Program Notes

We begin and end today's concert with music composed just two years apart: Janáček's *Sinfonietta* from Czechoslovakia in 1926 and then, in 1928, Stravinsky's *Le baiser de la fée* (The Fairy's Kiss), written during the composer's time in Paris between the wars. Amid these bookends, we will be treated to Paganini's first violin concerto written some 100 years earlier in 1818.

I began my musings on this program by simply listening to each piece. What struck me immediately about the sound worlds created in these works was that the colors and musical effects were surprising, and in some cases unsettling—not at all what you would expect based on the composer's name alone.

The Stravinsky felt backward-looking, but not in the neo-classical way that we know of from that period of his life. It immediately invoked for me wisps of the Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 2, nicknamed "The Little Russian." The Paganini opened in a way that sounded just like Rossini! He then morphed into a style that felt virtuosic in a way that is very much typical of the composer's writing for violin. But then, the sounds turned ultra-romantic, and then, flipped to classical. This unsettled style was very appealing, but it was also jarring to my ear for more reasons than one. And then, the Janáček. Well—once you hear the opening and closing of the piece—you will never confuse it with anything else. It opens with a brass fanfare, sounding like a heroic, but country-style band. And then, as each movement unfolds, we are exposed to incredibly distinct motivic and orchestration choices.

These referential and sometimes anachronistic impressions, it turns out, were very much intentioned by the composers. All three are turning back directly to their homelands and recalling composers and/or styles that are part of that ethnic fabric. This purpose of homage in all three works form a fabric of varied timelines and aesthetics that will provide for us a delightful and in many ways unexpected concert experience.

Leoš Janáček
(1854–1928)

Sinfonietta

Leoš Janáček was a fervent advocate for Czech culture and this piece is perhaps his most overt in reflecting this nationalism. The work was initially dubbed with the subtitle "Military Sinfonietta," however, the composer later

struck the word military and replaced it with "Sokol Festival." Sinfonietta was commissioned by that festival, an annual celebration of Czech independence meant to embody the ideals of "contemporary free man, his spiritual beauty and joy, his strength, courage, and determination to fight for victory."

This was rather a broad set of ideals, but Janáček was moved by the various military bands he had heard as a younger man in his hometown of Brno, and the fanfare for percussion and brass that is the first movement of the work truly does evoke this spirit of celebration and aspiration. The music of the fanfare is an amalgam of gestures played by these marching bands that Janáček had transcribed in a composition notebook that he carried with him at all times. The motivic content from this opening section is then spun out by the composer and forms the basis of the other movements of the work.

The remainder of the piece's movements are based on a scene of childhood importance to Janáček from Brno: the Castle; the Queen's Monastery; the Street Leading to the Castle; and the Town Hall. Each is full of those unexpected unfoldings that I referenced in the introduction. Instead of creating through-lines for the listener to follow, Janáček juxtaposes highly contrasting material, often with no transitions. The sense is one of great beauty and power, but most of all, surprise.

Niccolò Paganini
(1782–1840)

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op. 6

Remember when I mentioned the jarring nature of this concerto's opening? It sounds just like a Rossini overture with its bombastic bass drum and cymbal hits, lively melody, and perky sensibility. The introduction is essentially a Rossini-style overture in miniature—and then the violin's entrance several minutes into the work mimics a bel-canto style aria. Paganini idolized Rossini, already a prolific figure in the world of Italian opera, and this nod to his countryman continues in various ways throughout the work.

Of note is the secrecy of the composer around performances of his concerti. He would deliver hand-written parts on the day of the performance and not have a score published in order to keep his composition "secret." Officially six concertos are accounted for, others were lost completely to history.

Musicians feel rather unlucky that these works did not survive. Thankfully, the first concerto is one of three that remains fully intact. As Berlioz wrote about Paganini: "a volume might be written in discussing all that Paganini has created in his works of novel effect, ingenious contrivances…and orchestral combinations unknown before his time."

The first movement of the work, longer than the other two combined, allows the soloist to shine with frenzied passagework, double-stops, and harmonics. The next is distinctly different, with no extended techniques whatsoever. Paganini related that it was meant to depict a skilled actor delivering a tragic soliloquy. The finale is a rondo of great difficulty, falling much in line with other concertos of the early Romantic period, but with accompaniment figures that often firmly reposition Rossini in our minds and ears.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Divertimento from *The Fairy's Kiss*

Stravinsky was certainly a man and an artist unto himself, his style so distinctive as to be instantly recognizable, no matter the guise he puts on. The cataclysmic debut on the ballet stage of *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913 is the marker by which many define the beginning of modern music. But through all of that distinction, Stravinsky, as a citizen and as a composer, was a bit of a chameleon. He was born in Russia, summered in Ukraine, lived for a time in Switzerland and France, and ultimately gained American citizenship before dying in New York City. He also migrated through musical chapters of his own life—starting as a "Russian" style composer, his middle period was spent as a Neo-Classicist, and he ended as a serialist.

However, his roots were always in Russia—and in many ways they began with Tchaikovsky. Even though he eschewed the absolute Romanticism of Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky was deeply affected by having seen the elder Russian master perform on the piano in Russia just weeks before Tchaikovsky's death in 1893.

Thus, when approached about a ballet project to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Tchaikovsky's passing, Stravinsky accepted and eagerly set to work on composing *The Fairy's Kiss*. Stravinsky chose to write in a style that

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would imitate Tchaikovsky's in many ways, but we feel the presence of the modernist throughout. So powerful was the melding of styles that Stravinsky declared, "I've lost track of what belongs to whom." Stravinsky bases much of the material off of early Tchaikovsky songs and piano pieces—but also borrows from himself, quoting *Petroushka* in the second movement of this work.

In this Divertimento, Stravinsky himself creates a suite of about half of the ballet's music, presenting it in four movements. The first is a beautiful mix of both composers' typical sounds, while the second is the most purely Stravinsky of the group. The third is another wonderful mix, while the finale is a *Pas de deux* that again leans heavily on Tchaikovsky's material and voice.

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