

PROGRAM NOTES

Porgy and Bess, Selection for Orchestra

George Gershwin/Robert Russell Bennett

Born in Brooklyn, New York, September 26, 1898;

died in Hollywood, California, July 11, 1937/

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, June 15, 1894; died in New York, August 18, 1981

Immediately upon reading DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy* in 1926, George Gershwin wanted to transform it into an opera. It took seven years, however, for Gershwin and Heyward to begin work on it—they were joined by George's brother Ira as co-lyricist—and two more before it reached the stage. George spent several weeks with Heyward on Folly Island, near Charleston, to absorb the rhythmic language and singing of South Carolina black culture. *Porgy and Bess*, billed as an "American folk opera," deals with the harsh realities of life in the "Catfish Row" tenement—crap games, murder, drugs—and the love that grows between Porgy, a disabled beggar, and Bess, abused by her man Crown.

The premiere took place in Boston on September 30, 1935, and, after revisions, opened with the same company in New York on October 10. Despite the audience's enthusiasm, several critics judged it harshly for its "halfway" stance between opera and musical. *Porgy and Bess* later achieved international success, but unfortunately Gershwin did not live to witness it.

Suites from the opera for various ensemble combinations have proliferated, among them two by Robert Russell Bennett, who is best known as the orchestrator for some of the repertoire's most famous musicals by such illustrious composers as Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers—and George Gershwin. In 1942 Fritz Reiner heard a revival of Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, and, unaware that Gershwin himself had made an orchestral suite, asked Bennett, who had been a good friend of Gershwin, to make such an arrangement. When Gershwin's own suite surfaced many years later, his brother Ira titled it *Catfish Row* to distinguish it from Bennett's by-then-famous suite.

Reiner specifically wanted a piece that would fit on three 78 rpm records (six sides at four minutes per side), which dictated the twenty-four minute length. That arrangement, entitled *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture*, premiered on February 5, 1943, with Reiner conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony. Many orchestras, though, wanted a shorter version, so Bennett obliged in 1961 with the present *Porgy and Bess, Selection for Orchestra*, which accomplishes the amazing feat of presenting ten of the opera's famous vocal numbers—fied together with various motives from elsewhere in the score—all in the space of approximately twelve minutes!

Bennett's great skills as an orchestrator and his affection for Gershwin and his music show to great advantage in this work. The four chords that "herald the day" at the opening of Act II, Scene 3, set the mood for the collage of excerpts, which appear in a different order from the opera though basically close to the 1942 arrangement. Bennett's first substantial selection, "Clara, Clara, Don't You Be Downhearted," originated in Act III's chorus of women mourning those who died in the previous night's storm. It leads directly into "A Woman Is a Sometime Thing," which Clara's husband Jake sings in Act I as he volunteers to put their baby to sleep but which turns out to be more his musings on romance rather than a real lullaby.

Next comes Clara's lullaby, "Summertime," which actually precedes Jake's in the opening scene. Its sultry lyricism has made it the opera's most famous number. Bennett juxtaposes this with Porgy's jaunty "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'," which he sings in Act II, happy that Bess now lives with him and in direct contrast with Jake's more serious attitude about making ends meet. A melancholy cello solo brings on Porgy

and Bess's heartfelt love duet "Bess, You Is My Woman Now," sung just before the church picnic on Kittiwah Island, which Bess attends only reluctantly since the disabled Porgy can't go. The ensuing chorus "Oh, I Can't Sit Down" reflects the high spirits of the picknickers about to board the boat.

The bluesy, syncopated "There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York" follows, sung in Act III by drug dealer Sportin' Life to entice Bess to New York after she's been tricked into thinking Porgy will be jailed for a long time for the murder of Crown. Backing up to the church picnic scene, we next hear Sportin' Life's witty "sermon" on skepticism, the popular "It Ain't Necessarily So." Bennett's last substantial selection, the exuberant "Oh Lawd, I'm on My Way," comes from the end of the opera, when, only a week after Bess has left for New York, Porgy gets out of jail and sets out to follow her. Bennett cleverly superimposes fragments of other songs and fittingly concludes with a grandiose return to their love theme, "Bess You Is My Woman Now."

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, op. 22

Camille Saint-Saëns

Born in Paris, October 9, 1835; died in Algiers, December 16, 1921

A child prodigy whose natural musical abilities rivaled Mozart's, Saint-Saëns possessed a score-reading facility and digital dexterity at the keyboard that dazzled those who came into contact with him throughout his life. Nevertheless he opted for the life of a composer rather than that of a concert pianist, limiting his public performances almost exclusively to his own works. He premiered all five of his piano concertos at the keyboard.

Saint-Saëns composed his Second Piano Concerto in only seventeen days in 1868 as part of a program to display Anton Rubinstein as a conductor to the Parisian public, who knew him as a virtuoso pianist of Liszt's stature. Saint-Saëns, who played the piano part, wrote of the May 13 premiere in the Salle Pleyel, "Not having had the time to practice it sufficiently for performance I played very badly, and, except for the scherzo, which was an immediate success, it did not go well. The general opinion was that the first part lacked coherence and the finale was a complete failure."

Despite the initial reaction, the Concerto has become Saint-Saëns's most popular and widely acclaimed work in this genre. Liszt wrote a detailed critique to Saint-Saëns saying that the work as a whole "pleases me singularly," and regretted that as "an old disabled pianist" he could not appear himself in Paris.

Saint-Saëns's deviation from the conventional fast-slow-fast sequence of movements is one of the work's most striking features. The first movement, much admired by Liszt, opens with a piano cadenza—Bach-like at first—that initiates a fantasia-like movement rather than a traditional sonata-form movement. The tranquil theme that follows the long introduction was derived from Gabriel Fauré's *Tantum ergo* for voice and organ, which Fauré had shown to his teacher Saint-Saëns in the midst of working on the Concerto. Of course the movement does not "lack coherence," as is evident by tracing various thematic transformations, but the first audience's reaction may have reflected the composer's non-Classical manipulation of these themes. The return of certain material, for example, appears only in the closing cadenza.

Instead of a slow movement, Saint-Saëns placed a "scherzo" second, the rhythm of which Liszt found "piquant" and which owes much of its fairyland quality and form to Mendelssohn. Several prominent timpani passages offer a glimpse of Saint-Saëns's orchestrational prowess.

The closing movement is an irresistible tarantella, more Classical in form than the preceding movements. Bravura and technical skill are combined with inspiration.

The driving triplets and trilling piano patterns against a chorale-like background create novel effects, and the whole builds to one of the repertoire's most dazzling finishes.

Scheherazade, op. 35

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov

Born in Tikhvin, Novgorod govt., March 18, 1844; died in Lyubensk, St. Petersburg govt., June 21, 1908

The collection of ancient Persian-Indian-Arabian tales called *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* or *A Thousand and One Nights* has fascinated children and adults for centuries. Arranged in its present format as early as 1450, probably in Cairo, the collection was first introduced to the European world in 1704 by the Frenchman Antoine Galland, whose free rendering of the oldest known manuscript of 1548 came out in twelve volumes spanning fourteen years. Many translations later appeared and the immense popularity of the work continued into the nineteenth century, when Rimsky-Korsakov was inspired to compose his symphonic suite *Scheherazade*. Written in the summer of 1888 at Nyezgovity, Rimsky-Korsakov's summer place on the shore of Lake Cheryemenyetskoye, the musical work has become almost as well known as its literary inspiration.

Before following the career of a composer, Rimsky-Korsakov first took a position in the Russian Navy, following in the footsteps of his brother, twenty-two years his senior. He sailed aboard the clipper *Almaz* as a midshipman for two-and-a-half years, a tour that took him to England, the Baltic, the Eastern United States, Brazil, and the Mediterranean. His autobiography contains a wonderful travelogue of his sailing adventure: awe at the magnificence of Niagara Falls, notes on the American Civil War, tropical nights on the ocean, exotic places in and around Rio de Janeiro, and the unforgettable luminosity of the Sargasso Sea. This trip fostered the composer's lifelong interest in foreign and exotic places. The rich panorama of orchestral colors and the "sea pictures" in *Scheherazade* owe almost as much to Rimsky-Korsakov's sailing adventure as to *The Arabian Nights*.

Rimsky-Korsakov prefaced the score of *Scheherazade* with the following telescoped version of the story that frames the great collection:

The Sultan Schahriar, convinced of the perfidy and faithlessness of women, vowed to execute each of his wives after the first night. But the Sultana Scheherazade saved her own life by interesting him in the tales she told him through 1001 nights. Impelled by curiosity, the Sultan continually put off her execution, and at last abandoned his sanguinary resolve. Many marvels did Scheherazade relate to him, citing the verses of poets and the words of songs, weaving tale into tale and story into story.

The composer at one time gave programmatic titles for the four movements of his symphonic suite, which are still frequently used in concert programs despite the fact that he later withdrew them. He thought titles were too definite in associating various themes with specific characters and incidents. The same motives often have different literary connotations, which, as Rimsky-Korsakov realized, wreaks havoc on attempts to tie the music to a specific program. The Scheherazade motive, introduced by the solo violin, is the only one that holds up with regard to a program. Even the commanding opening motive that possibly represents the sultan returns later in places unlikely to relate to him.

Referring to the discarded headings—the sea and Sinbad's ship, the fantastic narrative of the Prince Kalender, the Prince and the Princess, the Baghdad festival and the ship dashing against the rock with the bronze rider upon it—Rimsky wrote in his autobiography:

In composing *Scheherazade* I meant these hints to direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled. . . . All I had desired was

that the hearer . . . should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders and not merely four pieces played one after the other and composed on the basis of themes common to all the four movements.

This suite, in which almost every instrument of the orchestra is featured, exemplifies Rimsky's virtuosity in orchestration, which at this point, he was proud to say, had not been influenced by Wagner. *Scheherazade*, and the just as brilliantly orchestrated *Capriccio espagnol* and *Russian Easter Overture* were in fact his last important purely orchestral works, after which he became almost exclusively an opera composer.

Rimsky-Korsakov begins this piece with the powerful music we associate at first with the Sultan Schahriar and the seductive, graceful violin solo representing Scheherazade. We sense the roll of Sinbad's ship in the composer's rocking, wave-like theme and a series of adventures as he develops all three ideas.

The original title of the second movement refers to an unspecified Kalender prince in the *Arabian Nights*. Rimsky seems to represent the Kalenders—a wandering tribe of beggars and dervishes—with his "Eastern" melodies and colorful solos for bassoon, oboe, flute, and horn.

The lyrical outpouring of the third movement is easily imaginable as love music. Rimsky-Korakov entwines two main themes, one sensuous and the other more playful. Scheherazade's gentle voice appears toward the end.

The composer originally described his Finale as "the Baghdad festival and the ship dashing against the rock with the bronze horseman on it." The ship is Sinbad's and the "bronze horseman" refers to St. Petersburg's famous statue of Peter the Great and to a famous poem by Aleksandr Pushkin that involves the statue and the 1824 flood of the Neva River. Rimsky-Korsakov must have liked the time warp, imagining Sinbad's ancient ship crashing against the statue of his own city in a storm. Following Scheherazade's introduction, we seem to hear first dancing at the festival and then waves at sea becoming more stormy. Rocking motion and cymbal crashes represent the waves, and the striking of the tam-tam (gong) surely marks the climactic moment when the ship hits the rock.

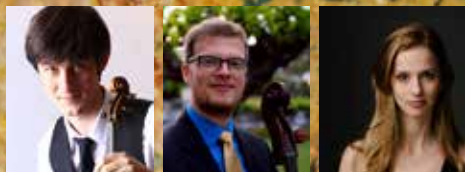
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