face: Does he dream of golden childhood as he lingers on the border of life?” Violins and violas play a soft syncopated pattern – the death motive associated with a clock or heartbeat. Solo woodwinds are featured with horn and harp accompaniment.

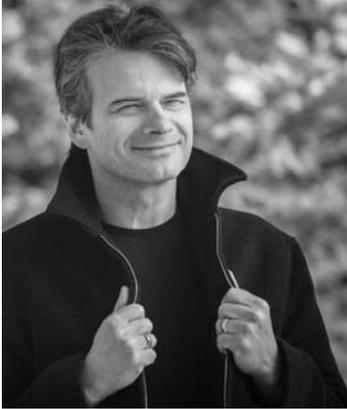
Allegro molto agitato. “But death grants him little sleep or time for dreams. He shakes his prey brutally to begin the battle afresh. The drive to live, the might of death! What a terrifying contest! Neither wins the victory and once more silence reigns.” Brass instruments combined with a faster tempo paint a musical picture of the struggle to defy death. Just when death seems unavoidable, the harp, trombones, cellos and violas provide a glimpse of transfiguration....Calm returns and life continues.

Meno mosso, ma sempre alla breve. “Exhausted from the battle, sleepless, as in a delirium, the sick man now sees his life pass before him, step by step, scene by scene. First the rosy dawn of childhood, radiant innocent; then the boy’s aggressive games, testing, building his strength – and so maturing for the battles of manhood, to strive with burning passion for the highest goals of life; to transfigure all that seems to him most noble, giving it still more exalted form – this alone has been the high aim of his whole existence. Coldly, scornfully, the world set obstacle upon obstacle in his way. When he believed himself near his goal, a thunderous voice cried: ‘Halt!’ But a voice within him

still urged him on, crying, "Make each hindrance a new rung in your upward climb.' Undaunted, he followed the exalted quest. Still in his death agony he seeks the unreached goal of his ceaseless striving, seeks it, but alas, still in vain. Though it grows closer, clearer, grander, it never can be grasped entire or perfected in his soul. The final iron hammer blow of death rings out, breaks his earthy frame, and covers his eyes with eternal light." Solos throughout the orchestra converse and give hints of childhood to adulthood. Chaos erupts as trombones and timpani proclaim impending death. After a final sonic struggle, the gong signals the soul's departure from the body.

Moderato. "But from the endless realms of heavenly space a mighty resonance returns to him bearing what he longed for here below and sought in vain: redemption, transfiguration." The extraordinarily lovely transfiguration theme is transformed as instruments combine and the soul climbs upward; a wonderful C major chord builds from the basses up and includes glorious bells and gongs.

English music critic Ernest Newman commented that this music would be difficult to hear as one died or awakened. "It is too spectacular, too brilliantly lit, too full of pageantry of a crowd; whereas this is a journey one must make very quietly, and alone".



Randall Craig Fleischer

Born: 1959

Echoes

Last ASO Performance October 2008

ASO Music Director and composer Randall Craig Fleischer shares the following background information about this weekend's tenth-anniversary presentation: Writing *Echoes* was one of the most satisfying experiences of my musical life. I was so honored to have received this commission! The piece is a multi-media experience that includes a full symphony orchestra, digital video, sound effects, dancing, singing and theatrical staging. There are three geographic areas represented in *Echoes* – Alaska, Hawaii and Massachusetts, all linked by the 19th century China trade and whaling industry.

Later in the 19th century, whaling was a huge business for coastal towns in Massachusetts. The ships would leave port and sail all the way around Cape Horn at the bottom of South America and up to Hawaii. They would hunt whales off the coast, often stopping on the islands to re-supply and then head all the way up to Alaska to hunt for whales; with their oil barrels full, they sailed home.

Life aboard most whaling ships was horrific. The survival rate was very low – barely half the sailors made it home. Most died of malnutrition. Some were washed overboard and many ships were destroyed in storms. Further, once a whale was caught, it was stripped of its blubber which was cooked into oil and stored in barrels on the ship. This process involved a very hot melting pot and sometimes the ships would be destroyed by fire. It was a very, very dangerous life.

I was given very clear instructions for writing *Echoes*. I was asked to make my piece a multi-media event including projected images and sounds from each of the three areas. I was also asked to use as much indigenous music as possible from the three regions and to do my best to include some historic elements of life aboard a whaling ship.

To relieve the tedium aboard ship sailors would bring instruments along and form little groups called 'fou-fou bands.' (Yes, 'foo-foo!') These bands might include any sort of instrument that was small enough to bring on board like a concertina, harmonica, fiddle, banjo, guitar, etc. The huge culture of sea chanties which grew out of the whaling era are beautiful and compelling.

As part of my agreement with the *Echoes* partners, I was invited to each museum or Native Center and had the opportunity to see and hear a number of private performances of indigenous music. I taped these sessions and asked many questions about the history of each song or dance. In Barrow, I got up and danced along! (This was quite amusing to the dancers!) In making these journeys and studying the music I met many wonderful artists and found their passion for their culture inspiring. This was a journey of discovery for me – not only the discovery of new music but of new friends.

I decided to write *Echoes* in a musical language that was accessible so audiences would enjoy the piece on a first hearing – nothing too dissonant or complex. I had to

make choices about which songs/dances I thought would be most exciting for an audience to see and hear. Next, I decided to structure the piece into six scenes.

SCENE I begins with nature. Before there were human beings, there was nature. So the piece opens with a beautiful montage of natural sights and sounds from each of the three locations – Alaska, Hawaii and Massachusetts – with a lush orchestral underscore. As the opening montage builds to a climax, we see stirring images of whales leaping, followed by the first image of a human being.

SCENE II reflects the terrible dangers aboard a whaling ship. Sailors face the full raging fury of the sea, the cold harsh wind, and the sharp, barking orders of their Captain trying to keep the boat afloat. As the storm calms, they break into a full rendition of a sea chanty, “Old Maui”, which I chose not only because of its stirring beauty but because it tells the entire story of life on the ship.

Scenes III, IV and V take us on a tour of Native American musical life with songs/dances from Alaska, Hawaii and Massachusetts.

SCENE III (Alaska) opens with a beautiful Athabascan melody sung in the traditional language of Anchorage’s first peoples; this comes from a Dena’ina song about hunting beavers. Next is an Inupiat “Messenger Song” from Barrow; the use of messengers and runners was an important way that villages spread news – sort of like the Pony Express but without the Pony! The traditional Yupik song that follows translates as “Pulling from Within”.

SCENE IV (Hawaii) begins with an ancient hula melody, “No Luna” which tells a very dramatic story about conflicts between fire and an angry sea. “No Luna” expresses a deep appreciation for the intelligence, compassion and character of the beloved heroine Hi’iaka, patron goddess of Hawaii. Next is a modern hula melody, “I Kona”. This song is a loving welcome to newcomers visiting Kona, a seaside town on the Big Island.

SCENE V (Massachusetts) is a setting of a “Sneak Up” song/dance which reflects a hunter sneaking up on its prey or a warrior sneaking up on an enemy;. The dancer searches the ground for the trail of his prey as the drummers create a fast, frenzied rhythm and sing out. As a more metered beat emerges, the dancer finds the trail and begins to track and follow.

SCENE VI takes us back to the deck of a whaling ship and begins with a French polka melody, “Polkas De Saint Carreuc”. I wanted to end Echoes in a joyful way, reflecting the glorious traditions of village festivals. Once the polka melody gets going in the concertina, the sailors begin to join the dance one by one, building to a lively, rowdy Celtic-like dance. At this point, Native dancers from Alaska, Hawaii and the Wampanoag Tribe from Massachusetts all re-enter and present their respective dances in a jubilant celebration, a reaffirmation of the joys of life.