"Air for the G String" from Orchestral Suite No. 3, BWV 1068

Johann Sebastian Bach
(b. 1685, Eisenach, Thuringia (now Germany); d. 1750, Leipzig)

In the intellectual rigor of his fugues and the spiritual depth of his passions and cantatas, J. S. Bach seems to represent the loftiest state to which music can aspire. But this formidable German had his lighter side as well, and his four Orchestral Suites show him as a master entertainer, wielding the courtly dance forms of his day with wit and panache. And the "Air" movement — now famous as the "Air for the G String" — from his Third Orchestral Suite demonstrates his ability to create a melody as meltingly lovely as anything from the Romantic era.

Scholars are still not sure when and where the Suites were written. Their secular nature and courtly style would seem to place them in the period of 1717 to 1723 when Bach served as kapellmeister at the princely court of Cöthen and concentrated on secular instrumental works, notably the six Brandenburg Concertos. But Prince Leopold's orchestra was of modest size and presumably unable to provide the exceptionally sumptuous instrumentation required by Suites 3 and 4. Therefore, though Bach may have composed an earlier version of the Third Suite at Cöthen, it is more likely that it dates from the late 1720s or early 1730s during his long service in Leipzig.

In addition to his primary duties providing music for the services of St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, from 1729 to 1737 Bach directed the city's Collegium Musicum, a voluntary association of professional musicians and university students. The Collegium gave weekly concerts — in summer in an outdoor square and in winter at Zimmermann's coffee house. Here Bach could put aside sacred texts and exercise his secular genius.

The Air is the second movement in the Third Suite. Adapted for solo violin by A. Wilhelmj in 1871, it has become known as the "Air on the G String." The G-string is the lowest of the violin's four strings, and it has a very distinctive character: warm, rich, and slightly husky. It is best suited to music in the violin's lower range. Up until Bach's time, it was the least-favored of the strings for Baroque composers, but in the early 18th century, its gut string was reinforced with silver wiring, giving it a more resonant sound. With this "Air," Bach beautifully showcased its new capacity for mellow, soulful singing.

Four Seasons of Buenos Aires

Astor Piazzolla
(b. 1921, Mar del Plata, Argentina; d. 1992, Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Historians disagree about whether the passionate dance known as the tango originated in Spain, Africa, or Cuba. But it definitely came of age in the poor urban neighborhoods of Argentina and

Continued

Uruguay, and by the early 20th century was established as the soul of both dance and song for the citizens of Buenos Aires. And by the 1920s, this sensual two-beat couple dance had crossed the Atlantic to become the sensation of Europe and then North America.

With their proprietary interest, Argentineans were not at first very happy with the tango innovations of their countryman Astor Piazzolla. The son of Italian immigrants who had spent a good part of his growing-up years in New York's Greenwich Village, Piazzolla always remained a bit of an outsider in his native land and an artistic maverick. In his late teens, he resettled in Argentina, and his skills playing the bandoneon, a variety of accordion that is the signature instrument of authentic Argentinean tango, won him a place in the traditional tango orchestras that were at their height during the 1940s.

But Piazzolla was no traditionalist, and he had a restless musical mind. After studying with the noted composer Alberto Ginastera, in 1954 he won a scholarship to study with the great French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger in Paris. There he soaked up French impressionism, contemporary atonality, and improvisatory jazz (the saxophonist Gerry Mulligan was a particularly strong inspiration). Nevertheless, Boulanger urged him to stay close to his tango roots; while playing one of his own tangos for her, he recalled her saying, "Here is the true Piazzolla — do not ever leave him."

And so Piazzolla returned to Argentina and developed what he called "tango nuevo": an invigorating contemporary form of tango that went far beyond smooth popular dance into the realm of serious concert music. As Fernando Gonzalez wrote: "He retained tango's poignancy and lyricism while rejecting its tendencies toward sentimentality ... He revised its harmonic language by incorporating the influences of Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Giacomo Puccini, and Olivier Messiaen, as well as the occasional nod to the cool jazz of Mulligan and Lennie Tristano."

However, while Piazzolla's tango compositions won fans abroad, the Argentineans resisted his innovations nearly up until the time of his death in 1992. And, in fact, Piazzolla's domestic and international fame has really blossomed after his death, as such renowned musicians as Daniel Barenboim, Yo-Yo Ma, Emanuel Ax, and the Kronos Quartet began championing his music in the concert hall.

The four tangos of Piazzolla's Quatro estaciones porteñas ("porteño" is the Argentinean name for a citizen of Buenos Aires) were composed between 1965 and 1970. The composer originally wrote these dances for the typical tango ensemble of bandoneon (played by himself), piano, violin, double bass, and electric guitar, but, as with most of his music, he sanctioned arrangements for other combinations as well. We will hear an arrangement for solo violin and small string orchestra made by Leonid Desyatnikov for the great Russian violinist Gidon Kremer; this arrangement matches the instrumentation for Vivaldi's The Four Seasons written 250 years earlier in Italy.

Romance from *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, K. 525

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(b. 1756, Salzburg, Austria; d. 1791, Vienna, Austria)

Eine kleine Nachtmusik (its translation, "A Little Night Music," was borrowed by Stephen Sondheim for his famous 1973 musical) has always enjoyed hit status among Mozart's works. It is one of the finest examples of the special-occasion music he composed throughout his career under various titles: serenade, divertimento, cassation, or nocturne. These works, usually in many movements, were created for princely soirées or weddings of wealthy merchants and frequently for performance out of doors and/or in the evening. They were intended to be light, festive background music to accompany social chatter and plenty of eating and drinking. But although Mozart usually wrote such works only on commission (they were an excellent source of quick cash for this often financially strapped composer), we have no record of why this piece — dated August 10, 1787 in the composer's own catalogue — was written or even whether it was ever performed in his lifetime. Could he have written it just for his own pleasure? The title in Mozart's native German, rather than the Italian he customarily used for such works, suggest that this might well have been a personal piece.

Eine kleine Nachtmusik is like a miniature four-movement symphony for string orchestra, with a sonata-allegro first movement, a slow movement, a minuet, and finale. We will hear just the second-movement Romance: lovely, dreaming music in rondo form (with a recurring refrain), which introduces a few nocturnal shadows in its minor-mode middle section to a work that is an idyllic ode to the pleasures of a balmy summer evening.

Fratres (Brethren)

Arvo Pärt
(b. 1935, Paide, Estonia; now living in Berlin, Germany)

Arvo Pärt's distinctive musical voice has been shaped by the fact that he is an Estonian who spent his first 45 years living and creating music under the Soviet system. After angering Soviet cultural authorities with avant-garde serial works early in his career, in the 1970s Pärt found a more personal style that was just as defiant, but in a quieter way. A deeply religious man, he turned to the study of traditional Gregorian and orthodox chant as well as Western European vocal music of the 14th through 16th centuries. In chant and early polyphony, he discovered a cleansing simplicity and spirituality still relevant for the 20th and 21st centuries. He called his new style "tintinnabuli" ("little bells"). As he explains, "I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements — with one voice, with two voices. I build with the most primitive materials — with the triad [three-note chord], with one specific tonality. The three notes of the triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation."

This return to musical basics suggests that Pärt shares a creative kinship with American minimalists such as Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and John Adams (earlier in his career). However, while Glass

Continued

and Reich's repetitive chords evoke a striving secular culture, Pärt's minimalism is saturated with mysticism and spirituality, bringing it closer to the world of his fellow Eastern European Henryk Górecki. His music invites us to close our eyes, forget our watches, and drift into an inner space of quietness and contemplation.

In 1977, Pärt created the first version of a work he would return to many times again over the next decade and a half: Fratres, or in English translation "Brethren." The composer initially scored this spare, haunting work for string and wind quintets to be played by an early-music ensemble. But subsequently he made many other arrangements: for string orchestra with percussion, for string quartet, violin and piano, and cello and piano. We will hear the version for string orchestra with an elaborate solo violin part that he created in 1992.

In keeping with Pärt's tintinnabuli style, Fratres is made out of just a few basic musical elements that continue throughout its ten and a half-minute span. The most important is a six measure-long chant melody, made up of three parallel voices. It is underpinned by a continuous drone on the notes A and E. And it is punctuated by a simple, but insistent knocking rhythm separating each of its nine statements. Each statement of the chant melody is lower in pitch than the previous one, and each becomes progressively louder until the midpoint, then grows softer until the hushed conclusion.

Though this description may sound rather mechanical, Fratres is actually a mesmerizing work, and the continual repetition draws the listener deeper into its contemplative world. The solo violin plays a constantly changing role throughout, making the repetitions sound like variations on a theme. Alone, it offers the first presentation of the chant melody, played with virtuoso double-stopping (playing two or more pitches simultaneously) and rapid arpeggios to cover the three voices of the chant. After the string ensemble takes over the chant melody, the soloist sings an eloquent descant or countermelody above or adds another voice to the ensemble's chords. In the last repetition, he plays in glistening, flute-like harmonics high above the orchestra, lending the music a beautiful, otherworldly coloring.

Holberg Suite

Edvard Grieg
(b. 1843, Bergen, Norway; d. 1907, Bergen)

During the early 18th century, the Danish poet-dramatist Ludvig Holberg put Scandinavia on the map in European theatrical circles. So deftly humorous were his comedies that he was dubbed "the Molière of the North," after the celebrated French playwright of the 17th century. Norway, too, claimed Holberg as her own because for a time the dramatist had lived in Bergen, Edvard Grieg's hometown. Moreover, until 1814 Norway was a province of Denmark, and even in Grieg's day drew much of her literary and cultural inspiration from Copenhagen.

Thus when the bicentenary of Holberg's birth rolled around in 1884, the city of Bergen wanted to provide its own festive salute. That this would take place during December and the stormy darkness of a Norwegian winter made no difference to the city fathers. They engaged Grieg to write a cantata for male voices to be performed outdoors around the new Holberg monument in the central market place, as well as another work for the concert hall.

Grieg, who possessed an earthy sense of humor, had no illusions about the success of his cantata for the unveiling ceremony on December 3. "I can see it all before me," he wrote a friend, "snow, hail, storm and every kind of foul weather, huge male choir with open mouths, the rain streaming into them, myself conducting with waterproof cape, winter coat, galoshes, and umbrella! And a cold afterwards, of course, or goodness knows what kind of illness! Oh well, it's one way of dying for one's country!"

The weather on that day turned out about as he'd predicted, and his cantata was soon forgotten. But his other composition, From Holberg's Time, a Baroque-inspired dance suite originally created for piano and then re-scored for string orchestra, had a much happier fate. Though Grieg dismissed it as "a perruque piece" (after the 18th century's powdered wigs), it became one of his most beloved works.

Holberg's life, 1684 to 1754, exactly paralleled that of Bach and Handel, both born in 1685. And so Grieg chose to compose his 20-minute piece in the style of a Baroque dance suite, modeled after Bach's suites and Handel's Water Music. But though his forms and melodies followed Baroque style, his lush string writing and rich Romantic harmonies reflected his own era.

In five brief movements, all but one in G major, the Holberg Suite begins with a **Praeludium** or prelude. It is in Baroque toccata style, with a continuous flow of fast, energetic figures and rushing scales: a warm up for the orchestra. Next comes a **Sarabande**, in Baroque times a slow, stately dance in 3/4 time. Grieg follows this character, creating music of gentle, melancholy beauty. Listen for the lovely passages for cello soloists in the second half of the dance.

In third place comes a **Gavotte**, a gracious, moderate-tempo dance usually in 2/4 time. Grieg's is charmingly pastoral in character and encloses a contrasting dance called a musette. French in origin, the musette was originally danced to bagpipe accompaniment, and we can hear the drone of the pipes in the second violins, cellos, and basses.

The **fourth-movement Air** is not a dance, but an elegiac song, like Bach's "Air for the G String." The only movement in minor (G minor), it is the passionately sorrowful heart of the Holberg Suite, a beautiful melding of Baroque style and Grieg's own poignant lyricism.

The Suite closes with a **Rigaudon**, a French dance with a cheerful, vivacious character. This one features violin and viola soloists imitating the spirited folk style of the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle, but in a very polished manner. It is as though the Norwegian country folk, all scrubbed up and in their best traditional costumes, had been summoned for a court performance in Copenhagen.

RSO Program Notes are also available at rso.com/notes