

notes

May 19/20

SEASON FINALE: RHAPSODY IN BLUE

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: Our concert opens and closes with two very different takes on the Viennese waltz. When “Waltz King” Johann Strauss Jr.’s irresistible *Voices of Spring* started out as a number for coloratura soprano it met with little initial success, but in its orchestral guise it has become one of the most characteristic musical souvenirs of Imperial Vienna. Dmitri Shostakovich composed his *Piano Concerto No. 2* as a solo vehicle for his son Maxim on the occasion of his graduation from the Moscow Conservatory. George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, one of the epochal works in American music history, “made a lady out of jazz,” according to conductor Walter Damrosch. Maurice Ravel saw *La Valse* both as “a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz” and as a “fantastic and fatefully inescapable whirlpool” toward which Vienna marched in three-quarter time. 🎵



JOHANN STRAUSS, JR.

Born October 25, 1825 in Vienna;
died there June 3, 1899.

VOICES OF SPRING WALTZ, OP. 410 (1883)

- First performed in March 1883 in Vienna, conducted by the composer.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on April 20 & 21, 2002 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 8 minutes)

“This fiend of German birth, destitute of grace, delicacy and propriety, a disgusting practice,” spluttered one English writer of the 1830s about that diabolic instrument of immorality, *The Waltz*. Why, in this depraved display, he ranted, the

couple actually danced in each other’s arms, refusing to keep the respectable distance that characterized all the good old dances. And it was that crafty pair of Viennese tunemongers, Johann Strauss and his buddy Josef Lanner, who were the main perpetrators of this insult to humanity, dispensing a concoction of sounds that Wagner described as “a stronger narcotic than alcohol” arousing “passions bordering on mad fury.” Alas for the poor Englishman, anything *that* irresistible was bound to be a success.

The waltz was descended from an Austrian peasant dance called a *Ländler*, a heavy-handed (footed?) affair in moderate triple meter that gained great popularity during Mozart’s last years in Vienna. (He wrote music for such *German Dances* when they were first allowed to join the staid, old minuet in the imperial balls in 1788.) The Viennese went mad over the new dance, and spent many nights literally dancing until dawn. Michael Kelly, a friend of Mozart and

a participant in the premiere of *The Marriage of Figaro*, noted such dedication in the 1790s to this sort of merriment that, “for the sake of ladies in the family way, who would not be persuaded to stay at home, there were apartments prepared, with every convenience for their *accouchement*, should they be unfortunately required.” It was really in the 1830s and 1840s, however, that the waltz established its definitive form and style and became a European mania. Strauss the Elder led a crack orchestra in his own compositions, faster-tempo and more lilting modernizations of the old *Ländler*. So great was the popularity of the waltz during his lifetime that, during at least one carnival season, the ballrooms of Vienna could accommodate 50,000 people in an evening — in a city with a population of 200,000. His reputation spread well beyond the Austrian capital, and he was called on to play 72 public concerts in England during the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837. Papa Johann tried to discourage his sons from going into the music business, but Johann, Jr. was determined to be part of the waltz madness. He established a rival orchestra to that of his father and both prospered for a time, but at his father’s death in 1849, the son merged the two ensembles. Strauss, the Younger, was soon dubbed “The Waltz King,” and he ruled over his domain as had no one in the history of music.

Voices of Spring was composed in 1883 as a virtuoso showpiece for the coloratura soprano Bianca Bianchi; the text was by Richard Genée. The work met with little acclaim when Bianchi premiered it at the Theater-an-der-Wien, the critics rating it as “mediocre,” “not very melodious” and “top-heavy with coloratura.” *Voices of Spring* proved popular on Strauss’ tours abroad, however, and it enjoyed wide success in a piano transcription that the composer made for his friend Alfred Grünfeld.

Even the Viennese press came eventually to admire the work, allowing that *Voices of Spring* was “closer to Mozart and Schubert than to Lanner and Father Strauss” because of its elegance and sophistication.

The score calls for piccolo, flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, harp and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
Born September 25, 1906
in St. Petersburg;
died August 9, 1975 in
Moscow.

PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2 IN F MAJOR, OP. 102 (1957)

- First performed on May 10, 1957 in Moscow, with Nikolai Anosov conducting and Maxim Shostakovich as soloist.
 - These concerts mark the first performances of this piece by the Des Moines Symphony.
- (Duration: ca. 20 minutes)

The life and music of Dmitri Shostakovich abound in dichotomies. In 1925, he was accompanying silent films on a battered piano in a frigid Leningrad cinema; a year later, after the premiere of the *First Symphony*, he was hailed at age twenty as the leader of the first generation of post-Revolution Soviet composers. During Hitler’s siege of Leningrad, he worked on the giant *Seventh Symphony* between tours of duty as a fireman. He was denounced in 1948 as a musical scoundrel; in 1954, he was honored as “People’s

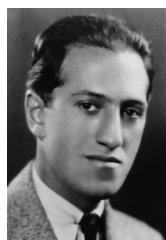
Artist of the U.S.S.R.” and two years later given the Lenin Prize. He was the chief adornment and most visible representative of Soviet culture for almost four decades though he did not formally join the Communist Party until 1962.

His music, as well, is filled with stark contrasts. Beginning with the *Symphony No. 1*, many of his individual works juxtaposed satire and pathos, grandeur and tragedy. The avant-garde style of his first mature decade — grotesque humor, biting dissonance, steely expressivity — was followed beginning with the *Fifth Symphony* by much music of conservatism and universal appeal. Symphonies (*Nos. 11 and 12*) extolling Lenin and the Revolution were succeeded by a musical condemnation of Soviet anti-Semitism in the *Thirteenth Symphony*. While maintaining a singular personality throughout his life’s work, Shostakovich displayed a wider range of musical attitudes than perhaps any composer except Gustav Mahler, by whom he was indelibly influenced.

The dichotomy dividing Shostakovich’s works between those primarily for public display and those that were more introspective and reflective of his deepest thoughts veered in his later years toward the latter — the wondrous series of string quartets and the last three *Symphonies* are the principal evidence. Standing beside these inward-looking pieces, however, is a large amount of immediately appealing music embodying one of his most important tenets: “I consider that every artist who isolates himself from the world is doomed. I find it incredible that an artist should wish to shut himself away from the people.” One of the best-crafted among this group of film scores, tone poems, jingoistic anthems and occasional instrumental works is a piano concerto that Shostakovich wrote in 1956-1957 for his son, Maxim, who was just finishing his studies at the Moscow Conservatory. The outer movements, both

marked *Allegro*, are propelled by an almost demonic energy grown from a hybrid of march and galop. They call for an invigorating display of virtuosity — nimble, powerful, percussive by turns — that gives the soloist ample opportunity to display his technique. In contrast, the slow middle movement, for piano and strings only (with the exception of a single entry by the solo horn), is of a lyricism and tenderness reminiscent of Chopin, filtered perhaps, in its harmonic suavities, through Poulenc.

The score calls for piccolo and flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons in pairs, four horns, timpani, snare drum, and the usual strings.



GEORGE GERSHWIN

**Born September 26, 1898
in Brooklyn, New York;
died July 11, 1937 in
Hollywood, California.**

RHAPSODY IN BLUE FOR PIANO & ORCHESTRA (1924; REV. 1942)

Orchestrated by Ferde Grofé (1892-1972) in 1942.

- First performed on February 12, 1924 in New York, conducted by Paul Whiteman with the composer as soloist.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 16, 1947 with Frank Noyes conducting and Jesus Maria Sanroma as soloist. Five subsequent performances occurred, most recently on February 15 & 16, 2014 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Jeffrey Biegel as soloist. (*Duration: ca. 16 minutes*)

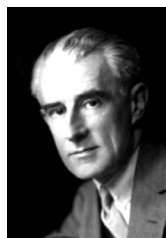
For George White’s *Scandals of 1922*, the 24-year-old George Gershwin provided

something a little bit different — an opera, a brief, somber one-acter called *Blue Monday* (later retitled *135th Street*) incorporating some jazz elements that White cut after only one performance on the grounds that it was too gloomy. *Blue Monday*, however, impressed the show's conductor, Paul Whiteman, then gaining a national reputation as the self-styled “King of Jazz” for his adventurous explorations of the new popular music styles with his Palais Royal Orchestra. A year later, Whiteman told Gershwin about his plans for a special program the following February in which he hoped to show some of the ways traditional concert music could be enriched by jazz, and suggested that the young composer provide a piece for piano and jazz orchestra. Gershwin, who was then busy with the final preparations for the upcoming Boston tryout of *Sweet Little Devil* and somewhat unsure about barging into the world of classical music, did not pay much attention to the request until he read in *The New York Times* on New Year's Day that he was writing a new “symphony” for Whiteman's program. After a few frantic phone calls, Whiteman finally convinced Gershwin to undertake the project, a work for piano solo (to be played by the composer) and Whiteman's 22-piece orchestra — and then told him that it had to be finished in less than a month. Themes and ideas for the new piece immediately began to tumble through Gershwin's head, and late in January, only three weeks after it was begun, *Rhapsody in Blue* was completed.

The premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* — New York, Aeolian Hall, February 12, 1924 — was one of the great nights in American music. Many of the era's most illustrious musicians attended, critics from far and near assembled to pass judgment, and the glitterati of society and culture graced the event. Gershwin fought down his apprehension over his joint debuts as serious

composer and concert pianist, and he and his music had a brilliant success. “A new talent finding its voice,” wrote Olin Downes, music critic for *The New York Times*. Conductor Walter Damrosch told Gershwin that he had “made a lady out of jazz,” and then commissioned him to write the *Concerto in F*. There was critical carping about laxity in the structure of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, but there was none about its vibrant, quintessentially American character or its melodic inspiration, and it became an immediate hit, attaining (and maintaining) a position of popularity almost unmatched by any other work of a native composer.

The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, snare drum, tam-tam, glockenspiel and the usual strings.



MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875 in Ciboure, France; died December 28, 1937 in Paris.

LA VALSE: POÈME CHORÉOGRAPHIQUE (1920)

- First performed on December 12, 1920 in Paris, conducted by Camille Chevillard.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on November 21, 1970 conducted by Willis Page. Three subsequent performances occurred, most recently on January 30 & 31, 2010 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 12 minutes)

Ravel first considered composing a musical homage to Johann Strauss, Jr. as early as 1906. The idea forced itself upon him again a decade later, but during the years of World War I he could not bring himself to work on a score he had tentatively titled "*Wien*" ("Vienna"), and it was not until January 1919 that he was immersed in the composition of his tribute to Vienna — "waltzing frantically," as he wrote to a friend. He saw *La Valse* both as "a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz" and as a "fantastic and fatefully inescapable whirlpool." The "inescapable whirlpool" was the First World War toward which Vienna marched in three-quarter time, salving its social and political conscience with the luscious strains of Strauss waltzes. Ravel completed *La Valse* in piano score by the end of 1919, and then made a piano duet version and undertook the orchestration, which he finished in the spring of the following year.

A surrealistic haze shrouds the opening of *La Valse*, a vague introduction from which fragments of themes gradually emerge. In the manner typical of the Viennese waltz, several continuous sections follow, each based on a

different melody. At the half-way point of the score, however, the murmurs of the introduction return, and the melodies heard previously in clear and complete versions are now fragmented, played against each other, and are unable to regain the rhythmic flow of their initial appearances. The musical panacea of 1855 cannot smother the reality of 1915, however, and the music becomes consumed by the harsh thrust of the roaring triple meter transformed from a seductive dance into a demonic juggernaut. At the almost unbearable peak of tension, the dance is torn apart by a violent five-note figure, a gesture so alien to the triple meter that it destroys the waltz and brings this brilliant, forceful and provocative work to a shattering close.

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