

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Kern Plays Grieg

October 7, 8 & 9, 2023

Program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Polonaise from *Eugene Onegin*



COMPOSER: born May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votinsk, Viatka province, Russia; died November 6, 1893, Saint Petersburg

WORK COMPOSED: 1877-78

WORLD PREMIERE: Nikolai Rubinstein conducted the first performance of *Eugene Onegin* featuring students of the Moscow Conservatory at the Maly Theatre in Moscow on March 29, 1879

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 5 minutes

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In July 1877, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky married one of his former Moscow Conservatory students, Antonina Ivanova Miliukova, whom he described as "... a woman with whom I am not the least in love." Tchaikovsky likely took this ill-fated step as a means of stifling public gossip about his sexual orientation, and to satisfy the wishes of his family. Within weeks of the wedding, Tchaikovsky suffered a crippling nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. When he recovered, Tchaikovsky severed all ties to his wife, although the two were never officially divorced.

After his marriage collapsed, Tchaikovsky went abroad for an extended period. To escape the bitter cold of Moscow's winters, Tchaikovsky sought out Rome's milder, forgiving climes. While there, he finished his opera *Eugene Onegin*, based on Alexander Pushkin's 1833 novel of the same name. "If ever music was written with sincere passion, with love for the story and the characters in it, it is the music for *Onegin*," Tchaikovsky wrote after finishing it. "I trembled ... with inexpressible delight while writing it."

The story behind *Eugene Onegin* centers around the lasting damage caused by unrequited love. During a visit to the Russian countryside, Onegin, a handsome cosmopolitan gentleman from St. Petersburg, meets a naive country girl, Tatiana, who immediately falls in love with him. Onegin, who does not reciprocate her feelings, coldly rejects her. Years later, back in St. Petersburg, Onegin attends a ball at the palace of Prince Gremin and is captivated by the prince's elegant, alluring wife. To his great surprise, Onegin realizes she is in fact Tatiana, transformed from a country bumpkin into Princess Gremin, a glamorous and sophisticated woman. Onegin pleads with Tatiana to run

off with him, but she tells him that even though she still loves him, she will stay with her husband out of loyalty. Devastated, Onegin recognizes the folly of his youthful error.

The third act, which takes place at Prince Gremin's ball, opens with the Polonaise, a majestic couples dance from Poland. Its vigorous energy reflects Onega's joy upon recognizing Tatiana.

MICHAEL DJUPSTROM

From the Northern Wilds



COMPOSER: born 1981, San Juan, Puerto Rico

WORK COMPOSED: 2015, for the American Composers Orchestra

WORLD PREMIERE: The ACO gave the first performance on October 16, 2015, at the Brookfield Place Winter Garden in New York City.

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, bass drum, glockenspiel, mechanical percussion, tam-tam, vibraphone, MIDI keyboard, harp and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 6 minutes

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Composer/pianist and music educator Michael Djupstrom's music has earned prestigious awards and fellowships from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, MacDowell, and the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, among others, and he has been commissioned by a growing list of artists and organizations across America, including the Curtis Institute, Tanglewood Music Center, the Dover Quartet, and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Djupstrom currently teaches chamber music at the University of Pennsylvania and maintains a private studio of piano and composition students.

"*From the Northern Wilds* was commissioned by the Great Falls Symphony Association in Montana in celebration of the orchestra's 60th anniversary," Djupstrom writes. "As such, the commission was designed for a new work that would reflect in some way upon the ensemble, the city, and its community. I decided to write something inspired by the great Missouri River, which flows through Great Falls and played a major role in the city's historical development.

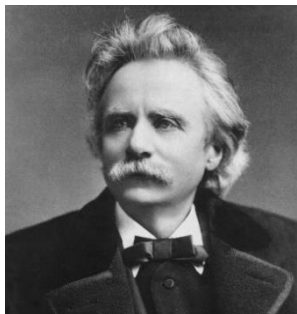
"From its origins at a wild, unmarked Montana mountain spring, the Missouri River runs for more than 2,600 miles before emptying its massive current into the Mississippi River just north of St. Louis. The music of *From the Northern Wilds* follows a similar course, with its flowing principal theme (first emerging quietly in the oboe) being taken up by larger and larger instrumental forces as the work progresses.

"The Missouri River's waters have long been a source of nourishment, travel, industry, and revenue for all those who live along its length, and I came to imagine that a secondary musical theme could represent the humans who have harnessed the river's energy throughout history. Just as the needs of humanity and those of the natural world can at times seem quite opposed to one another, these two musical ideas sometimes come into conflict as the work develops. At its climax, however, they are blended majestically and harmoniously together.

"In the 21st century, I think that humanity is more than ever before quite aware of how our actions can have a negative impact upon the natural world, but at the same time, how we could work towards utilizing the resources offered to us in a more sustainable manner. I wonder and I hope that just as the two themes in this piece combine, we might in the future achieve a more symbiotic relationship with the world we inhabit. The music ends with a question."

EDVARD GRIEG

Concerto in A minor for piano and orchestra, Opus 16



COMPOSER: born June 15, 1843, Bergen, Norway; died September 4, 1907, Bergen, Norway

WORK COMPOSED: Grieg wrote his piano concerto in 1868 in Søllerød, Denmark. He revised it a number of times between 1872 and 1907

WORLD PREMIERE: Holger Simon Paulli led the orchestra of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, with pianist Edmund Neupert, on *April 3, 1869*

INSTRUMENTATION: solo piano, 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 30 minutes

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“Keep on, I tell you. You have what is needed, and don’t let them frighten you.” – Franz Liszt to Edvard Grieg, during a meeting in the spring of 1870

Edvard Grieg had beginner’s luck with his piano concerto. Written when he was 25, it is one of the most performed piano concertos in the repertoire and, along with the Peer Gynt suites, Grieg’s most popular work. Grieg’s concerto is often compared with Robert Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A minor, and the similarities between them are not coincidental. Both concertos share the same key and open with a grand orchestral chord, followed immediately by virtuosic flourishes up and down the keyboard. Grieg’s and Schumann’s A minor piano concertos are also the only piano concertos either man wrote, a puzzling fact given that both were also skilled pianists. Grieg was an admirer of Schumann’s music, and was familiar with Schumann’s concerto, having heard Clara Schumann play it in Leipzig when he was a student there. Grieg always remembered this performance as a major highlight of his Leipzig student days.

Appreciation for Schumann’s music notwithstanding, Grieg’s piano concerto is his own. In describing his style of composition, Grieg wrote, “Composers with the stature of a Bach or Beethoven have erected grand churches and temples. I have always wished to build villages: places where people can feel happy and comfortable ... the music of my own country has been my model.” To that end, Grieg deliberately tapped into the colors of Norwegian folk songs and the rhythms of his country’s folk dances, although, like Antonín Dvořák, Grieg preferred creating his own folk-inspired melodies rather than using pre-existing music. The lively rhythms featured in the final movement, for example, are borrowed from the Halling, a popular rural folk dance.

The bold opening statement seems tailor-made for virtuosity; Grieg pairs it with a contrasting lyrical second theme. The music of the Adagio ruminates quietly, even in its most assertive moments, and features occasional solo passages for cello and winds. The piano tosses off brilliant flashes of color, like a sonic aurora borealis, in the closing Allegro moderato. Grieg gives the second theme to the solo flute; this graceful melody returns later, in a different key, to herald the majestic finale.

Grieg was unable to attend the premiere in Copenhagen, due to prior obligations with the Oslo orchestra, but he was gratified when pianist Edmund Neupert reported several eminent music critics had “applauded with all their might.” Three days later, Neupert also told Grieg that Anton Rubenstein, the famed Russian composer, virtuoso pianist, and founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, had attended the premiere and said he was “astounded to have heard a composition of such genius.”

JEAN SIBELIUS

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Opus 43



COMPOSER: born December 8, 1865, Hämeenlinna, Finland; died September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland

WORK COMPOSED: 1901-02, begun while Sibelius was living in Italy. Dedicated to Baron Axel Carpelan, who financed Sibelius' travels in Italy

WORLD PREMIERE: Sibelius conducted the Helsinki Philharmonic on March 8, 1902

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 44 minutes

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The reception of Jean Sibelius' music outside Finland is an interesting study of changing cultural tastes. Venerated at home – Sibelius' birthday is a national holiday in Finland – Sibelius' music was often ignored or dismissed abroad. In 1940, composer Virgil Thomson derided Sibelius' Second Symphony as "vulgar, self-indulgent and provincial beyond all description." Today it is Sibelius' most popular and most recorded symphony.

In this buoyant, optimistic music, Finns heard the echoes of their own struggles for independence from Russia; over time, the Second Symphony has been understood as a metaphor for liberation. Robert Kajanus, founder and conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, is primarily responsible for this interpretation. Not long after the Symphony's premiere, he remarked, "The Andante strikes one as the most broken-hearted protest against all the injustice that threatens at the present time to deprive the sun of its light and our flowers of their scent ... The finale develops towards a triumphant conclusion intended to rouse in the listener a picture of lighter and confident prospects for the future."

For his part, Sibelius considered his symphonies "absolute" works, with no underlying narrative. In a 1934 interview, he explained, "My symphonies are music conceived and worked out solely in terms of music, with no literary basis. I am not a literary musician – for me, music begins where words cease. A scene can be expressed in painting, and a drama in words, but a symphony should be music first and last ..."

Forty years earlier, however, Sibelius expressed a very different opinion. As a young composer, Sibelius was much influenced by Franz Liszt's music, particularly his tone poems, and Sibelius acknowledged this debt in 1894 when he characterized himself as "a tone painter and poet. Liszt's view of music is the one to which I am closest." This comment is particularly significant, given that when Sibelius began writing what became the Second Symphony, he first conceived it as a tone poem based on the story of Don Juan. Only after he was well into composing did Sibelius come to think of this music as a symphony.

The genesis for the second movement is particularly intriguing. Sibelius wrote in his diary regarding a dream he'd had about Don Juan: "I was sitting in the dark in my castle when a stranger entered. I asked who he could be again and again – but there was no answer ... At last, the stranger began to sing – and then Don Juan knew who it was. It was death." On the opposite page of his diary, Sibelius wrote down the opening theme of the Andante. The ominous portent of this theme grows in intensity, but just as it achieves its greatest tension, Sibelius introduces a lyrical countertheme suggesting Dulcinea.

© Elizabeth Schwartz

Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years, and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media).

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