

Masterworks Concert #3

Suite No. 2 for Small Orchestra

Igor Stravinsky
1882-1971

Following the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913, Igor Stravinsky had a dilemma: what should he do as an encore to such a revolutionary work. The outbreak of World War I closed the door on large projects, and Stravinsky spent the war years in Switzerland, composing for small ensembles such works as *L'histoire du soldat* and the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, songs, and piano pieces.

Orchestral Suite No. 2 had a mixed parentage. In 1915 Stravinsky composed *Three Easy Pieces* for piano four hands, each piece written for one of his friends: the *Marche* for composer Alfredo Casella; the *Valse* as a souvenir for composer Erik Satie after a visit with him in Paris; and the *Polka* for impresario Sergey Diaghilev whose Ballets Russes had produced the composer's three monumental ballets. According to Stravinsky the *Polka* was a caricature of Diaghilev as an animal trainer in a circus, wielding a big whip. Satie's *Valse* he described as an "ice cream wagon."

Stravinsky made arrangements of these pieces for various purposes, including arranging the *Polka* for a Paris nightclub performance. Finally he combined them, together with a *Galop* from another set of piano pieces as the Orchestral Suite No. 2, premiered in 1925.

La Création du Monde, Op. 81

Darius Milhaud
1892-1974

A native of Provence in Southern France, Darius Milhaud retained throughout his life the sunny atmosphere of his native region. His parents were musically gifted, and from age three he played piano duets with his father. At age seven he took up the violin; at thirteen began harmony lessons and discovered composition, his true vocation. In the aftermath of World War I he joined composers Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Francis Poulenc and Germaine Tailleferre in what became known as *Le groupe des Six*, disciples of composer Eric Satie and author and painter Jean Cocteau, who were preaching an anti-Romantic credo. Uniting them was their insistence on the right to express themselves musically in their own personal way and their resistance to what they considered the "phony sublimity" of the Impressionists and the other art movements in vogue at the time.

In the years 1917 to 1918, poet and dramatist Paul Claudel served as French minister to Brazil and engaged Milhaud, then a promising young composer, as his secretary. While in Brazil, Milhaud spent a good part of his time soaking up the native music. Those two years and a visit to New York in 1922—specifically to Harlem—influenced his music for the rest of his life.

On Milhaud's return from the U.S., he incorporated the Harlem jazz music into his 1923 ballet *La Création du Monde*. It was the earliest example of a symphonic composition using jazz and the blues, predating Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* by a year. He wrote, "My orchestra, like those in Harlem, was made up of 17 solo musicians, and I used the jazz style unreservedly, blending it with a classical approach." Milhaud conceived of the music as a

classical concertino for wind instruments with a jazz theme superimposed upon the classical form.

In a series of six continuous tableaux, the ballet portrays the story of creation and the birth of man according to African beliefs. Three giant deities cast their magic spell to sensuous, mysterious music, producing ordered life out of chaos. A tree grows magically, its leaves turning into animals that dance to a jazzy fugue initiated by the double bass. The slow, sensuous theme of the opening recurs for the creation of human beings. The jazz theme returns as a man and a woman emerge from the mass of humanity and perform the “Dance of Desire,” a combination of the sensuous creation music and the jazz theme. The dance becomes frenzied as soothsayers and witch doctors circle the couple. But the pair becomes absorbed in a kiss that seems to carry them away as the music fades.

Pelléas et Mélisande, Op. 46

Jean Sibelius
1865–1957

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Belgian Symbolist poet and playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) touched a sympathetic chord with composers of the *Belle époque*. His stories describe the spiritual adventures and transcendence of the soul within a mysterious fantasy world.

The most successful of Maeterlinck’s plays was *Pelléas et Mélisande*, written in 1892. A mystical fairy tale, it takes place in a vaguely medieval setting, described as a “dissonant dream world.” The motivation of the individuals in the play is unimportant, as they all are helpless in the face of their fate.

Golaud, grandson of King Arkël, has discovered Mélisande, a young woman with luxuriant golden hair, who is lost in a forest. He marries her, but her life in the castle is unhappy. Gradually she develops a friendship with Golaud's younger half-brother, Pelléas; but Golaud becomes suspicious of them and is convinced that she is unfaithful. The more he presses Mélisande for information, the more she withdraws from him, turning always to Pelléas for emotional support. In the climactic scene, Pelléas and Mélisande meet at night outside the castle gates. Pelléas announces his departure, declaring that his love for Mélisande makes his life at the castle unbearable; hesitantly, Mélisande admits that she loves Pelléas, and the two share their first passionate embrace. At that moment, Golaud surprises the lovers in their single unconsummated adulterous act and kills Pelléas. Mélisande flees but is found and brought back to the castle where she dies mysteriously a few days later, heartbroken over the loss of Pelléas but finally at peace with herself.

Sibelius wrote nine movements as incidental music for the Helsinki premiere of the play in 1905, which he subsequently combined into a suite. The music has none of the ethereal quality of Debussy’s five-act opera or the tunefulness of Fauré’s incidental music. Sibelius’s suite does not follow the storyline; the music focuses on Mélisande, portrayed by a melancholy oboe. Rather than personifying Golaud, Sibelius maintains an underlying sense of foreboding, even in the waltz of “By a Spring.” Only the rustic “Pastorale” is free of the “hidden agenda.” Neither Pelléas himself nor his yearning for Mélisande forms a part of the music.

Symphony No. 4 in C Minor, D. 417
Tragic

Franz Schubert
1797–1828

Of all the great classical Viennese composers, Franz Schubert was the only one to have actually been born in Vienna. Yet the city was less accepting of the music of its native son than of the music of outsiders who settled there. In the half century after his death, Schubert's reputation rested almost exclusively on his wonderful *Lieder*, while the rest of his music was mostly neglected. None of his orchestral music was published during his lifetime, the first six symphonies waiting until 1884–85 in the *Gesamtausgabe*, the first complete edition of his works.

Schubert gave the Symphony No. 4 the subtitle *Tragic* as an afterthought. At the time of its composition in 1816, he was a full-time teacher at his father's school. He hated the job, a factor that may explain the mood of the Symphony. At the time, he was also taking composition lessons twice weekly with Antonio Salieri, who had taught Beethoven upon his arrival in Vienna. Schubert was also attending numerous concerts and operas, doing some private teaching and socializing with his friends. There is very little biographical material available for this period in the composer's life that might cast light on the genesis of this Symphony. After all, he was only a schoolteacher and a student composer with no backstage father like Leopold Mozart to promote him all over Europe.

Despite his youth, Schubert was an extremely fluent composer, capable of turning out *Lieder* in a steady flow. He had composed music for his family's string quartet as well as some church music, but his two earliest goals were to compose symphonies and opera. Although he was familiar with Beethoven's first eight symphonies, his own early symphonies show little influence of the intimidating master. Rather, their language harks back to Mozart and especially Haydn. While Beethoven's symphonies from No. 3 on were the fruit of a mature composer, Schubert's first five were youthful, student attempts.

Schubert and Beethoven died within a year of each other and are usually regarded as contemporaries; but by a nasty combination of bad luck and dissolute habits, Schubert died before he could completely mature as a composer. Except for the compositions of his final years, the "Great" C Major Symphony, the final string quartets, the C Major String Quintet, *Die Winterreise* and the last piano sonatas, posterity has been denied the fruits of Schubert's maturity and can only guess what he might have achieved had he, too, lived into his 50s.

The Fourth Symphony, scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani and strings, was performed privately by Schubert's school orchestra and perhaps by some of Vienna's amateur orchestras. Its first public performance occurred only in 1849.

For a young man yet to reach his twentieth birthday, the Symphony is a hefty work. Symphonies in minor keys were rare for the time and often suggested a "program." It opens with a lugubrious introduction, which in the hands of Haydn might have been used to "set up" the listener for a rousing, jolly allegro. But Schubert meant it, as witnessed by the nervous, almost angry opening theme, a mood he maintains throughout the movement.

The second movement, an expansion of the conventional ABA song form, repeats both A and B sections with new and more poignant harmonies, plus a coda. It opens with a gentle

cantabile that almost washes away the tension from the opening movement. Then Schubert hits us with the middle section, a reminder that all is not serene.

Schubert called his third movement *Menuetto*, more in the style of Haydn's stomping peasant dances than Mozart's elegant courtly minuets; but it also suggests the new scherzo that Beethoven had substituted for a dance. The Trio is also rustic.

The *Allegro* finale returns to the anxiety of the opening movement. Written in sonata form, instead of the conventional rondo, it opens with another nervous theme. Schubert retains by lacing his secondary themes with dark harmonies and the major/minor ambiguity that characterizes so much of his most emotional writing.