

Chapel Hill

Philharmonia

Sunday, 8 December 2024
3:00 p.m.

Moeser Auditorium
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Evan Harger, Guest Conductor

Scenes Behind the Music

Prelude to *The 49th Parallel*

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Suite from *The Red Book* (USA premiere)

Reiko Nomura (b. 1975)

The Way of What is to Come

The Image of the Erring

The Opening of the Egg

The Sacrificial Murder

Overture to *Nabucco*

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

— *Intermission* —

Symphony No. 2 in B minor

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)

Allegro Moderato

Scherzo: Molto Vivo

Andante

Finale: Allegro

Scenes Behind the Music

Today's concert features music that was written at least in part to convey impressions of specific actions and scenes, as on a stage. The opera overture and movie score do that naturally, and the suite numbers all have visual images behind them. Even the symphony, which can be listened to without imagining such things, was conceived by its composer with definite visual associations in his mind.

Vaughan Williams: Prelude to *The 49th Parallel*

In 1940, when Great Britain found itself alone fighting Nazi Germany, movie producer Michael Powell agreed to make a propaganda film that might influence opinion in the USA. It is set in that country and Canada — most of the border between them being the 49th degree of latitude. The plot involves the crew of a German submarine that flees into Hudson's Bay, where it is destroyed. The crew then attempts to escape south to the border of the neutral USA, and one by one they fail. (By the time the film was released in 1942, the USA was already into the war against Germany, but that didn't matter.) It features a stellar cast, including Leslie Howard, Laurence Olivier, and Raymond Massey — all of whom took only half their normal pay for it. For background, Powell persuaded the eminent composer Ralph Vaughan Williams to write his first movie score. The opening music, played while the title, cast members, and production personnel are shown on the screen against a background of border scenery, has taken on a life of its own and is frequently played under the title used here. The music is somberly descriptive of the border regions, from the Pacific through the Rockies and plains, the Great Lakes and the cities, and out into the Atlantic, where the story begins.

Nomura: Suite from *The Red Book*

[From comments by the composer.]

"This piece was inspired by *The Red Book*, a red leather bound portfolio created by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung. In my master's thesis I analyzed myself using an art therapy created by Jung.

Jung showed me a special spiritual journey called "Confrontation with the Unconscious," and the *Red Book Suite* is the result of that journey. It was overwhelmingly powerful, with an unconscious energy that cannot be imagined in a normal state of flowing consciousness.

The suite confronts these questions:

Why do humans exist?

What should we do?

Even though there is no answer, and I know I cannot find the answer, I can never stop thinking about it in terms of *The Red Book*. We should try to see our inside, but it's tough work. I hope the suite will help people focus on their inside the way Jung's *Red Book* did for me."



Verdi: Overture to *Nabucco*

After the failure of his second opera, which coincided with tragedy in his immediate family, Giuseppe Verdi decided to abandon composing as a career, but he had contracted with La Scala to write another opera. The opera's manager handed him a libretto that had been turned down by Otto Nicolai, urging him to look at it. According to a romanticized version of the event, Verdi took it home and threw it on the table in anger; the book fell open at the page where the chorus sings a lament for their homeland; Verdi immediately imagined a melody to set it, and began to work. (Scholarship has debunked this nice tale.) Eventually Verdi did finish the opera and La Scala mounted it, to an overwhelming success. It was Verdi's breakthrough work, establishing him all over Europe as a major opera composer.

The opera concerns the biblical story of the Babylonian Captivity under Nebuchadnezzar. (Nabucco is short Italian for that name.) Adhering to neither scripture nor history, the plot inserts that operatic cliché, a love triangle, and implausibly ends with the great king releasing the Israelites because he accepts their god. But it features the most famous chorus in Italian opera, the lament of the Israelites (*Va, pensiero*), which is performed all over the world wherever choral music is sung.

The overture uses the opera's themes, from the destruction of the Temple and the removal of the Israelites to their happy release, with the lament as a contrasting theme.

Borodin: Symphony No. 2 in B Minor

The illegitimate child of a Russian aristocrat, registered by custom as the son of one of his serfs, Alexander Borodin was given by his real father an excellent scientific education. At age 23 he had a doctorate in chemistry, and embarked on a research career. But he had also studied cello and piano, and music was his second passion. After receiving his degree he spent several years pursuing chemical research in western Europe, achieving a considerable reputation for his work. (His scientific publications far outnumber his published musical compositions.) In 1862 he was appointed professor at the Imperial Medical-Surgical Academy in St Petersburg, a position he held for the rest of his life.

The same year he began studying composition with Mily Balakirev, becoming a member of the group of part-time and largely self-taught composers later famously known as the Mighty Five. (The others were César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, all military officers.) Balakirev urged them to reject western models of composition and invent new styles using Russian folk and liturgical themes as their basis. Under this influence, Borodin began to write a symphony. It took nearly seven years to complete because he could rarely devote more than a few hours in any day to it. Its performance in 1869, to popular acclaim, encouraged him to undertake further works.

He started a new symphony, but then took on an opera, *Prince Igor*, which he never finished. He got far enough to write a ballet scene called *Polovtsian Dances*, now a widely played concert work. But a few hours of work a day were not sufficient, so he put it aside and went back to the symphony, using ideas from the opera in its themes. Eventually finished in 1877, its first performance was a failure; but after some revisions in instrumentation on suggestions from Rimsky-Korsakov it was successfully presented in 1879. It quickly became, and remains, his most popular major orchestral work.

Outwardly the symphony follows the standard western forms: the usual four movements, including a rapid scherzo and a lyrical slow movement. But much of what those movements contain is highly original in terms of harmonic treatment, rhythmic innovations, and instrumentation.

According to the critic Vladimir Stasov, Borodin's friend and biographer, the composer visualized legendary Russian scenes in three of the movements: in the first a gathering of heroic warriors; in the third a bard accompanied by an old accordion; and in the finale a festive celebration of the heroes accompanied by ancient plucked instruments. Because of these images, sometimes the symphony is given the subtitle *The Bogatyrs*, a Russian term for their ancient heroic warriors.

The first movement opens with a stern motto, a compelling call to arms:



This uses an eight-note scale, with alternating half and whole step intervals, echoing ancient incantations. It is followed by a happy dance motive in the woodwinds. (Borodin introduces nearly all of his melodies in the winds rather than the strings; perhaps this is because old Russian folk music had no instrument like the violin, its stringed instruments being mostly plucked or strummed.) These two motives are repeated and developed, until the arrival of the second subject — played by the cellos in a rare exception to the rule.



The development combines these three ideas with a *dum-da-da-dum* pattern initiated by the tympani. The recapitulation is notable for setting the second subject not in B minor or major, but in E-flat and C, keys quite remote from the ones expected. After a short coda the movement ends where it started, with a broad statement of the opening motto by the whole orchestra in unison.

The scherzo, one beat to the bar, is as fast as the winds can play their repeated notes. A scampering theme, running up in the strings and down in the winds, is followed by a syncopated theme which seems always to be pushing forward. The slower middle section features another lovely Borodin melody introduced by the oboe:



Toward the end the tempo becomes breathlessly fast; then a hushed wind chord ends the piece.

A pastoral melody in the solo horn, accompanied by harp and strings, starts the *Andante* movement:



(Note the change in number of beats per bar; Borodin lets his melodies have the number of beats they need and adjusts the meter to make it happen.) This is passed to the clarinet, and after a pause a new faster section starts with this little motto:



The music rises in intensity and then falls back, the return of the little motto suggesting a quiet close. But suddenly the strings and middle winds sing out the horn's melody at full voice, while the rest of the orchestra accompanies with rocking triplets. It is a thrilling moment. The passion subsides, the little motto returns, and the movement ends as it began, with solo horn, harp and strings.

Without pause, the finale begins with a syncopated rhythm setting up the main theme, a happy dance alternating between bars of three and two beats:



(Perhaps this anticipates the 5/4 "waltz" in Tchaikovsky's last symphony.) There is a lyrical second theme introduced by the winds, but the movement is dominated by the first.

Remarkable in this movement is Borodin's use of the strings to simulate old strummed instruments. In the exposition the second theme is accompanied by harp and strings, some playing pizzicato chords, others playing thrown strokes (dropping the bow on the string and letting it bounce). In the recapitulation the strings in accompaniment play every way except normally: thrown strokes, flying staccato, and rapid pizzicato with stand partners tossing chords at each other.

One can easily visualize the happy warriors and their exuberant dancing. At the end there is a short coda reprising the introduction, and with a long trill and a final chord the symphony is over.

Of the Mighty Five, Borodin adhered most closely to western models, writing symphonies and chamber music. The others gently criticized him for that. His post-doctoral years in Germany and his love of playing the cello in chamber music clearly influenced his choices. Nevertheless, he imbued his works with the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms of the Russia of the past, and the combination has always had great appeal, both in Russia and the west.

The works of Borodin that are played frequently today are few, comprising mainly this symphony, the *Polovtsian Dances*, one of his two string quartets, and the tone poem *In the Steppes of Central Asia*. He was of course very much a part-time composer, and only for about 25 years. But as Sir Henry Hadow, educator and composer, said: "No musician has ever claimed immortality with so slender an offering. Yet if there be immortalities in music, his claim is incontestable."

Notes by Lawrence Evans