FELIX MENDELSSOHN
Overture: *Ruy Blas*, Op. 95

Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg in 1809 and died in Leipzig in 1847. He composed this work in three days in March of 1839, and it was first performed at a benefit for the Leipzig Theatrical Pension Fund before the ink was dry. The score calls for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings.

Mendelssohn *really* didn't want to write this overture. The Leipzig Theatrical Pension Fund (one of the composer's favorite charities) had asked him to compose an overture and a song for their benefit performance of Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas.* The trouble was, Mendelssohn thought Hugo's play was "quite ghastly" and "beneath contempt." He supplied a choral song but told the Fund he didn't have time to compose an overture.

The managers of the Fund thanked him and expressed regret that they had not given the busy composer enough time to complete an overture. This must have irked Mendelssohn—it's possible that was the Fund managers' intent—for the next thing he did was turn out his Overture to Ruy Blas in three days, just in the nick of time for the benefit performance.

The plot of *Ruy Blas* involves a Spanish nobleman who wishes to disgrace his Queen. He disguises his valet—the title character—as a nobleman and instructs him to seduce her. This he does, but in the process he becomes quite popular in the court, even becoming prime minister. His master then tries to blackmail the Queen with the whole sordid affair, but Ruy Blas murders him, then poisons himself. In his dying moments he receives the Queen's forgiveness.

Mendelssohn had no great love for French romanticism in general nor for Hugo's often odious characters in particular. But that seemed to have no impact on the quality of music he wrote: this is a crackerjack concert opener. If one is so inclined one can hear the royalty, intrigue, and conflict of Hugo's play in the music, even if Mendelssohn spares us the murderous ending. But perhaps it is best to forget the title—as Mendelssohn tried to, referring to it always as the Theatrical Pension Fund Overture!—and enjoy it for its power, its remarkable concision, and its breath of life.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK
Concerto in A minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 53

Antonín Dvořák was born in Mühlhausen, Bohemia in 1841 and died in Prague in 1904. He composed this concerto in 1879, and it was first performed in Prague by violinist František Ondříček and the Orchestra of the National Theater under the direction of Mořic Anger in 1883. The concerto calls for solo violin, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.

Johannes Brahms was instrumental in bringing the music of Dvořák to the world's attention. Brahms was a member of the panel that awarded the Austrian State Prize in Composition to Dvořák several years in a row and, perhaps more importantly, Brahms introduced Dvořák to his own publisher, Fritz Simrock. When Simrock published Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* in 1878, they became instantly

and wildly popular, bringing Dvořák's name world-wide and making a fortune for Simrock. (As an as-yet unknown composer, Dvořák made very little out of the deal, but would increase his percentage thereafter.) Brahms also showed some of Dvořák's chamber music to the great violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), and Joachim was so impressed he asked Dvořák to compose a concerto for him.

Dvořák did so, and although he himself was a good violinist and knew what the instrument could do, he honored Joachim by sending him the completed concerto and soliciting the master for suggestions.

He discovered, in hindsight, that *that* was a mistake.

Joachim kept the score for two years. When he finally got around to looking at it, he decided it needed exhaustive revision. Dvořák met with him and together they went over the work bar by bar. The composer set about revising the score and was pleased with the results: "I put the greatest effort into it. The whole concerto has been transformed. Besides retaining themes I wrote several new ones. The harmonization, the instrumentation, the rhythm, the whole course of the work is new. I shall get it ready as soon as possible and give it immediately to Mr. Joachim in Berlin."

When Joachim got the revised score, he ignored it for *another* two years. Finally, Dvořák persuaded Joachim to schedule a rehearsal run-through with full orchestra. At that rehearsal Joachim and a representative from Simrock had even more suggestions for revisions, but by this time Dvořák had had enough. He made a few minor alterations and then insisted Simrock publish it as it was. Once printed, Dvořák had it premiered in Prague by another violinist, and Joachim never performed his concerto.

Some scholars say that the work was too much of a departure from the classical concerto mold for Joachim's taste, but to modern ears these differences are evolutionary, not revolutionary. The violin enters within seconds of the beginning of the first movement, its ardent and lyrical music separating the martial orchestral passages. The critical assessment of this movement is that it tends to meander a bit, and that's true. But what it lacks in focus it more than makes up in passion and color. This movement moves without pause into the *Adagio.* This is warm and lyrical, with the soloist front-and-center throughout. There's a trace of angst here and there, but nothing the soloist cannot dispel.

The Finale is chock-full of the dance rhythms of Bohemia. The delightfully off-kilter *furiant* that opens the movement also serves as the returning section of the rondo form. The episodes are boldly Bohemian (especially the bittersweet *dumka*) and unabashedly evocative of peasant music. A sunnier Finale has never been written.

IGOR STRAVINSKY
Petrouchka

Igor Stravinsky was born in Oranienbaum, Russia in 1882 and died in New York City in 1971. He completed his ballet Petrouchka in 1911, and it was first performed the same year by the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris under the direction of Pierre Monteux. Stravinsky revised the orchestration several times; the version heard tonight was his last revision, done in 1947. The score calls for 3 flutes, piccolo, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 4 bassoons, contrabassoon,

4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, celeste, piano, and strings.

In nearly every culture that has had a tradition of puppetry there have also been legends, myths and fairy tales about puppets brought to life. Pierrot for the French, Punch for the British, Pinocchio for the Italians and Petrouchka for the Russians—all are characters whose straw and sawdust turn miraculously into flesh and blood. For Stravinsky, Petrouchka was "the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair."

After the huge success of *The Firebird,* Stravinsky and Serge Diaghilev (director of the Ballet Russe) planned to collaborate again on a ballet based on pagan rituals—*The Rite of Spring*. In the meantime Stravinsky sought to "refresh" himself by composing a concert piece, with a prominent piano part, motivated by the idea of a puppet brought to life. When Diaghilev heard what Stravinsky had composed, he instantly saw its dramatic potential and persuaded Stravinsky to develop his ideas into a large-scale ballet called *Petrouchka.*

The first scene depicts a fair in Admiralty Square in Saint Petersburg. People of all classes—some sober, some not—are seen browsing among the many stalls and entertainments. The bustling music may be heard to stop and, like a zoom lens, focus on one hurdy-gurdy player, then another. The Puppet-Master draws open the curtain of his theater to reveal his three puppets: Petrouchka, a Ballerina, and a Moor. He plays his flute, charming them into life, whereupon they perform a vigorous Russian dance.

Scene two opens with Petrouchka in his tiny cardboard room. The dissonant theme in the clarinets is his anguished cry—he is disgusted at his grotesque appearance and his dependency on the Puppet-Master. When the Ballerina enters, he falls in love with her. When she rejects him, he erupts in rage.

In scene three we find the Moor dancing about his opulent room. The Ballerina enters (trumpet solo) and she and the Moor dance to a purposely banal waltz. Petrouchka tries to intrude, but is kicked out.

Scene four depicts the fair, this time at night. Among other things we hear a group of dancing nursemaids and a peasant leading a performing bear (tuba solo). Petrouchka enters, pursued by the Moor; after a chase the Moor slays Petrouchka with his scimitar. The Puppet-Master reassures the onlookers that Petrouchka was, after all, only a puppet. But as he drags the body off-stage, Petrouchka's ghost appears above the puppet theater, jeering one last time at the Puppet-Master and—it seems—the whole world. The music fades quickly and quietly, almost like a question.

Where *The Firebird* is commonly described as late-romantic, *Petrouchka* presents a much more harsh and dissonant musical idiom. Stravinsky accentuates the stridency in the fair scenes by interspersing literal quotes from dance-hall tunes and Russian folk songs; the contrast is telling. Petrouchka's jeering theme—mournful in the second scene, terrifying at the end—is bi-tonal. That is, it is simultaneously in two different keys; in this case, C major and F-sharp major, as distant as two keys can be. Thus Stravinsky's two-sided theme expresses the two sides of Petrouchka: a puppet of wood and straw, and a living, feeling being. The appearance of Petrouchka's apparition after his death suggests that the puppet was not only alive, but had a soul; with the mysterious ending that remains unresolved, the question is left hanging.

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