

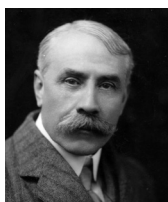
notes

February 10/11

STRAVINSKY'S *PETROUCHKA*

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: Edward Elgar's *In the South*, inspired by a winter-time trip to sunny Italy, was influenced by the lovely town of Alassio, where he stayed; his reading of Tennyson's *Childe Harold*; and a vision of ancient Roman armies. Jean Sibelius's *Violin Concerto*, which he composed at a time when he was worried about losing his health and his hearing, stems from the Romantic tradition of the virtuoso compositions of Mendelssohn, Bruch and Tchaikovsky. Igor Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* originated in an old Russian tale in which a puppet at a fair is suddenly endowed with life. 🎵



EDWARD ELGAR

**Born June 2, 1857 in
Broadheath, England;
died February 23, 1934
in Worcester.**

IN THE SOUTH, OP. 50, "ALASSIO" (1904)

- First performed on March 16, 1904 in London, conducted by the composer.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 6 & 7, 1999 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 19 minutes)

As a restorative for body and spirit during the damp British winter, Elgar and his devoted wife, Alice, left London for the Mediterranean coastal town of Bordighera, just east of Monte Carlo, on November 21, 1903. Elgar found Bordighera "lovely but too Cockney for me," and on December 11th, the couple travelled up the coast to Alassio to take rooms at the Villa San

Giovanni, from which Elgar reported that he could see "streams, flowers, hills, with the distant snow mountains in one direction and the blue Mediterranean in the other."

On one sunny afternoon, the Elgars made an outing to an old church in the village of Moglio, the sound of whose name so appealed to Elgar that he repeated it over and over to himself until it had generated a musical motive in his mind. He added this fragment to the other sketches he was accumulating for an overture, called tentatively *In the South*, but it was not until an excursion to the Vale of Andora four days later that the finished shape and content of the new work became clear to him. "I was by the side of an old Roman way," he recalled. "A peasant shepherd stood by an old ruin, and in a flash it all came to me — the conflict of armies in that very spot long ago, where now I stood — the contrast of the ruin and the shepherd — and then, all of a sudden, I came back to reality. In that time I had 'composed' the overture — the rest was merely writing it down." The score of *In*

the South, to which Elgar appended the subtitle *Alassio*, was finished in London on February 21, 1904, allowing barely enough time to prepare the orchestral parts and arrange rehearsals before the premiere was given under the composer's direction at an Elgar Festival on March 16th. The work's success confirmed his reputation as the leader of English music, and he was knighted four months later.

Though Elgar called *In the South* an overture, its scale, orchestral expansiveness, evocative episodes and even its form make it, in effect, a symphonic poem. Its allusive qualities are indicated by two poetic excerpts that the composer placed at the head of the score. The first is from Tennyson: *What hours were thine and mine, In lands of palm and southern pine, In lands of palm, of orange blossom, Of olive, aloe, and maize and vine.* The other excerpt was culled from Byron's *Childe Harold*, the literary inspiration for Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*: *... a land Which was the mightiest in its old command And is the loveliest ... Wherein were cast ... the men of Rome! Thou art the garden of the world.*

Elgar contained his vision within a modified sonata form, which was made to accommodate two atmospheric episodes in place of the usual development section. An entire procession of fine melodic ideas occupies the first theme area: a heroic leaping motive; a striding downward melody marked with the composer's most characteristic performance instruction, *Nobilmente*; and a gentle, limpid strain led by the clarinet. The formal second theme, assigned to the strings, is quiet and almost passionately lyrical. The center of *In the South* holds two of Elgar's most evocative sound pictures. The first is a bold depiction inspired by his vision of ancient Roman armies, a stern passage whose open fifth-based harmonies make it one of the most daring episodes in all of Elgar's works. The second picture grows from a haunting bucolic

melody entrusted to the solo viola, the principal instrument of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*. (So distinct in character, mood and melody is this passage that Elgar arranged it separately as a piece for small orchestra titled *Canto Popolare* and as a song called *In Moonlight* with a text borrowed from Shelley's *An Ariette for Music*.) A recapitulation of the full complement of themes from the exposition rounds out *In the South*.

The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, glockenspiel, harp and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



JEAN SIBELIUS

Born December 8, 1865 in Hämeenlinna, Finland; died September 20, 1957 in Järvenpää, Finland.

VIOLIN CONCERTO IN D MINOR, OP. 47 (1904)

- First performed on February 8, 1904 in Helsinki, with Viktor Nováček as soloist and the composer conducting.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on May 6, 1957 with Frank Noyes conducting and Tossy Spivakovsky as soloist. Five subsequent performances occurred, most recently on October 21 & 22, 2000 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Nurit Patcht as soloist. (*Duration: ca. 32 minutes*)

By 1903, when he was engaged on his *Violin Concerto*, Sibelius had already composed

Finlandia, *Kullervo*, *En Saga*, the *Karelia Suite*, the four *Lemminkäinen Legends* (including *The Swan of Tuonela*) and the first two symphonies, the works that established his international reputation. He was composing so easily at that time that his wife, Aino, wrote to a friend that he would stay up far into the night to record the flood of excellent ideas that had come upon him during the day. There were, however, some disturbing personal worries threatening his musical fecundity.

Just after the premiere of the *Second Symphony* in March 1902, Sibelius developed a painful ear infection that did not respond easily to treatment. Thoughts of the deafness of Beethoven and Smetana plagued him, and he feared that he might be losing his hearing. (He was 37 at the time.) In June, he began having trouble with his throat, and he jumped to the conclusion that his health was about to give way, even wondering how much time he might have left to work. Though filled with fatalistic thoughts at that time, he put much energy into the *Violin Concerto*. The ear and throat ailments continued to plague him until 1908, when a benign tumor was discovered. It took a dozen operations until it was successfully removed, and the anxiety about its return stayed with him for years. (Sibelius, incidentally, enjoyed sterling health for the rest of his days and lived to the ripe age of 91, a testament to the efficacy of his treatment.)

The *Violin Concerto's* opening movement employs sonata form, modified in that a succinct cadenza for the soloist replaces the usual development section. The exposition consists of three theme groups — a doleful melody announced by the soloist over murmuring strings, a yearning theme initiated by bassoons and cellos with rich accompaniment, and a bold, propulsive strophe in march rhythm. The development-cadanza is built on the opening motive and leads directly into the recapitulation

of the exposition themes.

The second movement could well be called a “*Romanza*,” a descendant of the long-limbed lyricism of the *Andantes* of Mozart’s violin concertos. It is among the most avowedly Romantic music in any of Sibelius’ works for orchestra. The finale launches into a robust dance whose theme the esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey thought could be “a polonaise for polar bears.” A bumptious energy fills the movement, giving it an air reminiscent of the Gypsy finales of many 19th-century violin concertos. The form is sonatina, a sonata without development, here employing two large theme groups.

The score calls for flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and the usual strings.



IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born June 17, 1882 in Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg; died April 6, 1971 in New York City.

PETROUCHKA, BALLET IN FOUR TABLEAUX (1911; REV. 1947)

- First performed on June 13, 1911 in Paris, conducted by Pierre Monteux.
- Selected movements from *Petrouchka* first performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 12, 1950 with Frank Noyes conducting. The 1947 revision of *Petrouchka* was subsequently performed on April 9 & 10, 1983 with Yuri Krasnapolsky conducting and on October 20 & 21, 1999 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 35 minutes)

Stravinsky burst meteor-like onto the musical firmament in 1910 with the brilliant triumph of his first major score for the Ballets Russes, *The Firebird*. Immediately, Serge Diaghilev, the enterprising impresario of the troupe, sought to capitalize on this success by commissioning Stravinsky to write a second score as soon as possible. Stravinsky was already prepared with an idea that had come to him even before finishing *The Firebird*. "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite," he recalled in his *Autobiography* of 1936. "Sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring. Such was the theme of *Le Sacre du printemps*." Diaghilev was as excited about this vision as was Stravinsky, and he sent the composer off to write the score with all possible haste. Stravinsky continued the story in his *Autobiography*:

"Before tackling *The Rite of Spring*, which would be a long and difficult task, I wanted to refresh myself by composing an orchestral piece in which the piano would play the most important part — a sort of *Konzertstück*. In composing the music, I had a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life.... Having finished this piece, I struggled for hours to find a title which would express in a word the character of my music and, consequently, the personality of this creature. One day I leaped for joy, I had indeed found my title — *Petrouchka*, the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries. Soon afterwards, Diaghilev came to visit me. He was much astonished when, instead of the sketches of the *Sacre*, I played him the piece I had just composed and which later became the second scene of *Petrouchka*. He was so pleased with it that he would not leave it alone, and began persuading me to develop the theme of the puppet's sufferings and make it into a whole ballet."

Though his progress on the score was

interrupted by a serious bout of "nicotine poisoning," Stravinsky finished the work in time for the scheduled premiere on June 13, 1911. The production was a triumph, though it appeared that at the last minute it might be scuttled by a costumer who refused to let things proceed until he was paid. The till being temporarily empty, Diaghilev went to the box of the redoubtable Misia Sert, the Polish pianist, salon hostess and arts patron, to ask for her help. She was, as always, ready with assistance, but the curtain was delayed half an hour while her driver was sent to retrieve the necessary funds. When the performance finally began, the music of Stravinsky and the dancing of Nijinsky captivated the audience. The illustrious thespian Sarah Bernhardt was so moved by the depth and subtlety of Nijinsky's portrayal of the love-sick puppet that she said, with no little envy, "I am afraid, I am afraid — because I have just seen the greatest actor in the world."

Tableau I. *St. Petersburg, The Shrove-Tide Fair*. Crowds of people stroll about, entertained by a hurdy-gurdy man and dancers. The Showman opens the curtains of his little theater to reveal three puppets — Petrouchka, the Ballerina and the Moor. He charms them into life with his flute, and they begin to dance among the public.

Tableau II. *Petrouchka's Room*. Petrouchka suffers greatly from his awareness of his grotesque appearance. He tries to console himself by falling in love with the Ballerina. She visits him in his room, but she is frightened by his uncouth antics, and flees.

Tableau III. *The Moor's Room*. The Moor and the Ballerina meet in his room. Their love scene is interrupted by the arrival of Petrouchka, furiously jealous. The Moor throws him out.

Tableau IV. *Shrove-Tide Fair Towards Evening*. The festive scene of Tableau I resumes with the appearance of a group of wet-nurses, a performing bear, Gypsies, a band of coachmen

and several masqueraders. At the theater, Petrouchka rushes out from behind the curtain, pursued by the Moor, who strikes his rival down with his sword. Petrouchka dies. The Showman assures the bystanders that Petrouchka is only a puppet, but he is startled to see Petrouchka's jeering ghost appear on the roof of the little theater.

The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, xylophone, tambourine, tam-tam, harp, piano, celesta and the usual strings.