

## Overture to *The Magic Flute*, K. 620

by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (*born in Salzburg on January 27, 1756; died in Vienna on December 5, 1791*)

“*The Magic Flute* is possibly the only opera in existence that might have been composed by God,” the British music critic Neville Cardus once wrote in the *Manchester Guardian*. Undoubtedly he was including Mozart’s lovely Overture with the rest of the work, and his enthusiasm seems to connect with the awe of the present-day humorist songwriter Tom Lehrer, born in 1928, who in 1963 opined, “It is sobering to consider that when Mozart was my age he had been dead for a year.”

It was September 28, 1791, when Mozart completed the final bits of his last stage work, the Overture to *The Magic Flute*, along with its “March of the Priests” and the second-act Introduction. Two days later he conducted the première, in a Vienna theater helpfully owned by his librettist, Emmanuel Schikaneder, and two months after that he lay on his death bed, unable to witness the triumph of the opera’s succeeding performances. Instead he followed the music as if he were in the theater, pocket watch in hand, saying, “Now the first act is ending, now comes the Queen of the Night’s entrance.” *The Magic Flute* was the one ray of sunshine in his last tragic weeks, in the course of which he succumbed to nephritis (or at least some kidney condition) which carried him off at the age of 35.

New to Mozart’s final opera style is the ethical symbolism in which it abounds. Mozart had lately been sworn into the professional fraternal brotherhood of the Freemasons, whose liturgy incorporated a great deal of the idealistic philosophy of *Magic Flute*’s plot, with its emphasis on the eternal human striving towards perfection. (Schikaneder was a Freemason too.) And the settings were those of ancient Egypt, where Freemasonry was thought to have originated, back in the creative days of the Pharaonic pyramids and, later, Solomon’s Temple, in whose erection the craft of masonry obviously attained an exalted importance.

The three solemn chords that open the Overture—three was an almost magical numeric symbol—are repeated halfway through the piece, and the quiet measures and shifting harmonies that follow are like a slow damming up of the world’s energies. Presently, a brilliant breakthrough comes, by way of a pert, busy counterpoint figure that Mozart will use again in the opera’s climactic scene when the young lovers, Tamino and Pamina, prepare for their mystical trials of water and fire.

The great Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein once wrote that Mozart had compressed into this Overture all the struggle and victory of mankind. Yet, despite its symbolism and spirituality, the music preserves a delicate fairytale atmosphere. There is always a quicksilver in Mozart’s counterpoint and in his unflinching charm, which blesses the listener like an outward manifestation of the composer’s inward grace.

## Smetana: *Vltava (The Moldau) from Ma Vlast (My Country)*

by Bedrich Smetana (*born in Bohemia, on March 2, 1824; died in Prague on May 12, 1884*)

Smetana’s early life in music was mostly as a composer of piano works—polkas, quadrilles, waltzes, *balatas*. In fact, that is how he met his first wife, Katerina Kolárova. He liked to dance, she liked to dance, he liked to write music for her, she liked to play music by him. After a lengthy courtship, owing to her fragile health, they married in August of 1840.

Bedrich himself came of a well-to-do peasant family, his father a master brewer for wealthy aristocratic families. Having studied the piano since he was six, young Smetana became a very good pianist and was eagerly pressed into service as accompanist for the many fancy-dress house-balls of the rich when he was in his teens. Apparently in so doing (and by teaching) he could earn enough money to support a wife and a family that soon included four daughters. Various childhood diseases carried off the youngest three, but when the eldest girl, who showed great musical talent from her earliest years and was named Bedriska for her father, succumbed to scarlet fever, Smetana’s grief could hardly be contained.

But more suffering was to follow. Like Beethoven, he grew deaf. But Smetana’s loss of hearing came like a bolt from the blue. On the night of October 20, 1874, he attended the opera, responding to Mozart with some pleasure, though his hearing had been diminishing since the summer months. The next morning he awoke and could hear absolutely nothing, nothing but a whining high-pitched note in his head. He was only 50 years old, but he spent the remaining ten years of his life unable to hear a sound except that all-pervasive whine. (Typically, he made a wry dig at

Fate out of it by writing it into the first-violin part of his autobiographical string quartet, *From My Life*. “I permitted myself this little joke,” he wrote, “because it was so disastrous to me.”)

Fortunately for the rest of us Smetana-lovers, he continued to compose. In fact, much of his finest music was yet to come. His friend and fellow composer, Franz Liszt, lauded his efforts to promote the best in nationalist Czech music—which was already very highly reputed indeed—by saying, “Here is a composer with the most distinctly Bohemian spirit, a supreme master by the grace of God, and his own superb talent.”

In the preceding summer Smetana had started work on a project dear to his heart. It was a series of six tone poems (a form initiated by Liszt) depicting various landscapes and other aspects of the history and legends of Bohemia. By far the most frequently performed of the six is *Vltava*, or *The Moldau*, to use its German equivalent, a tonal picture of the mighty river that rises in the Eastern part of Czechoslovakia, runs through Prague, before joining the Elbe and ultimately flowing into the North Sea.

In the composer’s own words, “My composition describes the course of the Vltava, starting from the two small springs and flowing on in the union of both into a single current, as it runs through woods and meadows where is heard the joyous sound of hunters, to a meadow where a farm wedding dance is heard; and then a round dance by naiads in the pale light of the moonlight, leading vigorously to the churning St. John’s rapids, and thence past the ruined splendor of the mighty Vysehrad castle, and the waters’ eventual merging with the mighty Elbe.”

Smetana’s orchestral imagination runs the gamut of the two flutes that picture the liquid rippling of the rising stream, to the folk dancers celebrating a country wedding, to the eerily high muted violins that summon up nymphs in the moonlight, and the full orchestra that paints the ancient stone castle Vysehrad in all its historic magnificence. Additionally he incorporates an old Italian folk-tune, “La Montovana,” as this tone-poem’s most famous melody; it is also the source of the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah,” and a much older Czech folksong, “Kocka leze dirou” (“The cat is crawling to the hole”).

Smetana composed the entire *Vltava* between November of 1874 and December 8, without being able to hear a single note of it except in his imagination. It was played for the first time the following April 4, and immediately recognized for its exceptional beauty.

Both Léon Janáček and Antonín Dvořák, outstanding successors to Smetana in the realm of Bohemian music, paid affectionate homage to him repeatedly. Dvořák claimed that Smetana’s opera *The Bartered Bride* was his favorite of the whole repertoire, and Janáček recalled in print, “My memories of Bedrich Smetana are like a picture of how children imagine God: far, far up in the clouds.”

### Three Orchestral Pieces *from the Incidental Music to [Bjørnsterne Bjørnson’s drama] Sigurd Jorsalfar*, Opus 56

by Edvard Hagerup Grieg (*born in Bergen, Norway, on June 15, 1843; died there on September 4, 1907*)\

*Prelude: Ved Mannjeningen* ((In the Hall of King Sigurd I)

*Intermezzo: Borghilds Dram* (Borghild’s Dream)

*Hyltingsmarsch* (Homage March)

Grieg was fortunate in achieving creative relationships with the two major Norwegian wordsmiths of his day, Henrik Ibsen (whose longest play, *Peer Gynt*, is best known these days for Grieg’s incidental music to it) and the poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, a close friend of the composer.

Bjørnson, like Grieg an ardent spokesman for the independence of Norway, which was then governed both politically and culturally by Denmark, succeeded in enveloping the more modest Grieg anew with his enormous vitality and by infusing in him a patriotic ardor that could not help but find its way into the composer’s music.

Calling Grieg “the great tone-poet,” Bjørnson, a dedicated lover of the out-of-doors, wrote rather touchingly about him in 1898:

He walked here beside me;  
I heard the waters flow  
With a lovelier cadence;  
And never in the world before,  
No matter how often I had trod the same path,  
Had I understood completely

How dear Nature had become to me in this place.

Already in 1872 Grieg had set to music several of Bjørnson's song texts and a cantata celebrating the Norse patriot Olav Trygvason. Now he eagerly agreed to provide incidental music for the poet's historical drama, *Sigurd Jorsalfar*. Grieg began working on his music, nine brief sections, in 1872, and revised most of it later, in 1892. Both the poet and the composer attended the first performance of the play, in the Norwegian capital Christiania, in November 1872, but without much pleasure. Though the play was being presented before an elite audience in honor of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, poor Bjørnson was in despair at the inadequacy of the production itself, and Grieg became more and more melancholy as the opening-night audience chattered away through the orchestral pieces, while the actor playing Sigurd made a ludicrous attempt to sing his rather straightforward vocal lines, substituting the most melodramatic acting for genuine musicianship.

Bjørnson based his play on the young king of Norway, Sigurd Magnusson (Sigurd, son of Magnus, his father), the first European monarch to fight in the Crusades, while at the same time ruling the Vikings of Norway from 1103 to 1130. When he was about 19 years old, he led a Norwegian contingent in support of the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, becoming famous for the many valorous deeds which soon earned him the title of Sigurd Jorsalfar (literally "Sigurd the Jerusalem-farer")

The first of Grieg's three orchestral pieces describes the vast hall which Sigurd built to house his men (the Norse word "ved" also means "temple"), and the music suggests an airy architectural structure of the utmost dignity. The second piece conveys the impressionistic nocturnal imaginings of a princess whom Sigurd meets and falls in love with in Palermo, where her father is King Roger of Sicily, Sigurd's companion in arms. Curiously, Borghild, meaning "fort battle," is an ancient Norwegian name, not a Sicilian one. Her serene dream is interrupted by an agitated section that adds a further hint of mystery. The famous "Homage March," as other knights gather to render the highest praise to Sigurd, comes originally in Act II of the play. But later, in fashioning his orchestral suite, Opus 57, Grieg considerably extended the March, mainly by giving it a contrasting Trio section. The beautiful quartet of cellos in the opening is probably unique in music, and is doubly interesting because it closely resembles the slow-movement melody of Grieg's Cello Sonata, Opus 36, which he had composed for his cellist brother John in 1883.

The two creators' satisfaction with their work was vindicated when *Sigurd Jorsalfar*, with its accompanying music, was chosen to open the new National Theater of what was now known as Oslo, in 1899. Grieg himself again conducted the orchestra, and the evening was a spectacular success.

Grieg always proudly claimed that he was, first and foremost, above all, a *Norwegian* composer, a nationalist musician, that the blood of Norsemen flowed proudly in his veins. In a speech before the Norwegian parliament, when in 1874 he was granted a lifetime pension at the age of 29 because his early works had done so much to "boost our nation's morale," Grieg wittily admitted that "In all my music, there is always the pervasive flavor of codfish." Composer Claude Debussy, an admirer of Grieg's works, had another idea: "His music leaves in one's mouth the bizarre and charming taste of pink bonbons stuffed with snow."

### **Concerto in B minor, Opus 104, for violoncello and orchestra**

by Antonín Dvořák (*born in Bohemia on September 8, 1841; died in Prague on May 1, 1904*)

*Allegro*

*Adagio, ma non troppo*

*Finale: Allegro moderato*

The great Johannes Brahms famously said, after he had just finished reading through the score of Dvořák's Cello Concerto, Opus 104, "Why on earth didn't I realize that one could write a violoncello concerto like this? If I had only known, I would have written one long ago!"

Too bad Brahms didn't respond to his own suggestion, though he did compose a magnificent double concerto for violin and violoncello, not to mention two sonatas for cello and piano that are among the finest in the repertoire. But the number of truly first-rate solo cello concertos can be counted on the fingers of one hand. And one of them is, without any question, Dvořák's Opus 104, in B minor. It was the last of his works to be composed entirely in the United States, mostly in New York City when he was at the height of his fame. .

He had sailed to New York at the request of Jeannette Thurber, wife of a wealthy grocer and a passionate lover of music. She was particularly enthusiastic about "national" music, and one of the reasons she selected Dvořák to be the head of her new American Conservatory was his insistence on creating music of his own background and culture. He arrived in 1891, on leave from his position on the faculty of the Prague Conservatory, and took up residence in an apartment on East 17<sup>th</sup> Street (torn down long ago, alas) with his wife and three of their smaller children, near the 3<sup>rd</sup>

Avenue elevated train which he loved, as he loved all locomotives, and which he rode several times a day, to detrain after just a few blocks so as to sit on a sidewalk bench where he could feed a greedy crowd of pigeons, which he also loved.

In other words, life went on for him as it always had. He once wrote to a worshipful admirer, “I am a very simple person, to whom such expectations of exaggerated modesty as you attribute to me are entirely mistaken. I remain what I always was, a plain, uncomplicated Bohemian *Musikant*” Among the most charming pages of Paul Stefan’s *Life of Dvorák* come from his Introduction, which describe the life-style of this “Bohemian musicant” perfectly: “Picture him to yourself, this fiddler, clarinetist, trombone player, or what have you, sitting at a table, probably in some rustic inn-garden, with his glass of beer in front of him, having enjoyed a hearty meal of coarse but savory Bohemian food. Suddenly the spirit moves him and he is transformed into an artist. There follows inevitably the full flood of melody, unfailing rhythm, infectious temperament. Nobody and nothing can escape this thralldom . . . Listening to him, you can see the forests, the fields, the village and its people, the geese on the pond, the peasant children, the organist, the schoolteacher, the priest, the authorities, the gentry—all that early world of a lovable, unspoiled people.”

It is not only the young Dvorák that fits his description. When he came to New York to undertake his teaching duties, the “great man” disarmed his students by talking to them as if he were one of them. And he sought the comforts of home each evening, sitting in the kitchen to compose, wishing to be in the midst of the domestic sounds of pots and pans, of chattering children.

Summers he spent in Spillville, Iowa, where he and his family transformed themselves into bohemians once again, Antonín becoming the humble church organist for the small Moravian congregation, happy as a lark.

He intended to compose in the American fashion, as Mrs. Thurber had hoped he would, but instead the obviously Slavic-inspired Cello Concerto, the *Symphony from the New World*, the “American” *String Quartet*, and a host of others, emerged in impressive quantity and quality. How could they not? He was an inborn Czech and could not be anything else.

The Concerto’s first movement, *Allegro*, opens with the orchestra’s playing of the concerto’s fiery principal subject, announced by the clarinets. The second theme, a yearning, nostalgic melody played by the horn. Dvorák himself loved it. He wrote a friend, “Whenever I hear this theme, my whole being is moved.” When the solo cello enters, the music is marked *Quasi improvisando* and it is in the unusual and remote key signature of A flat (G sharp minor) When the two main melodies recur, we hear the yearning theme first and then the fiery theme.

The second movement, *Adagio non troppo*, is in simple song form, *A-B-A*. Dvorák seems to out-do himself in emotional warmth and songfulness.

The finale is a rousing dance-like movement, infused with what another Czech biographer, Otakar Sourek, describes as “the tone of happy anticipation of the composer’s early return to his own country.” (Dvorák did indeed leave for Czechoslovakia in 1894, the next year.) A melodious central section leads to a reminiscence of both the slow movement and the final movement theme, before erupting in a brilliant crescendo for a triumphant ending.

—Musical annotations by Clair W. Van Ausdall  
for Maestra Susan Deaver and the North Shore Symphony Orchestra