

“World Class” Program Notes

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Sacred Geometry for Chamber Orchestra

by Richard Chandler (b. 1954)



Richard J. Chandler studied music at St. Johns University and the College of St. Benedict, receiving his BA in music from St. Cloud State University, with graduate music composition studies at the University of Minnesota. His works have been performed by the Bethlehem Chamber Orchestra, the St. Cloud State University Wind Ensemble, at the College of St. Benedict and St. Johns University, as well as in recitals in Minneapolis and St. Paul, St. Cloud and in Greater Minnesota. To learn more about Mr. Chandler, go to: www.richardjchandler.com

About his new composition, he writes: *Sacred Geometry for Chamber Orchestra* is inspired by the architecture and art of the late medieval and Renaissance period of European times. Many of those churches, cathedrals and castles built centuries ago still stand to inspire and edify us. Perhaps you may hear sounds within this work that hearken to those timeless qualities of proportion, symmetry, harmony and dancing rhythm. —rc



Concerto No. 2 in g minor, 63

by Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

After the Russian revolution of 1917 Prokofiev spent 17 years in self imposed exile in the west. During this time,

like so many other contemporary composers (Hindemith, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, etc.) he experimented with creating new musical languages – what was to be called the “avant-garde” – stretching harmonies, losing the sense of melody that had up until that time been so important to musical compositions, to the point where he developed a reputation as being the enfant terrible “bad boy.”

In the 1930’s he realized that this type of composing was detrimental to his creativity, and so he started to change his style, into what he called a “new simplicity” – music that would be more approachable to the general public. This change of heart resulted in the film score to *Lieutenant Kije*, which he later turned into an orchestral suite, the ballets *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella*, the *second violin concerto*, the *fifth* and *sixth symphonies*, and many other works, most of which remain popular in today’s orchestral repertoire.

As an aside, one might make a comparison to American composer Aaron Copland who, in his early years, wrote “very difficult music” (one critic complained that if he was writing music like this in his early twenties, that soon thereafter he would be ready to commit murder), but he too later changed his composing to a “more simple style,” which resulted in some of his most popular works, including *Appalachian Spring*, *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, etc.

In 1935, Prokofiev composed his *second violin concerto* for the French violinist Robert Soetens, who premiered the work later that year with the Madrid Orchestra. The concerto is conventional in the sense that it had three movements, with recognizable melodies, and followed the normal pattern for tempos – the first movement was fast, the second slow, the third fast. That being said, the first movement is unusual in that it first states the primary melody as a solo line in the solo violin, and then repeats it many times, sometimes in the solo part and sometimes throughout the orchestra, but in different guises, with different tempi and keys. He also treats the secondary melody in a similar fashion. Throughout the movement, and in fact throughout the entire concerto, there are often rhythmically unexpected, but interesting and challenging, accompaniments combined with unexpected/unusual key changes, and his “unusual” musical quirks and idiosyncrasies.

The second movement is a beautifully lyric piece, but again with unexpected changes and moods. The third movement is a rondo – the primary theme returns many times, but often with varying accompaniments, and in different keys. In many respects, it is like a peasant dance, but

with lots of accents, at times an almost ferocious temperament, and interestingly, a very prominent part for the bass drum (not timpani as would be the norm). As one commentator noted, and I do tend to agree, in this movement, it is as if Prokofiev was almost creating a battle between the soloist and the orchestra with the soloist trying to “escape.” Be that as it may, the concerto has all of the hallmarks of a great and expressive masterwork. Jf

Serenade for Strings, opus 20

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)



Edward Elgar who is generally regarded as England’s most prominent romantic composer, is best known for only a handful of orchestral works. *The Enigma Variations*, *The Cello Concerto*, *The Pomp and Circumstance Marches*, *the Introduction and Allegro*, and *Serenade for Strings* (heard on this set of performances) are undoubtedly the most popular and recognizable from his output.

At the onset of his career, aside from violin lessons from a local teacher, Elgar was largely self-taught. He had ambitions to study in Leipzig, but because of family financial limitations, those dreams went unfulfilled. Consequently, his early works were not particularly well crafted, and generally have been dismissed as being undistinguished. In those early years, he made his living by teaching, playing organ in the local churches and violin in the regional orchestras, one of which was conducted by Antonin Dvořák.

As Elgar developed his compositional skills, and even after he became famous (largely because of *The Enigma Variations*), his music seemed to be out of touch with English critics. A quote from E.J. Dent on modern English music stated, “*For English ears, Elgar’s music is too emotional and not quite free of vulgarity.*”

Even though a number of well-known composers and critics including George Bernard Shaw came to his defense, and the British Broadcasting Corporation continued to play his music on the radio, Elgar’s popularity in the concert hall diminished.

The Serenade for Strings, was composed in 1892, and was first performed four years later in Antwerp. It is no surprise that the premiere took four years to happen, and that it was not even in Elgar's native land. The reason is simple – Elgar was still a struggling composer at that time – his fame would come later when the *Engima Variations* were composed (1898-99) and would soon be universally lauded as a masterpiece. Unknown composers have a tough time getting their works performed.

Even though it is small in scope – short in length and strings only — taken on its own terms, the *Serenade* is a remarkable piece of music. It is Elgar's first work that has his unique sense of harmony, phrasing and melodic structure, thereby distinguishing it from music by other contemporary English composers. What I mean by this is that much of the early to middle 20th century English music for strings, (excluding Elgar), often seemed to have similar harmonic and rhythmic patterns, many with the sing song rhythms of the sea, and although pretty with nice melodies, there is not much emotional content.

The Serenade is different in that as E.J. Dent suggests, it is emotional (but certainly not vulgar), which as just mentioned, is often lacking in other English music of the time. Because of this, I think the music must be approached differently from its counterparts. For me, the phrases need special (more) care in shaping, the rhythmic pulse needs to be very distinct and clearly defined, etc. Perhaps this is best demonstrated in the second movement, which is the emotional highpoint of the work. Although not marked in the score, I think the music calls for varying tempos, highlighting the various instrumental lines, and shaping the melodic lines so to highlight the beginnings, the highpoints and the endings of the phrases. jf

Ancient Airs and Dances Suite I

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)



Ottorino Respighi came to prominence as a composer in 1916 with his *Fountains of Rome*, the first of what was to become several depictions of entities related to Rome – *the Pines of Rome*, *Church Windows* etc.

Respighi was one of ten Italian composers, including Ildebrando Pizzetti and Rocardo Zandonai, who signed a manifesto against the modern trends of composition that said in part:

We are against art that cannot and does not have any human content and desires to be merely a mechanical demonstration and a cerebral puzzle... A logical chain binds the past and the future – the romanticism of yesterday will again be the romanticism of tomorrow.

Composed in 1917, the ***Ancient Airs and Dances Suite I*** was the first of three suites that took “ancient” (16th and 17th century) lute music from the Renaissance and Baroque, kept the melodies and harmonies as they were first written, and then orchestrated them using modern instruments.

The first movement, “*Ballo detto il Conte Orlando*,” was a popular piece from the 17th century written by Simone Molinaro.

Vincenzo Galilei, who coincidentally was the father of the famous astronomer, composed the second movement’s “*Gagliarda*,” which was originally called “*Polymnia*.” In the middle section of this movement, Respighi added an anonymous dance with a drone bass.

For the third movement, Respighi chose a “*Villanella*,” which originally was a setting of the dying words of a character in Ariosto’s *Orlando furios* . This of course suggests a sad (slow) piece, which is the case, but there is a slightly quicker *Italiana* (which probably refers to an Italian dance or dance form) in the middle.

The last movement combines two 16th century anonymous dances, the first including several variations on a “*passa mezzo*” (a fast Italian dance) mixed with a “*mascherada*” (party dance), ending the movement and the suite with a brilliant flourish. jf