Dvořák: Slavonic Dance in g minor, Op. 46, No. 8 (arr. Isaac)

Few composers have worked harder for their fame than Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904). The Bohemian (Czech) composer was the son of a country butcher, himself an amateur musician who taught his son to love music, but perhaps did not mention what a tough living it would be. By the age of 16, young Antonín was in Prague studying composition and performance, both on keyboards and on string instruments. Performing in orchestras and churches kept him fed, but it would not be until he was in his thirties that his compositions finally caught enough of the public attention to allow Dvořák to develop a thriving music career.

Amongst these first – though delayed – successes are his eight Slavonic Dances, Op. 46, published in 1878 first as piano duets and then later that same year in orchestral versions by Dvořák himself. Each borrows the characteristic rhythms and energies of the region’s traditional music: music that Dvořák had known from childhood. Rather than quoting pre-existing folk melodies, he crafted his own melodies in the spirit of those musical roots.

The last of those eight Slavonic Dances takes its potentially dark key of g minor and finds within it much flash and fire. Sweeter passages also appear, as Dvořák knew well that his homeland’s traditional dances typically featured abrupt alterations of tempo and mood. Such quick changes would have kept dancers on their toes, and are no less demanding of attention from performers and conductors.

Rossini: The Barber of Seville Overture

The Barber of Seville was 17th of 29 operas by Gioacchino Rossini (1792 – 1868). When it premiered February 20, 1816, the composer was not quite 24 years of age, and yet was already proving to his elder and more established colleagues that he was easily their match, and possible their superior. Yet even a young genius can find himself pressed for time. On the day of the work’s premiere, he had not quite enough time to complete a new overture, so he borrowed one that he’d already used in not just one previous opera but two. Aureliano in Palmira of 1813 and Elizabeth Queen of England of 1815 had each begun with this same overture, a fact that few remember today, as it has become irrevocably attached to Barber.

As the overture was not just second-hand, but actually third-hand, it features no melodies from Barber itself. However, it does bear the hallmarks of Rossini’s favorite tricks in overtures: beginning with a dramatic, attention-grabbing introduction before proceeding through a sequence of increasingly lively melodies. He also uses a technique in which a short rhythmic pattern is repeated over and over, each time more loudly, played by more instruments. The resulting build-up of energy became so identified with the composer himself that it has come to be known as a ”Rossini crescendo.” All in all, though the overture did not originate with Barber, it magically captures the high spirits of the tale.

Weber: Clarinet Concerto No. 1 in f minor, Op. 73 – first movement

Carl Maria von Weber (1786 – 1826) was not himself a clarinetist. However, his colleague Heinrich Joseph Bärmann was, and possessed sufficient genius with the instrument that Weber composed several showcase works specifically for him. Before these works appeared — all in the very early 19th century — the only important composer who had had much to do with the clarinet was Mozart, already twenty years in his grave. So clarinetists had been waiting for new material, and they found it with Weber.
His clarinet-inspired works include both chamber pieces and concerti with orchestra. The first of the two concerti was published in Leipzig in 1814. The work opens determinedly in the minor key of its title: ominous and suspenseful in mood, as if insisting that this instrument so rarely found in the spotlight was indeed something to be taken seriously. Mindful of expectation of the day, Weber lets the orchestra set the scene before the soloist joins the action. Here, the most dramatic statements are generally for the orchestra, the soloist providing more poignant commentary with quick runs and trills to punctuate the action.

I. Allegro (lively)

Sarasate: *Zigeunerweisen*, Op. 20 (Gypsy Airs) and *Carmen Fantasy*, Op. 25

Born in Pamplona, Spain, Pablo de Sarasate (1844 – 1908) was one of those colorful figures who so frequently populate the pages of music history. Born into a poor Spanish family, he showed an extraordinary talent for violin, an ability which brought him into the highest social circles and soon supported an extravagant style of living. Bruch, Saint-Saëns, and Dvořák all wrote music for him, and Sarasate was acknowledged as a pre-eminent master of the violin. His popularity was such that in one of his Sherlock Holmes short stories (“The Red-Headed League”), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has the detective and Dr. Watson spending an afternoon at a Sarasate concert in London’s St. James Hall. Since at the time the story was published Sarasate was alive and well, some friend or colleague must have brought it to his attention.

Of Sarasate’s own compositions, all feature the violin, and many are based on folk dance rhythms or themes from popular operas. Examples of each approach are found in tonight’s concert. *Zigeunerweisen* (Gypsy Airs) offers a series of melodies that showcase both the soloist’s technique and the ability to coax poignant expression from the instrument. The pyrotechnic finale serves up electric excitement which might be gypsy-like but also Iberian, unsurprising for this native of Pamplona. The slightly later *Carmen Fantasy* has the advantage of drawing inspiration from one of the most famed operas of all time, one that is, moreover, set in Spain and rich with Spanish flavor. There is plenty of opportunity for virtuosity display. Transferred to Sarasate’s care, the melodies are not the less for lack of singers. His frequent tempo changes perfectly reflect the opera’s shifting scenes: sometimes languid in mood, at other times vibrant, but always well suited to the violin.

Tchaikovsky: *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture*

More classical music may have been inspired by the writings of Shakespeare than by those of any other author. Over three hundred years of composers, from Henry Purcell (1659 – 1695) through Thomas Adés (b. 1971) and beyond, have found in the Bard’s comedies and tragedies characters well-suited to musical expression. Although over a dozen Shakespeare plays have been treated by various composers, the one that consistently attracts the most attention is the familiar tale of *Romeo and Juliet*. The star-crossed lovers have found life in operatic, balletic, and symphonic conceptions, among many other musical settings, but of all those numerous works, Tchaikovsky’s tone poem has become the most beloved.

The *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture* arose from a consultation between Tchaikovsky and his more experienced colleague, the composer Mily Balakirev (1837 – 1910). In 1869, Tchaikovsky, not quite thirty, complained to his friend that he had lately been unable to compose, that he was lacking ideas for new pieces. Balakirev, who was at the time working on a *King Lear Overture*, suggested a Shakespearean solution: *Romeo and Juliet*. He even proposed possible themes and a general outline for the work. Tchaikovsky agreed, and soon set to work, sending the composition-in-progress to Balakirev for commentary. Balakirev, apparently irked that Tchaikovsky had not followed his suggestions to the letter, was somewhat critical of the results, yet expressed cautious approval, declaring “It is the first of your compositions that contains so many beautiful things one does not hesitate to pronounce it good as a whole.” The completed score premiered in Moscow in March, 1870. Two revisions followed; the final edition was first heard in 1886.

Rather than setting out to portray the play’s events in the order in which they occur, Tchaikovsky instead concerned himself with a variety of characters and moods whose melodies offer effective musical contrast. The work opens with a serene clarinet-and-bassoon melody that represents the lover’s ally, Friar Laurence, shown in a somber and reflective state of mind. The scene then shifts to one of violence, with a chaotic theme for the feuding Montagues and Capulets. Yet before long, Tchaikovsky introduces a new melody: the soaring love theme of Romeo and Juliet themselves. As the piece progresses, love and violence share the stage with a sense of growing urgency until the climax is reached and the lovers lie dying in the tomb. With a hint of Friar Laurence’s melancholy theme, as if he has arrived on the scene too late to be of help to his young friends, the *Fantasy-Overture* concludes.