

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Viva Italia – December 1, 2 & 3, 2018

GIOACCHINO ROSSINI

Overture to Guillaume Tell (William Tell)



Gioacchino Rossini was born in Pesaro, Italy, on February 29, 1792, and died in Passy, near Paris, on November 13, 1868. He composed his final opera, Guillaume Tell, on a libretto freely based on Schiller's famous German drama in 1829. The opera was premiered in Paris on August 3, 1829. The score calls for flute and piccolo, two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings. Duration is about 12 minutes.

Some music is so famous that it is almost never played—at least not in “serious” concerts. The William Tell Overture may well top that curious list of super-familiar compositions. It was a regular concert favorite in orchestral subscription concerts in the nineteenth century, but with the rise of Pops concerts in the twentieth, it is far more often heard there, as if it were somehow less serious than it once was. Of course, the reason why William Tell is relegated to such concerts is that today the music simply can no longer conjure up the intended image of heroic Swiss freedom-fighters. Instead listeners are faced with a series of thrice-familiar passages that have been employed ad nauseam to create a pastoral mood in animated cartoons or to signal the exploits of a certain masked man.

The overture to William Tell is more famous for some of its sections than for the whole. Yet it is a remarkable work, filled with surprises. The very opening, for example, is richly sonorous, though it calls for just four solo cellos in an extended passage. Violent “storm” music follows, dying away into the gentle pastoral sound of the country. Finally, to bring the overture to a close with tremendous brio, we have the famous galop. None of the music in the overture appears in the opera itself, but it does nonetheless suggest the natural beauty of Switzerland both in sunshine and storm, and the heroic determination of William Tell and his fellow patriots.

ANTONIO VIVALDI

Gloria in D major



Antonio Lucio Vivaldi was born in Venice, Italy, on March 4, 1678, and died in Vienna, Austria, on July 28, 1741. The dates of composition of his various pieces of sacred music are unknown, as are the dates of first performance, though it is presumed that some of them, at least, were intended for the musicians of the state supported orphanage, the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, where he was at various times director and teacher; this is probably the case with the Gloria, given the emphasis on female voices for the solo parts. The work was certainly composed after 1708 and may come from the years 1713 to 1719, when there was no one else at the Pietà with the specific

responsibility of composing sacred vocal music. In addition to three female soloists (two sopranos and an alto), the score calls for chorus and an orchestra of oboe and trumpet, plus strings and continuo. Duration is about 30 minutes.

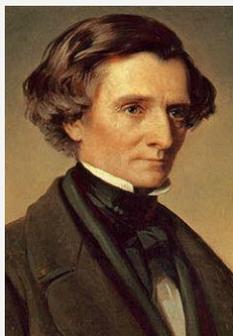
For a time in the eighteenth century and again in our own day (following a century's hiatus), Antonio Vivaldi became the most famous and influential Venetian composer of the Baroque era, largely on the strength of his many hundreds of concertos, which established a style and a flexible form that other composers were able to use for decades. But much of his output was almost totally forgotten. Happily, a major discovery in the 1920s recovered a large body of manuscripts containing hundreds of Vivaldi works that were totally unknown, including the scores of seventeen complete operas and a substantial amount of sacred music, including the Gloria.

Sacred music was regularly performed at the Pietà, the orphanage where Vivaldi spent many years as musical director, training the young women there as an orchestra and chorus that attracted listeners from far and wide.

From the very opening bars, the Gloria is marked with Vivaldi's characteristic energy in the leaping octaves that form the basic rhythmic motive of the piece. Each of the short segments projects a specific expressive character, from the opening cries of "Gloria" through the sustained and subdued intensity of "et in terra pax," the cheerful soprano duet "Laudamus te," the innocence of "Domine Deus" (conceived in a siciliano dance rhythm) for soprano with obbligato oboe, and the tragic character of the alto's solo at "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei." To round off the piece, Vivaldi brings back the leaping octaves of the opening at "Quoniam tu solus sanctus" and then concludes with a large fugue adapted from the close of a Gloria composed in 1708 by another Venetian composer, Giovanni Maria Ruggeri. But, as was expected in such cases of musical homage, Vivaldi made Ruggeri's music still grander and more expansive.

HECTOR BERLIOZ

Harold in Italy



Louis Hector Berlioz was born in La Côte Saint André, Isère, on December 11, 1803, and died in Paris on March 8, 1869. Berlioz composed Harold in Italy in 1834, on a commission from Niccolò Paganini, who refused to give the first performance, which fell to Chrétien Urhan; this took place under the direction of Narcisse Girard on November 23, 1834. In addition to the solo viola, the score calls for two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, two cornets, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba (originally ophicleide), timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, harp and strings (Berlioz specifies at least fifteen each of first and second violins, at least ten violas, at least twelve cellos and at least nine basses). Duration is about 43 minutes.

Harold in Italy is an overt reflection of Berlioz' admiration for Beethoven. But this work of utterly original conception owes its impetus to an unlikely source, a commission for a viola concerto from the great violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini. Paganini had introduced himself to Berlioz after a performance of the *Symphonie fantastique* on December 22, 1833, in which the audience had gone wild and the players "were radiant with enthusiasm as they left the platform," Berlioz recalled in his memoirs. One member of that audience expressed particular excitement: Paganini.

The following month Paganini came to see Berlioz with an unusual proposition. He had just obtained a Stradivarius viola, which he wished to play in public, and he desired to have a viola concerto composed for him. "You are the only one I would trust with such a commission," he told Berlioz, who, though highly flattered, argued that Paganini should write one for himself. But Paganini was already suffering from the throat cancer that was to kill him and insisted that he was too ill to compose. So Berlioz proceeded.

Even as he was composing the piece, Berlioz worried that his score would not be brilliant enough to serve as a showcase for the virtuoso soloist. He wanted to write "a solo combined with the orchestral accompaniment in such a way as to leave the orchestra full freedom of action."

As soon as the first movement was finished, Paganini asked to see it. Sure enough, he objected to all the rests in the viola part. "There's not enough for me to do here. I should be playing all the time." Berlioz insisted once again that if he wanted a concerto, he should write it himself. Paganini, with an air of disappointment, went away and departed soon afterwards for Italy.

Disappointed but realistic, Berlioz decided to finish the work to suit his own taste, making the solo viola a character of solitary melancholy, like the Childe Harold of Lord Byron.

This treatment of the solo instrument, not as a device for virtuoso display but as a kind of dramatic persona, whose presence—always lost in reverie and contemplation—colors everything that goes on around him, was utterly novel. Berlioz gave the symphony no formal program other than its overall title and the headings of the four movements:

1. Harold in the Mountains: Scenes of melancholy, happiness, and joy
2. March of Pilgrims, singing their Evening Prayer
3. Serenade of a Hillsman of the Abruzzi to his Love
4. Orgy of the Brigands; Memories of Past Scenes

It is easy enough to see at a glance the relationship between such a plan and the traditional abstract four-movement symphony. Easy, too, to note the obvious homage to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in the "Memories of Past Scenes" that bring the principal themes of the earlier movements in review once again as part of the finale. It is thus the most conservative of Berlioz' major works. At the same time, the work is full of exotic images of a distant place so beloved to the romantic spirit.

Ironically, not all of the musical ideas in the symphony arose as conceptions of the Abruzzi range in central Italy. Two of the themes—the first-movement Allegro's secondary theme and the tune that characterizes the solo viola—came from an earlier Berlioz work, a depiction of Scotland after Sir Walter Scott. It was a work Berlioz had sent from Rome during his residency there to prove that he had been working diligently as the winner of the Prix de Rome. The piece had been premiered on April 14, 1833, with notable lack of success. Berlioz wrote in his memoirs, "I destroyed it immediately after the concert." But—as in other instances where Berlioz claimed he had destroyed something—this was not quite true; the best parts remained intact and reappeared—in the same key—in *Harold*.

The opening Adagio offers a surprising touch: it is a strict double fugue, but devoid of the air of the academy that such a texture normally produces. Berlioz uses it to evoke a kind of placeless wandering, into which he inserts the first suggestion (in the minor mode) of the melody that will characterize "Harold," as represented by the solo viola. This melody, when it appears, will prove to be perfectly, classically balanced, an excellent musical representation of one who remains cool, uninvolved. Following the world-weariness of the opening Adagio, the Allegro brings on a mood of exuberance continued in the secondary theme and, indeed, until the end of the movement through a coda in double-time.

The Pilgrims' March was the most favorably received movement in Berlioz' own time. A soft tolling in the harp and quiet chords in the horns accompany the melody that represents the march proper. At first hearing it might sound as if the melody is simply being repeated over and over again, but in fact Berlioz varies it with the utmost subtlety, yet always brings the ending of the melody back to the same pitch with endlessly inventive reharmonizations. The procession seems to come closer, the pilgrims intone their hymn softly in the strings against arpeggios *sul ponticello* in the solo viola. Finally, with splendid control of sonority and color, Berlioz suggests the passing of the procession into the distance.

The Serenade is the most original of all the movements in the symphony. There is a suggestion of dancing in the 6/8 dotted rhythm of the opening, following which the English horn sings the serenade melody. Later, as the horns repeat it, the solo violist repeats Harold's theme in long note values, dreamily. Finally, Berlioz combines all three themes, in different tempos.

The finale grew out of a germ of a march theme in B-flat that now appears as the secondary theme in a sonata-form movement that begins with a retrospective survey of the themes from preceding movements. This is really the last opportunity the solo violist has to be heard with any degree of continuity, because once the brigands' "orgies" break out, the dynamic level is such as will far outstrip the lone violist. What would Paganini have said if he had seen this movement?

Paganini's first chance to hear the piece was in Paris on December 16, 1838. After the performance was over, Paganini led the composer before the audience, fell to his knees, kissed his hand and declared him to be the successor of Beethoven. His sincerity can hardly be questioned: two days later, Paganini's son delivered what he called "a letter that requires no response." It contained a bank draft for 20,000 francs and a note from Paganini opening, with the words, "Beethoven having left us, only Berlioz can make him come alive again."

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