

ASYO Program Notes  
May 10, 2026  
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## **IVES Symphony No. 2**

American composer Charles Ives was one of a kind — a highly experimental composer who liked to entertain friends with popular songs. He became a professional musician at fourteen but ultimately made his living as an insurance executive.

“Father felt that a man could keep his music-interest stronger, cleaner, bigger, and freer, if he didn’t try to make a living out of it,” wrote Ives. “Assuming a man lived by himself...[he] might write music that no one would play, listen to, or buy. But — if he has a nice wife and some nice children, how can he let the children starve on his own dissonances?”

Ives wrote his First Symphony under the supervision of Horatio Parker at Yale. He followed with his Second Symphony shortly after moving to New York. The Second Symphony is an amalgam of the music that had filled his head until that point. It is jam-packed with musical references, including “America the Beautiful,” “Camptown Races,” and “Turkey in the Straw.” Some references are direct quotes, while others carry just a whiff of something familiar, encouraging fans to dissect the piece to discover them.

“Every one of his themes paraphrases an American vernacular tune,” wrote biographer J. Peter Burkholder. “At the same time, many transitional sections...paraphrase transitions or episodes in the music of Bach, Brahms, or Wagner. The American sources, then, are identified with the thematic material, the European sources with non-thematic episodes and transitions.” There are fiddle tunes, hymns, marches, Civil War songs, a student song, an abolitionist song, and bits from Ives’ own compositions. And he set these tunes in an elaborate dialogue with the European classical music as if to represent the whole musical firmament as he knew it.

Charles Ives revised the Second Symphony as late as 1910 and completed the Third Symphony that same year. For years, both works sat on a shelf. Ives moved on, venturing into an experimental sound world until he wrote his last piece in 1926.

Twenty years later, Lou Harrison conducted the premiere of the Third Symphony, earning some surprising, if delayed, recognition — Ives received the 1947 Pulitzer Prize for Music. Suddenly, the music world looked again at his works and marveled at his daring inventiveness. With Ives on the brain, Leonard Bernstein conducted the premiere of the Second Symphony in 1951 — fifty years after the composer had completed its first draft. Ives declined to attend the performance but listened to it on a small radio.

## **RAVEL *Alborada del gracioso***

Through the end of the 19th century, many composers hopped onto the Iberian bandwagon. With crackling castanets and persistent Spanish-flavored harmonies, they gave us sizzling examples of Spanish music written by non-Spanish people, including Bizet’s *Carmen*.

Maurice Ravel actually had an ancestral claim to Spain. He and his mother came from the Basque Country, a region straddling France and Spain. While they were both born inside the French border, her family was Spanish, and she met Ravel’s father in Madrid.

Ravel was an up-and-coming composer when he wrote a piano suite called *Miroirs*. At the time, he hung out with a group of creatives who haunted late-night cafés and laughingly called themselves “Les Apaches” (pron. ah POSH). (The term referred to street gangs, but in their case, an old crank had yelled the word at them.) Ravel dedicated each movement of *Miroirs* to one of the Apaches. “Alborada del gracioso” (1905) is dedicated to the music critic Michel Calvocoressi. As a piano piece, “Alborada” is by far the most strenuous and virtuosic of the set.

Ravel orchestrated *Alborada del gracioso* in 1918. The title roughly means “Morning Song of the Jester,” and refers to a song sung at dawn signaling to illicit lovers that it is time to part. (Of course, Ravel’s orchestration would awaken the whole town.)

Ravel frames *Alborada* with the seguidilla, a folk dance from southern Spain. Typically, in triple meter, a boom-chick rhythm subdivides the beat. In this piece, Ravel imitates the Spanish guitar with pizzicato strings before unleashing the mighty orchestra.

### **TCHAIKOVSKY *Swan Lake Suite***

During its opening run, *Swan Lake* baffled many people. The audience liked it, but the critics found the music distracting. The choreographer didn't understand Tchaikovsky's vision, and the dancers complained they couldn't dance to such complicated music.

The notion that dancers could pull off a large-scale, dramatic work wasn't part of Russia's entertainment scene. In those days, ballet music was the domain of second-tier composers. Tchaikovsky's dream defied expectations, and it took time for the dance world to come up to his level.

The Bolshoi Ballet had been in decline when Tchaikovsky wrote *Swan Lake* between 1875 and 1876. After the dicey premiere, things got complicated. Worthy revival productions happened, but not until after Tchaikovsky's death. Since the 1890s, directors and choreographers have had their way with the score, making cuts and altering the story at will. As a result, there is no definitive version. And some basic points about its creation are unknown.

Some say the story originated with Tchaikovsky and his little nieces and nephews. Others suggest he mined German folktales. It feels like a fairytale, but we know nothing of its source.

Thanks to the creativity of the dance world, there are many variations on the following story:

The sorcerer Rothbart has cursed a group of young maidens to live as swans by day. Only a marriage proposal and true love can break the curse.

On his 21st birthday, Prince Siegfried goes hunting. He aims his bow at the swan Odette, but stays his hand when she turns into a beautiful maid. They fall in love. Siegfried tells Odette that he's required to choose a wife at a ball the next night. He declares that he will choose Odette, lifting her curse (and his).

On the night of the ball, Rothbart dispatches his daughter, Odile (the "Black Swan"), in Odette's place. Thanks to Rothbart's trickery, the prince chooses the wrong girl. When he discovers the ruse, he throws himself into the lake, where he and Odette die together.

### **VERDI Overture to *La forza del destino***

Giuseppe Verdi was all about drama. In *La forza del destino*, he builds an excruciating story around a bromance in which the two besties try to kill each other. The libretto's inspiration came by way of playwright Angel de Saavedra, Duke of Rivas, who wrote "Don Álvaro, or the Power of Fate" in 1835.

The show opens with three elephantine chords — the hand of Fate — followed by a stormy overture. When the curtain rises, Verdi spins a tender love story which seems to chase the storm clouds away, only to be followed by a disaster in the courtyard: the girl's father startles her lover as he slips away from the house. Disarming himself, the young protagonist drops his gun. It goes off and kills the old man. A grieving brother vows vengeance. There follows rip-roaring comedy and battlefield camaraderie to give one hope, but for an undercurrent of inevitability.

By the mid-1850s, the composer Giuseppe Verdi had grown weary of the music business — the censors, the critics, and the gossips had taken their pound of flesh, and Verdi's output slowed. Gravitating toward country life, he rejected offers from various opera houses in favor of tending to his crops and horses. But there were rumblings of something bigger in the air — Italian unification. Ramping up around 1848, the movement embraced Verdi as a symbol of national pride. Soon, patriots adopted his name as a slogan for the Risorgimento: "Viva Verdi," an acronym for Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia (Victor Emmanuel King of Italy). In 1859, the composer accepted a political appointment, mostly as a gesture of support for the cause (he wasn't particularly interested in governing).

In 1860, an offer of 60,000 francs from the Imperial Theater in Russia lured him back to his writer's desk to compose *La forza del destino*. The opera premiered in St. Petersburg on November 10, 1862. Verdi revised the show for a second premiere in 1869.