BRAHMS: *Academic Festival Overture*

Johannes Brahms came from a working-class family in Hamburg. Money was tight. To help make ends meet, "Hannes" quit school at fourteen and headed to the seaport to work as a barroom musician. By all accounts, it was a disreputable place. Despite the antics of drunken sailors, young Brahms did his best to keep his nose in a book—*while* playing piano.

By the time he hit thirty, he was a respectable musician. When he started issuing symphonies, audiences heard his music as far away as New York City. Imagine his surprise when, at age forty-five, the University of Breslau announced its intention to award Brahms an honorary doctorate. This came with a strong suggestion that he might write for them a symphony to mark the occasion (this would have been a major acquisition for the university). But Brahms was too much of a free spirit to get boxed into something like that.

He answered with one of his most playful scores, a ten-minute piece filled with popular student drinking songs.

The *Academic Festival Overture* came from the summer of 1880, written in the picturesque spa town of Bad Ischl ("Bad" is the German word for "bath"). That same summer, Brahms wrote a companion piece to it, not unlike the theater masks, Comedy and Tragedy.

"The *Academic* has led me to a second overture which I can only entitle the *Dramatic*," he wrote. Over the coming months, he changed the title to *Tragic Overture.* He conducted the two overtures side-by-side at the presentation of his honorary doctorate.

SIBELIUS: *Finlandia*

Since Napoleon, the Finnish people have had an 830-mile problem—the border with Russia. In 1809, they fell under the thumb of the tsar. Initially, the Russian monarch permitted some measure of autonomy. That changed in 1899 when Nicholas II instituted a policy of Russification. His censors took control of the Finnish press. The Russian military began drafting Finns into service, and administrators forced the people to adopt the Russian language. The Finns pushed back just as Sibelius was emerging as an important composer.

Although he grew up in a Swedish-speaking household, the composer married the daughter of a famous Finnish patriot and statesman. Sibelius caught the patriotic fever, adopted the Finnish language, and devoted many of his works to the Finnish identity.

In October 1899, members of the Helsinki press organized a benefit, ostensibly to support a newspaper pension fund. In truth, it was a pep rally for national unity. The entertainment included a theatrical presentation of the poem "The Melting of the Ice on the Ulea River" by Zachria Topelius, culminating in the dawning of Finnish independence. Sibelius wrote *Finlandia* for that dramatic moment, and the audience went wild. Sibelius's piece quickly spread throughout the country and came to symbolize the resistance, prompting the Tsar to ban performances of it. In response, Finnish musicians changed its name to keep the piece circulating. Sibelius became a national hero.

MUSSORGSKY: "The Great Gate of Kiev" from *Pictures at an Exhibition*

In the spring of 1874, Modest Mussorgsky lumbered into an art show to view the life's work of a close friend. Victor Hartmann, an architect, designer, and painter, had died suddenly at 39; Mussorgsky was heartbroken. As he strolled through the exhibition, a flood of piano music came to him.

"I can hardly manage to scribble it down on paper," he wrote. Sadly, the 35-year-old Mussorgsky had one foot in the grave. A hard-core binge drinker, he eventually lost his job and his home and died at forty-two, leaving much of his creative output in shambles. Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov went to great lengths to preserve Mussorgsky's legacy, editing and completing several of the late composer's works. This included *Pictures at an Exhibition,* published by Rimsky in 1886. In 1922, conductor Serge Koussevitzky hired master orchestrator Maurice Ravel to create a "colorized" version of *Pictures*, recasting the piano pieces as a mighty orchestral suite.

The last movement, "The Great Gate of Kyiv," echoes an architectural drawing by Hartmann showing a large arch flanked by two smaller arches and a bell tower. Hartmann entered this design in a contest sponsored by Tsar Alexander II. The gate was never built.

RESPIGHI: "Pines of The Appian Way" from *Pines of Rome*

Rome, Italy, got its nickname, the Eternal City, back in the time of togas and gladiators. Two thousand years later, it still fits. Looking past the buzzing Vespas and irascible taxi drivers, you'll see relics of earlier civilizations taking you through the Renaissance and Middle Ages and back to the Bronze Age. Today's Roman workers can scarcely dig a subway tunnel without hitting ancient ruins.

Ottorino Respighi wrote *The Pines of Rome* in 1924 as a tribute to the Eternal City, with the ever-present pinus pinea—the stone pine—looking on. These towering, umbrella-shaped trees form elegant canopies over the city. They also yield the popular food item, the pine nut.

"The centuries-old trees which so characteristically dominate the Roman landscape become witnesses to the principal events in Roman life," wrote Respighi. The "Pines of the Appian Way" takes you to a roadway in ancient Rome as an endless column of armor-clad soldiers threads its way into the city center.

"Misty dawn on the Appian Way," wrote the composer. "The tragic country is guarded by solitary pines. Indistinctly, incessantly, the rhythm of unending steps. The poet has a fantastic vision of past glories. Trumpets blare, and the army of the Consul bursts forth in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph the Capitoline Hill."

ELGAR: Cello Concerto in E Minor

In July 1904, Edward Elgar, the son of a piano tuner, knelt before King Edward VII. The king raised his sword and tapped the composer on the shoulders, elevating him to knighthood.

Edwardian England was the "Gilded Age," a time when the playboy King Edward hopped around Europe attending glamorous parties. The British Empire stretched around the globe. And technology brought electric lights, indoor plumbing, and refrigerators into many homes. In fiction, we know the Edwardians from *Sherlock Holmes*, *Downton Abbey*, and *Mary Poppins*.

This was Edward Elgar's world, and he was at his zenith. People considered him the greatest English composer of the past 100 years, and orchestras worldwide played his works. But the Edwardian era was brief. The king died in 1910, and Europe plunged into war in 1914.

In just four years, the Great War spilled the blood of a generation, leaving a million Englishmen dead and another two million with disabilities. The Spanish Flu crippled communities and wiped out tens of millions of souls worldwide. The tumult created a new world order. America emerged as a political and economic power while Britain began to recede.

After the War, the music world changed, too. 62-year-old Edward Elgar found himself a has-been. He wrote his Cello Concerto in 1919, a piece that is, to many ears, a lament for a lost world.

By all accounts, the premiere was a disaster. Conductor Albert Coates used up most of the rehearsal time for his own program leaving conductor/composer Elgar little time to prepare his new piece. The concerto languished for several decades until the 1960s when the brilliant young cellist Jacqueline du Pré became its champion.

Today, Elgar shares the top spot with Dvořák for having written the most popular cello concerto in the world.

BRITTEN: *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*

Composer Benjamin Britten once wrote: "One of my chief aims was to try and restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell."

It was high praise for Purcell and a blistering critique of other English composers; Purcell had been dead for 250 years.

Britten had a history of locking horns with England's musical establishment. At 19, he'd had it with the old guard and dropped out of the Royal College of Music. He got his first job at the General Post Office (they oversaw communications in the early 20th century). The G.P.O. had a documentary film division, and young Britten signed on to write movie soundtracks.

By 1945, he was an old hand at writing for motion pictures when the Ministry of Education asked for a film score about the instruments of the orchestra. Still, fans, biographers, scholars, and musicians marvel at the sheer quality of what he wrote. *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* holds its own as both a concert piece and an educational tool.

Britten based the piece on a tune by Henry Purcell, written for a stage play in 1695. Britten announces Purcell's them with a full-throated orchestra and then bounces from one section to the next (woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion). He follows the introduction with a series of variations featuring different solo instruments, to which Britten applies the principal of "opposites attract." For example, the tuba accompanies the clarinets. The brass accompanies the violas. In the end, he brings them all together in a frolicsome fugue.

TCHAIKOVSKY: Mazurka from *Swan Lake*

A mazurka is a boisterous Polish dance in triple meter that usually places the accent on the second beat. Though it's considered a national dance of Poland, it became a popular ballroom dance across Europe. Many Russian composers wrote mazurkas in the 19th century (not necessarily for dancing). Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky wrote mazurkas for solo piano and included one in the opera *Eugene Onegin.* In *Swan Lake*, he used the dance for the ballroom scene during which the prince falls for Odile, the Black Swan, who has disguised herself as his beloved Odette.

Tchaikovsky wrote *Swan Lake* for the Bolshoi Theatre between 1875 and 1876. Though it is among the most iconic examples of classical ballet, its genesis remains a mystery. The author of the libretto is unknown. Early revivals and creative license after Tchaikovsky's death further muddied the waters producing multiple versions.

Swan Lake has inspired endless tributes, parodies, and popular references, such as *Barbie of Swan Lake*, *The Black Swan* starring Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis, and the video *Shake It Off* by Taylor Swift.

MENDELSSOHN: Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, movement I

Felix Mendelssohn had more than one brilliant career. He wrote his first masterpiece at sixteen. He founded the Leipzig Conservatory in 1843 and was a famous conductor.

He'd had a charmed upbringing. His father, Abraham, was a prominent banker. His mother championed the arts and brought a stream of famous people to the family home. Not only was young Felix a celebrated piano prodigy (along with his sister Fanny), he excelled at sports, writing poetry, painting, and foreign languages. Today, people regret that Mendelssohn had so many talents because he was often too busy to compose.

In 1841, he was working as conductor at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig when the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV lured him to Berlin. The king wanted Mendelssohn to lead a musical renaissance in the city, promising concerts, ensembles, a new conservatory, and commissions to write music. The composer agreed to the move—and wrote some marvelous works for Berlin—but the king overpromised and underdelivered. Mendelssohn started juggling his commitments to the king while resuming his work at

the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Meanwhile, he maintained a warm relationship with England's Queen Victoria, so he made several trips to London. In 1843, he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, stretching himself even further, and his health began to fail.

In early 1845, he took a break from performance and produced several works, including his Piano Trio No. 2, which he gifted to his sister, Fanny, on her birthday.

Like a candle that burns twice as bright but half as long, Mendelssohn died in 1847 at 38.