



Fanfare & Serenade

Tonight's colorfully eclectic program highlights the various sections of our favorite orchestra. The strings take center stage on the first half, playing music by two of England's greatest composers, Britten and Vaughan Williams. After intermission, the woodwinds offer Dvořák's pleasing wind serenade; brass and percussion bring the concert to a stirring conclusion with Tomasi's *Fanfares liturgiques*

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Born 12 October 1872; Down Ampney, England

Died 26 August 1958; London, England

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis

Composed: 1910

First performance: 6 September 1910; Gloucester, England

Last MSO Performance: May 2004; Peter Oundjian, conductor

Instrumentation: strings

Approximate duration: 15 minutes

Ralph Vaughan Williams was the most important British composer of his generation – that between Elgar and Britten – and a key figure in the revival of English music. His voluminous compositional output includes nine symphonies and other orchestral pieces, operas, songs, choral music, film and theatre music, and chamber music, as well as Christmas carols and hymn tunes. Among his best-known works are *The Lark Ascending*, *Fantasia on 'Greensleeves'*, the Symphony No. 1 ("A Sea Symphony"), and the opus on tonight's program, *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

As music editor of *The English Hymnal* (1906), Vaughan Williams had the opportunity to study the church music of earlier eras. Included in his research was the music of Thomas Tallis (c1505-1585), one of the greatest composers of the Renaissance. Among Tallis's works were nine hymn tunes written for metrical versions of the psalms fashioned by Matthew Parker, the first Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury. Vaughan Williams based his *Fantasia* on the third of these melodies, one that he had included in the hymnal.

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis dates from 1910, not long after Vaughan Williams had gone to Paris to study orchestration with his younger colleague Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). The work had its premiere in Gloucester Cathedral, at the Three Choirs Festival. (Elgar's oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* was on the same program.) The composer constructed the work with that edifice's acoustics in mind, scoring it for three discrete string ensembles: a full string section, a smaller group of nine players, and a string quartet.

In preparation for what we're about to experience, quietly descending chords create a mystic atmosphere. Tallis's melody is first suggested by plucked notes from the violas, cellos, and basses, and then is rapturously stated in its entirety by the full ensemble, with its Phrygian-mode harmonies just as the Renaissance master set them down. For the next 15 minutes, the three groups – singly and in various combinations – explore Tallis's simple but affecting "theme." The *Fantasia* concludes with the same ethereal chords with which it began, and a solo violin offers a final benediction.

Recommended recording: Sir Adrian Boult, London Philharmonic Orchestra (EMI) 🎧

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born 22 November 1913; Lowestoft, England

Died 4 December 1976; Aldeburgh, England

Les Illuminations, Opus 18

Composed: 1939

First performance: 30 January 1940; London, England

Last MSO Performance: May 1997; Raymond Leppard, conductor;
Wendy Nielsen, soprano

Instrumentation: strings

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

Benjamin Britten has been hailed as "the greatest English composer since Purcell." His prodigious catalogue includes operas, solo vocal music, chamber music, concertos, symphonic works, film music, and choral music. Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* is a singular masterpiece in the genre, and his *War Requiem* (1961) remains one of the towering works of the 20th century.

It was Britten's friend, the poet W.H. Auden, who first introduced him to the writings of the late-19th century French poet Arthur Rimbaud. *Illuminations* was written when Rimbaud was still in his late teens. The poetry's impetuosity and sexually erotic overtones immediately appealed to the 25-year-old composer. He fashioned a song cycle, in an order of his own devising, using only a fraction of the many poems and prose-poems in Rimbaud's collection.

Britten began *Les Illuminations* in Suffolk in March 1939, completing it on Long Island, New York in October of that year. Britten and his life partner, the tenor Peter Pears, both ardent pacifists, had seen the storm clouds gathering over Europe and had departed for Quebec, later making their way to the United States. Britten dedicated the work as a whole to the Swiss soprano Sophie Wyss, who gave its premiere in 1940. Several of the individual movements contain smaller dedications to others; the most significant is the one "To P.N.L.P." (Peter Neville Luard Pears) that sits atop *Being Beauteous*.

Though scored only for strings, *Les Illuminations* displays a remarkable variety in tone color: Each song has its own distinct texture, pointing up the shifts in mood and atmosphere. The opening *Fanfare* boasts trumpet-like passages, and the singer makes a declaration that will twice recur: "J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage" (I alone hold the key to this savage parade.) *Villes* (Towns) features a galloping rhythmic figure. The eerie string harmonics of *Phrase* support a steadily moving vocal line that concludes with a supple downward slide. The guitar-like sounds of *Antique* conjure the image of a serenade below a balcony, and a solo violin provides delicious counterpoint to the soprano's melody. The vigorous dotted-rhythms of *Royauté* (Royalty) exude mock pomposity.

In *Marine* (Seascape), the cellos double the soprano's fragmented line an octave lower, except in those instances when the voice takes a sudden 16th-note flight-of-fancy. The *Interlude's* descending scale passages eventually lead to a *sotto voce* statement of the singer's opening line. *Being Beauteous* – languorous, sensuous – is young Britten's paean to the man who would soon become his lover and, ultimately, his life's companion. *Parade* is a vigorous march that concludes with a fortissimo declaration of "J'ai seul la clef..." In the final song, the poet – satiated, for the time being, at least – takes his leave amid the muted strings' softly pulsing eighth-notes.

Recommended recording: Heather Harper; Sir Neville Marriner, Northern Sinfonia Orchestra (EMI) 🎧

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born 8 September 1841; Nelahozeves, Bohemia

Died 1 May 1904; Prague, Bohemia

Serenade in D minor, Opus 44

Composed: 1878

First performance: 17 November 1878; Prague, Bohemia

Last MSO Performance: February 2003; Andreas Delfs, conductor

Instrumentation: 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; contrabassoon, 3 horns;
1 cello; 1 bass

Approximate duration: 23 minutes

We wouldn't be far off the mark if we called Antonín Dvořák the most versatile composer of the Romantic era. The Czech master's list of works includes operas, chamber music, choral music and songs, symphonies, concertos, tone poems, and other orchestral music.

The delightfully tuneful wind serenade is Dvořák's homage to Mozart, frequently cited as the only opus in the wind band repertoire that can be compared to the Austrian master's works in the genre. Johannes Brahms, Dvořák's friend and advocate, thought highly of the piece. In a May 1879 letter to the great violinist Joseph Joachim, he wrote, "Take a look at Dvořák's Serenade for Wind Instruments. I hope you will enjoy it as much as I do... It would be difficult to discover a finer, more refreshing impression of really abundant and charming creative talent. Have it played to you; I feel sure the players will enjoy doing it!"

Imbued with the keen spirit of Czech music, the Serenade takes its inspiration from the outdoor *Harmoniemusik* of the Classical era. Dvořák scored it for ten wind instruments, with cello and double bass added to give extra support to the upper voices. It is cast in a familiar four-movement mold, though the second and third movements are reversed from their conventional placement.

Dvořák's tongue must have been planted firmly in his cheek when he set down the Moderato's opening theme, a delightful send-up of Baroque pomposity. A playful second theme provides contrast before the return of the march. The Minuet is actually a *sousedská*, a moderate-tempo Bohemian "neighbors" dance in 3/4 time; its trio is a *furiant*, a fast, fiery dance that alternates between 2/4 and 3/4 time. (The composer used both these forms in his ever-popular *Slavonic Dances*.)

The slow third movement calls to mind the Adagio from Mozart's *Gran Partita*, K. 361. Melodies interweave in the oboes and clarinets as the lower voices provide a syncopated accompaniment. Following an agitated middle section, there's a return to the opening material. The foot-tapping Finale begins with a polka-like theme in the home key of D minor, but by movement's end we're hearing, this time in a bright D major, the march that opened the Serenade. It is a felicitous bookend to one of the best-loved pieces in the wind band repertoire, an ending that always brings a smile to its hearers.

Recommended recording: Sir Neville Marriner, Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields (Philips) 

HENRI TOMASI

Born 17 August 1901; Marseilles, France

Died 13 January 1971; Paris, France

Ofares liturgiques

Composed: 1947

First performance: 1947; Monte Carlo, Monaco

Last MSO Performance: MSO premiere

Instrumentation: 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 4 trombones; timpani; percussion
(cymbals, field drum, snare drum, suspended cymbals,
tam tam)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

Not even the most enthusiastic concertgoer would cite Henri Tomasi as a household name, yet the French composer left us an attractive body of works. He studied at the Paris Conservatoire and, in the 1930s, was one of the founders – along with Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc, and Prokofiev – of a contemporary music alliance called Triton. In his richly colorful, essentially lyrical music, the influence of his French contemporaries is immediately evident. Melodies, both diatonic and chromatic, are supported by triadic (sometimes polychordal) harmonies. Though Tomasi established his reputation with stage works, he also wrote numerous concerti – for flute, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, horn, trumpet, trombone, violin, viola, and guitar.

Fanfares liturgiques is a suite from Tomasi's opera *Miguel Mañara*. Set in 17th-century Seville, it tells the story of an aging womanizer (think *Don Giovanni*) who renounces his life of debauchery to marry an innocent young woman, Girolama. When she dies a few months after their wedding, Miguel finds solace in religion and spend the rest of his days as a monk.

Annonciation (Annunciation), from Act 3 of the opera, is a three-part structure in which fanfares enclose a middle section of tender lyricism, one that depicts Miguel's transformation after spurning his lecherous ways. Evangile (Gospel) features a solo trombone proclaiming, in an extended cadenza, the Good News. Afterward, the assembled brass sing a solemn chorale. In the third movement scherzo, Apocalypse, Brother Miguel struggles to conquer one last lustful temptation. As motifs are tossed among the different instruments, we sense his inner battle as he is pulled in several directions simultaneously.

Procession du Vendredi-saint (Good Friday Procession) depicts a traditional Holy Week cortege, common to Seville, as it files past Miguel. He has just lost Girolama and is desolate with grief. There's a passacaglia-like texture as the tubas and timpani provide an ostinato-bass pattern, based on a medieval chant (Dies Irae). In the closing moments of the piece, the Dies Irae gives way to an ethereal Corsican hymn – in the opera, it's sung by a solo soprano and chorus – that speaks of epiphany and redemption. The Holy Spirit has comforted Brother Miguel.

Recommended recording: Summit Brass (Summit) 

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.