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Adventures in SYMPHONIC MUSIC

by
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DECORATIONS BY JOHN O'HARA COSGRAVE II

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To
My Mother and Father

Preface

The best lesson I ever had in music appreciation was given me by Adolf Hitler. We could not yet hear the armies of liberation thundering across the world. Hitler thought himself triumphant, and in the blackness of Europe there seemed no common-sense, practical reason to doubt his triumph. Little Austria had been crushed. Now it was being digested, and I had come to Salzburg for an American newspaper to report on what remained of the once-famous Salzburg Festival.

Some of my anti-Nazi friends were dead, some had fled, others were cautious and desperate. The great artists, Toscanini, Bruno Walter, Lotte Lehmann, Max Reinhardt, were gone. The great performances were past. Amid all the show of festivity there was but one strangely inspired production: a tragedy, "Egmont," by Goethe, with the music which Beethoven wrote for it. Now "Egmont" was an apparently innocent last-minute substitute for Reinhardt's banned production of "Faust." But there are a thousand ways of telling an unwelcome conqueror what you think of him, and "Egmont" was one. For it describes the subjugation of the Netherlands by the Spanish Duke of Alva; it shows their agony, their sullen defiance, and it ends with a call to revolt.

Beethoven's overture begins with a mighty lamentation for freedom lost. There are lyric passages which may portray Egmont's beloved, Clärchen. There are agitated murmurings, the voice of an angry, rebellious people and at the last, tumultuous, joyous affirmation. But why joy,

since "Egmont" is a tragedy? It is not until the end of the drama, when the orchestra sweeps again into that same exultant finale, that its meaning is made clear.

The play shows at first the easygoing, liberty-loving Netherlanders, a people like the Austrians themselves; then the terror that Alva brings with his army of occupation. Netherland liberties are abolished. Criticism of the new tyranny is made punishable by death. And Egmont, the champion of Netherland freedom, is thrown into prison.

As the plot approached its tragic climax, the Salzburg audience became quiet and tense. Each bitter word spoken from the stage accused not only Spanish tyrants, it lashed out at those beyond the footlights, at brown and black uniforms and traitors sitting there. The tyranny of the Duke of Alva had become the tyranny of Hitler. The Netherlands were Austria. The tension grew.

Egmont has been sentenced to death. The night before his execution, Clärchen appears to him in a dream as the Goddess of Freedom. She shows him that his death is the spark that will fire the Netherlands to regain their lost liberty. She proclaims him victor and crowns him with a wreath of laurel. Then a drum roll disperses the dream and daylight shows through the prison bars. Egmont feels for the laurel.

"The wreath has vanished. Fair vision, the light of day has taken you. Yes, they were here, united, the two sweetest joys of my heart. Divine Freedom borrowed the form of my love. . . . She came to me with bloodstained feet, the swaying folds of her garment stained with blood. It was my blood and the blood of many a noble man. No, it was not shed in vain. Stride forth, brave people! The Goddess of Victory leads you on. And like the sea bursting through your dikes, so must you burst and overwhelm

the ramparts of tyranny, and sweep it from the land it has usurped. [Drums approach . . . the background is filled with Alva's soldiers.] Yes, bring them together! Close your ranks, I fear you not. . . . My enemies encompass me on every side. Swords flash—friends, take heart! Behind you are your parents, wives, children! . . . Guard your sacred heritage! And to save all you hold most dear, fall joyfully, as I give you the example now!"

As Egmont, surrounded by soldiers, marches off to his death, a "symphony of victory" sweeps up from the orchestra to end the drama with the triumphant fanfares which mark the finale of Beethoven's overture.

For a moment, the Salzburg audience seemed stunned. Then there was polite, perfunctory applause. Those who felt like cheering did not dare, and those who dared were not in a mood to cheer. But none, I think, who heard that performance will ever listen to Beethoven's "Egmont" music with the same quiet pulse as before. For the players in that drama and in that music were my friends and your friends, and, in the last analysis, it was we ourselves who walked the stage. That is what we mean when we speak of a universal art.

All music tells a story. Sometimes the composer chooses a theme we know like "Romeo and Juliet" or "Egmont," or the siege of Leningrad. Or he explains his plot as Berlioz did for his *Fantastic Symphony*. Then we call it program music.

Often the composer has a more or less connected story in mind, but leaves our imagination free to fill in the details. The black pessimism of the *Pathetic Symphony* conceals a story Tchaikovsky would not reveal. Richard Strauss refused to give a program to his tone poem, "*Till Eulenspiegel*." For were he to put into words the thoughts it suggested to him, "They would seldom suffice," he

wrote, "and might give rise to offense. Let me leave it therefore to my hearers to crack the hard nut the rogue has prepared for them."

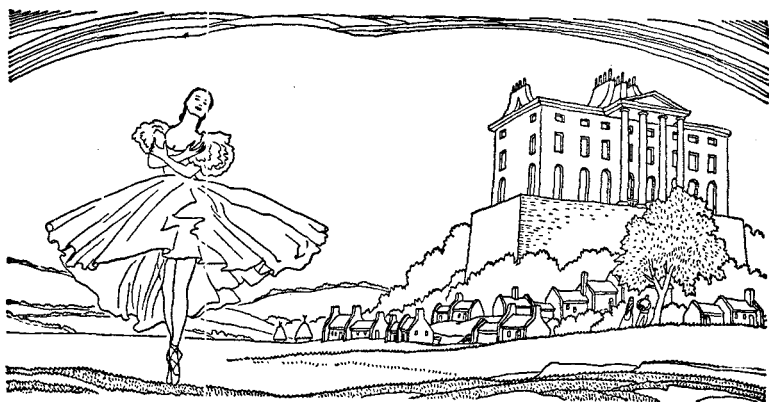
And sometimes music tells a story which cannot be put into words, in which case it is often called pure or absolute music. But such words are misleading. They imply that music is an abstract play of tonal design, separate from life, insulated from the rest of the world. There is no such thing as pure music; it is always a crystallization of human emotions. And the fact that its story can be told only in music, does not mean it has none.

In the following pages, a large part of the standard symphonic repertory and certain less frequently heard works have been grouped into short programs of roughly related subjects. For the convenience of music lovers and students who have record collections, the discussions are limited to compositions available on discs; and with a few exceptions, each program lasts under one hour. Much of this material was originally delivered in the form of intermission commentaries for the Symphonic Hour of Station W67NY, key frequency modulation station of the Columbia Broadcasting System in New York City. Certain pages appeared in the music section of the *Boston Transcript*; others are quite new.

Obviously these works might have been discussed from many points of view. The headings under which they appear in this volume are intended simply as suggestions which are far from giving the one and only key to the music. For any great work of art tells a dozen stories. And each listener, if he is lucky, will continue to find new meanings in his favorite masterpieces as often as he can hear them. Not only is the language of music universal; its subject is as universal as human experience. All music tells a story. The story is about you. *De te fabula narratur.*

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I. *Music and the Dance*

FROM THE LATEST SWING on the Hit Parade back to the primitive pounding of drums or rattles to which our earliest ancestors cavorted, probably on some forgotten plateau of Central Asia, our music is haunted by the rhythm of dancing feet. There are primitive tribes of Africa who, though they don't have much of anything we would think of as melody, practice a marvelously complicated and exciting art of dance music on drums. And like the giant in the Greek fable who renewed his strength by touching the earth, the greatest composers return again and again to draw strength from the elemental impulse of the dance, from its forms, its rhythms and its inexhaustible driving power. Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, Mozart, Sibelius, Tchaikovsky—all have paid homage to the newest and oldest music in the world.

It would take a doctor, an anthropologist or a psychiatrist to tell us why we all respond to rhythm. Perhaps it all goes back to so simple, biological a thing as the rhythmic beating of our hearts. Anyhow, dance music is one form of the art which almost every human being who has ever existed has known and enjoyed; for dancing is as old as the human race, and possibly a good deal older. And in spite of all the refined techniques and imagination of modern music, both the newest Broadway boogie-woogie and such a sophisticated symphonic piece as Stravinsky's "Sacre du Printemps" are nearer to the jungle drums than most of us believe.



MOZART: Minuet from Symphony in E flat major (K. 543)
WAGNER: Dance of the Apprentices from "Die Meistersinger"
JOHANN STRAUSS: Waltz, "Wiener Blut"
TCHAIKOVSKY: Third movement from Fifth Symphony
RICHARD STRAUSS: Dance of the Seven Veils from "Salome"
RAVEL: "La Valse"
STRAVINSKY: Sacrificial Dance from "Le Sacre du Printemps"

From the courtly grace of our great-great-great-grandmothers and their gallant, periwigged beaux, there came a dance which echoes still through the masterpieces of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven. For the minuet was not only the favorite dance of the glittering court of Versailles and of lesser society through the eighteenth century; it was a favorite means of expression to generations of great composers. And while your great-great-great-grandmother might have had a hard time dancing to the minuet movement of Mozart's E flat Symphony; if it had not been for her dance, the movement would not sound the way it does.

The minuet had a long and honorable career, both as a social diversion and in its symphonic transformations. But by the time Mozart wrote his E flat Symphony, it was threatened by another popular dance from the country outside Vienna. For hundreds of years Austrian peasants there had clogged about to a burly, triple-time dance called the *ländler*, which Richard Wagner later used for local color in the third act of "Die Meistersinger." The origins of the *ländler* itself may have been none too re-

spectable, but by the middle of the eighteenth century it was decent enough to have penetrated into the great cities of Prague and Vienna, where it was transformed into the waltz.

At first this wild, new dance was viewed with alarm and indignation. In Prague it was forbidden by an Imperial Edict of March 18, 1785 as both "injurious to the health and very dangerous as to sin" (*sowohl der Gesundheit schädlich als auch der Sünden halber sehr gefährlich*). Even after the French Revolution a shocked traveler to Paris remarked that it was only after the war that "the waltz, tobacco smoking and other vulgar habits became common." Gradually the waltz climbed the social ladder into more and more conservative circles until finally in 1816 it was danced in public at Almack's by Tsar Alexander II. Which of course made it all right.

Meanwhile the peasant rhythms from which it came were passing through the hands of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert to culminate in the immortal waltzes of the Strausses, father and son. Though the dance itself was tamed, its music had become richer and more imaginative, and from Vienna it conquered the world. The most serious musicians paid homage to the genius of Strauss and the waltz found its way into symphonies, tone poems and operas.

Tchaikovsky, for example, used it to express the peculiar mixture of gaiety and melancholy he sought in the third movement of his Fifth Symphony; there the waltz replaced the customary scherzo, which in turn had replaced the minuet.

Richard Strauss (no relation to the Viennese Strauss family) used the waltz in the Dance of the Seven Veils from his opera, "Salome." This is the famous dance with which Salome wins the head of John the Baptist from her

weak-willed stepfather, Herod. The melodies here are transformations of those with which Salome wooed John the Baptist earlier in the opera. But John, or Jochanaan, as Strauss calls him, scorned Salome and pronounced a curse upon her. Herod has promised Salome anything she may wish, even to half his kingdom, if she will dance for him, so she dances to revenge herself. The music starts as a languorous, oriental "danse du ventre," but as the climax approaches we realize that its whirling rhythms come from the Viennese waltz. Toward the end there is a moment when the rhythms pause and Salome hovers regretfully over Jochanaan's prison well, before throwing herself at Herod's feet to ask her ghoulish reward: the severed head of John the Baptist.

Ravel too has used the waltz with brilliant imaginativeness in his symphonic piece, "La Valse," suggesting a great ballroom scene in the time of Emperor Napoleon III of France. From the dull, thudding beat of the opening, to the grinding dissonances and berserk rhythms of the climax, we hear the waltz in a dozen different guises. There is even a suggestion of the golden hurdy-gurdy, which the emperor himself used to play for Eugénie and their friends at intimate parties when they dispensed with an orchestra. The score of "La Valse" bears this descriptive note: "Whirling crowds give glimpses, through rifts, of couples waltzing. The clouds scatter, little by little. One sees an immense hall, peopled with a whirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of the chandeliers bursts forth, fortissimo. An imperial court about 1855."

With the Sacrificial Dance from his "Sacre du Printemps" Stravinsky takes us back again to primitive times. We hear the climax of the spring rites of a pagan Russian tribe, at which a chosen member of the group dances her-

self to death as a sacrifice to the fertility of the earth. Here the distortions and dissonances of Ravel are carried one step further. The music is a curious combination of the utmost sophistication and savage, naked rhythm; perhaps the strongest evidence we have in modern music of the eternal return of the artist to the most elemental instincts of the human race.



BACH: Suite for Flute and Strings, B minor

MOZART: "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik"

RAVEL: "Le Tombeau de Couperin"

"He loved music, he was well acquainted with it, he understood it." That was Bach's happy opinion of the master for whom he composed his popular B minor Suite for flute and strings. Prince Leopold was an amiable, well-educated young man of twenty-four who had traveled, was fond of books and pictures and reigned at the little court of Anhalt-Cöthen, one of the many tiny principalities that made up Germany in Bach's day. And like a cultivated amateur, he not only listened to music, he played the violin, the viola da gamba, the harpsichord, and he sang in a cultivated bass voice.

Those were happy years at Cöthen, for young Prince Leopold appreciated Kapellmeister Bach and the music he wrote for his eighteen-piece orchestra. There was little religious music at court, but in the orchestral works which his prince preferred Bach showed he could be as worldly and joyful as the next man, and that he could not only move his listeners but entertain them as well. Here it was that he

composed the six magnificent concertos dedicated to the Margrave of Brandenburg, his violin concertos, and his four orchestral suites, including the one in B minor.

As a matter of fact Bach himself didn't call this work a suite, he called it an overture, after the first movement which is modeled on the French operatic overtures of the day. With the exception of the final badinerie, all the remaining movements are based on dance forms. And what a rich musical heritage these dances represent!

First we have a rondeau which is descended from a medieval dance song. Various couplets alternate with a chorus refrain.

Next there comes a solemn sarabande, a dance which, according to the musicologist, Curt Sachs, came originally from Central America! Spanish colonists, he believes, brought it back to Andalusia, where it was dignified and refined into a step for Spanish grandees. Others say it may have been brought to Europe by the Moors from the Near East. Eventually the stately rhythm of the sarabande found its way even into operatic arias (like Handel's "Lascia ch'io pianga") and instrumental suites. In this movement, incidentally, Bach combines it with the ancient medieval device of the canon.

The sarabande is followed by two lively bourrées, the second with a fetching part for the solo flute. The bourrée is an old French folk dance which was usually accompanied by the bagpipes or a hurdy-gurdy. The fact that its name comes from the word "bourrir" (to flap the wings) may mean that it goes back to primitive dances, possibly even of totem origin, in which the performers imitated the movements of ritual beasts and birds.

The lovely polonaise, very different from the brilliant piano pieces of Chopin; is a dance which probably originated at the court of Poland in 1574, and devised

from old Christmas carols. Bach follows it with a variation called a double, in which the flute plays brilliant counterpoint over the melody.

The eighth movement, a minuet, comes from the court of Versailles, where Lully established it as the representative dance of Louis XIV and the aristocracy of France. But before that it had been a folk dance of the Poitou.

The final and perhaps most popular movement of the B minor Suite is a frisky badinerie (literally: a playful, trifling piece) in which the solo flute again runs off with all the honors.

We have mentioned historical background in such detail here only to show how ancient and diversified are the roots of the suite. Bach of course was not thinking of "flapping his wings" or of medieval dance songs when he wrote for the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen. But all of these things contributed to the richness and fascination of an art form which we tend to look upon somewhat patronizingly today as "a predecessor of the symphony."

Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," "a little serenade" as he modestly calls it, is a sort of suite too, though it has only four movements. Or you might call it a cross between a suite and a little symphony. It was composed in Vienna some sixty years after Bach wrote his B minor Suite, and it is fascinating to see how the style of music had changed within a lifetime.

Gone is the contrapuntal grandeur of Bach's day and the endless stream of melody. Mozart's melody might be compared to the links of a chain, rather than an endless stream. His music tends to take the form of a series of rounded phrases, each an entity in itself, balanced against what comes before and after. It is neither more nor less beautiful than Bach, it is simply a different style of speech.

The first movement of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" is a sonatina, a tiny sonata of crystalline purity of form. Beneath the melodious surface of the following romanze there is murmurous agitation, suggestions of a subdued passion, of a romantic feeling which didn't become the fashion until after Mozart's day. The third movement is a minuet and the last is a rondo (the Italian version of the rondeau). The skipping, sparkling refrain of this finale is the very essence of Mozartean charm, with its echoes of Viennese popular song and the naïve Papageno of Mozart's "Magic Flute."

But before Mozart and Bach, an older composer, Couperin the Great, had written suites "for the little chamber concerts which Louis XIV used to ask me to play almost every Sunday of the year." From his position in Versailles Couperin's influence reached out not only to Bach but even to the twentieth-century Frenchman, Maurice Ravel. One year before World War I, Ravel decided to acknowledge his debt in a revival of the eighteenth-century suite which he called "Le Tombeau de Couperin."

Ravel was deeply conscious of his French cultural heritage and he was shocked by the experience of the war in which he served as an ambulance driver. When the piano version of "Le Tombeau de Couperin" appeared in 1917 each of its six movements bore a dedication to a comrade who had fallen at the front. Finally in 1919 Ravel made his masterly orchestrations of the prelude and three dance movements: the forlane, menuet and rigaudon. Modern in technique, ancient in form, and profoundly gallic in its clarity and restraint, this version of "Le Tombeau de Couperin" has become a classic of our current symphonic repertory.

