

AYSO Program Notes
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By Noel Morris ©2024

Petrushka

In 1909, Igor Stravinsky was a 28-year-old no-name, a skinny, bespectacled man who had been given the chance of a lifetime. He took it. He wrote the score for a ballet called *The Firebird* and became a 20th-century giant overnight.

Stravinsky's ballet was an assignment by the impresario Sergei Diaghilev for a Russian ballet company in Paris. Young Stravinsky had been Diaghilev's fifth choice for the project—he was his first choice for the next one.

Flush with success, Stravinsky felt he needed to get the sounds of *The Firebird* out of his head, so he started writing some orchestral music. Along the way, the idea of puppets came to him, akin to the puppet theaters he used to see on the streets of St. Petersburg. He told Diaghilev about the concept, and they began to kick around ideas together until a scenario for a new ballet took shape.

According to Alex Ross, designer Alexander Benois asked the composer “to write a ‘symphony of the street,’ a ‘counterpoint of twenty themes,’ replete with carousels, concertinas, sleigh bells, and popular airs. Stravinsky answered with periodic explosions of dissonance and rhythmic complexity, which mimic the energy of the modern urban crowd.”

Using folk songs and dazzling orchestral effects, Stravinsky crafted a vivid music bed for Diaghilev's dancers, including an organ-grinder, a street dancer performing to a triangle, a music box, and drummers calling people to the puppet theater.

In the ballet, an Old Magician brings three puppets to life: Petrushka, the Ballerina, and the Moor. Petrushka pines for the Ballerina, but the Ballerina prefers the Moor. The Magician makes them dance. The Moor ends up killing Petrushka. When the crowd calls the policeman, the old magician reminds him that Petrushka is only a puppet. In the end, Petrushka's ghost appears overhead and torments the Magician.

Brahms Symphony No. 4

Johannes Brahms spent half his career making aborted attempts at writing symphonies. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't enough to write beautiful melodies (which he did).

He aspired to be a great craftsman, infusing his works with almost mathematical perfection.

With the premiere of the First Symphony in 1876, Brahms hit his stride and pushed out two more symphonies with ease. In the summer of 1884, he traveled to the mountain village of Mürzzuschlag, where he registered with the local police as an “itinerant musician.” He rented rooms on the main street, befriended people in the local tavern, and took daily hikes. His landlady said she often heard him pacing the room and humming. Out of that came the first two movements of his Fourth Symphony. He returned to the village the following summer and wrote the last two movements. For some added inspiration, Brahms looked to one of his greatest passions: the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

“On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings,” Brahms said of Bach. He was referring to Bach’s Chaconne from the Partita No. 2 for violin (chaconne is a Baroque form in which the composer spins a yarn over repetitions of a bassline).

Brahms modified a sequence from Bach’s Cantata 150 to serve as his bassline and crafted a chaconne for the finale of his Fourth Symphony, building a great drama across thirty variations. At the time, people close to him questioned this choice; they considered the chaconne outmoded. Ignoring their misgivings, Brahms conducted the Fourth Symphony’s premiere in October 1885. Within a year, it was played throughout Europe and in New York City.

In the spring of 1897, he heard the Fourth performed for the last time in Vienna. According to witnesses, people craned their necks to get a look at him and broke into a thunderous ovation after each movement. He died less than a month later.

Strauss *Salome*

“And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee.”

Mark 6:22 KJV

There was a time when combining church and theater was considered indecent. For example, early performances of Handel’s Messiah scandalized the upstanding citizens of Dublin and London. Invariably, the silent partners of 19th-century opera were the censors and functionaries who prevented composers from showing priests, biblical figures, crucifixes, and religious rites in the disreputable atmosphere of a theater.

Depending on the degree of Church influence in a particular city, composers were perennially having to rewrite shows to gain a censor's approval. Needless to say, creating an opera based on the story *Salome* was a bold move—even in 1905.

Richard Strauss based his opera on the 1891 Oscar Wilde play that had already been banned in London. But in 1902, Max Reinhardt, an aspiring young director, staged a German version of *Salomé*, and it launched his career. By the time Richard Strauss saw the production, he had already read the play and chosen the key of C-sharp minor for the opening line, "How beautiful the princess Salome is tonight!"

The nightmarish opera culminates with the psychotic teenager Salome performing a slinky dance for King Herod. In exchange, he promises to grant her a wish. She requests the head of John the Baptist. Herod keeps his promise to her but orders her execution on the spot.

Salome received its premiere in Dresden at the end of 1905, drawing thirty-eight curtain calls. Within two years, another fifty other productions popped up around the world, and Strauss became a wealthy man. In New York City, the Metropolitan Opera gave *Salome* two public showings in 1907 before banning the show until 1934.