

**PROGRAM NOTES  
FOR APRIL 9**

***Soirées Musicales, Op. 9 (Suite after Rossini)***

**Benjamin Britten**

**Born 22 November 1913 in Lowestoft, Suffolk**

**Died 4 December 1976 in Aldeburgh**

*Approximate duration 7 minutes*

- Britten's suite is orchestral versions of short pieces by the Italian composer Rossini.
- The movements are dance-inspired and have been choreographed.
- Listen for national 'styles,' suggesting music of several European countries.

Long after he gave up writing operas in 1829, Gioachino Rossini – composer of *The Barber of Seville* – continued writing smaller pieces for both instruments and voices. Between 1857 and 1868, he composed 13 volumes of music, primarily songs and short piano pieces, under the collective title *Péchés de Vieillesse* [Sins of Old Age]. Seven decades later, the English composer Benjamin Britten orchestrated a handful of them, calling them *Soirées Musicales* [Musical Evenings].

The Suite opens with a brief March adapted from ballet music in the opera *William Tell*. The other four movements are arrangements of songs in *Péchés de Vieillesse*. Britten chose his movements well, allowing for variety of mood. Dance rhythms predominate, but he capitalizes on the potential for delicate orchestral color. *Canzonetta* is a Venetian barcarolle; *Tirolese* a lively Alpine country dance, complete with yodeling. *Bolero* adds castanets to enhance Spanish flavor. A rumbustious *Tarantella* brings *Soirées musicales* to an enthusiastic close.

***Siegfried Idyll***

**Richard Wagner**

**Born 22 May, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany**

**Died 13 February, 1881 in Venice, Italy**

*Approximate duration 18 minutes*

- Wagner composed this as a birthday gift to his second wife, Cosima.
- No other work by Wagner comes close to a symphony.
- Tenderness, calm, and delicacy are the watchwords for this lovely movement.

If you want to press some "hot buttons," bring up the subject of Richard Wagner among music lovers. As opera composer, philosopher, dramatist, political theorist and colorful romantic figure, he left a powerful imprint on the Europe in which he lived. Modern Western culture remains touched in profound ways by the Wagnerian legacy, and Wagner has inspired more impassioned writing and rhetoric than any other composer. Few react neutrally to Wagner. His proponents

defend and celebrate him with passion and inexhaustible energy. Anti-Wagnerites attack his prejudices and other flaws with equal ferocity.

Amid the brouhaha and controversy, one aspect sometimes gets overlooked: Wagner as lover and husband. The *Siegfried Idyll* is the fruit of the composer's love for his second wife, Cosima. A tender and intimate offering, this work reveals a gentleness in Wagner's personality that one rarely glimpses in his operas.

Wagner first met Cosima -- the elder of Franz Liszt's two illegitimate daughters by the Countess Marie d'Agoult -- when Cosima was a teenager. Their acquaintance developed into a warm friendship after 1857, when she married the conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow, a champion of Wagner's music and one of Wagner's most devoted disciples. Cosima's and von Bülow's union was not a great success. In 1864, Cosima and Wagner became lovers. When their liaison became public, it precipitated one of the greatest scandals of the nineteenth century in artistic circles. By the late 1860s, Wagner had fathered two daughters with Cosima, and by November 1868, the pair were living together openly. Cosima bore Wagner a son, Siegfried, in June 1869.

Not surprisingly, Hans von Bülow had by then undertaken divorce proceedings. Cosima and Wagner received confirmation on 18 July, 1870 that the divorce was final. They were married in Lucerne, Switzerland on 25 August, legitimizing their affair and their children. For Cosima's first birthday following their marriage, Wagner surprised his bride with an instrumental serenade, performed by a 13-piece orchestra in their home at Villa Tribschen, on Lake Lucerne. That piece, the *Siegfried Idyll*, has become Wagner's most popular instrumental composition. Certainly it is the most personal.

### **Surrogate symphony**

The *Idyll* is the closest Wagner came to writing a symphony. Most of its themes are appropriated from Act III of the opera *Siegfried* (1869), but the title also alludes to Cosima and Wagner's infant son. An inscription on the autograph manuscript is headed:

*Tribschen Idyll* with Fidi-Birdsong and Orange Sunrise, presented as a symphonic birthday greeting to his Cosima by her Richard, 1870.

Fidi was the couple's nickname for the baby; "orange sunrise" was an allusion to the wallpaper outside their bedrooms in the Tribschen home.

It is apparent that this work was very special to them both. Cosima referred to it as a "secret treasure" in her diary. She relinquished the manuscript for publication only with great reluctance, when pressing financial obligations compelled the couple to do so in 1877.

### **About the music**

An extended movement of about 18 minutes' duration, the *Siegfried Idyll* is lullaby, love-song and modified sonata form rolled into one. The modesty of Wagner's orchestral forces adds to the intimacy of the music, yet there is sufficient color among the instruments to achieve pleasing variety with a muted palette.

## ***I crisantemi* [Chrysanthemums]**

**Giacomo Puccini**

**Born 22 December, 1858 in Lucca, Italy**

**Died 29 November, 1924 in Brussels**

*Approximate duration 7 minutes*

- This rare early instrumental piece by Puccini began as a string quartet.
- Writing for strings alone brings out the lyrical elements in a small orchestra.
- Puccini recognized a good tune, and used the same themes in an opera.

Any opera fans in the audience? For those of you who know Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1893), the music from *I crisantemi* occurs in the opera's final act: as the curtain rises, when Des Grieux and Manon are dragging across the desert, exhausted; then later, when he addresses her from outside the bars of her prison window.

*I crisantemi* preceded the opera by three years. This jewel for string quartet (later transcribed for string orchestra) is one of several examples of musical material originally for instruments that Puccini recycled for use in his operas. "Puccini always knew how to insert the recycled passages at the most suitable place," Michele Girardi has written, "so that when re-heard in the new context they do not jar stylistically with their surroundings."

If that observation is true, then it is because the music was so appropriate in its original guise. *I crisantemi* is a threnody: a funeral oration in music. Puccini composed in memory of Amedeo di Savoia, duke of Aosta, who died 18 January, 1890. Less than three weeks after the duke's death, on 6 February, Puccini reported to his father that the new piece:

. . . was performed with great success by Campanari at the Conservatory and at Brescia. I wrote it in one night on the death of Amadeo [*sic*] di Savoia.

Most of Puccini's surviving chamber music — and there is precious little — consists of exercises he composed at Milan's Conservatorio. This one had a more benign fate, although it is clouded with the death that prompted its composition. Puccini's melancholy mode is well-suited to the idea of a threnody, and the atmosphere is unchanged, perhaps even enhanced, by his transcription for string orchestra. In the opera, both of *Crisantemi*'s themes are associated with Manon's physical deterioration. This type of motivic connection with death would remain consistent throughout Puccini's career.

## **Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major, K. 503**

**Wolfgang Amadè Mozart**

**Born 27 January, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria**

**Died 5 December, 1791 in Vienna, Austria**

*Approximate duration 30 minutes*

- Listen for trumpets and drums. This is bright, assertive music!

- The pianist's first entrance is almost like a mini-cadenza.
- In the outer movements, Mozart's approach to the concerto is symphonic.
- Wide melodic leaps link the slow movement to opera.

The year 1786 was exceptionally productive for Mozart. In addition to his opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, he was able to complete a number of splendid chamber works and several piano concerti. Arthur Hutchings has observed that the C major concerto, K. 503, "marks the end of Mozart's period of 'stardom' as Vienna's performer/composer." In many ways, K. 503 crowns the entire magnificent cycle of Mozart's piano concerti, earning it the nickname of 'Mozart's *Emperor Concerto*.'

Spaciousness, breadth, power and heroism do indeed look forward to Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto, the *Emperor*. 'Majestic' is the watchword for both works. Mozart employed his largest concerto orchestra in K.503 (excepting only No. 24 in C minor, K. 491, which calls for clarinets as well as oboes). The first movement of K. 503 is the lengthiest movement that Mozart ever composed.

A bold, assertive C major opening sets a forthright military tone. A secondary fanfare theme foreshadows the opening phrase of the French national anthem, the "Marseillaise." It also plays an important role. These deceptively simple melodic ideas are present in all three movements. Mozart constructs the most elaborate and imposing of his musical structures with economical means. In the playful rondo that closes the concerto, his lighter tone never compromises the grandeur and dignity of the whole.

No solo cadenza by Mozart survives for this concerto, because he wrote the piano part for himself, and his custom was to improvise in concert. (Written-out cadenzas survive for other concertos, usually those he furnished to his gifted students.) Many modern pianists have crafted cadenzas for K. 503, including Friedrich Gulda, Robert Casadesus, and Alfred Schnittke.

Jeremy Thompson prefers cadenzas that are closer to the era when the piece was composed. He has chosen one by Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837), a pianist and composer who studied with Mozart as a child, subsequently working with Albrechtsberger, Salieri and Haydn. Hummel made solo piano arrangements of several Mozart piano concerti. His arrangement of K. 503 is the source of the cadenza Mr. Thompson plays.



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