

Program Notes: London

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

(Born February 23, 1685, Halle, Germany; died April 14, 1759, London)

Concerto Grosso in D Major, op. 6, no. 5, HWV 323

Composed: Completed October 10, 1739

Published: 1740, London

Other works from this period: Six Organ **Concerti**, op. 4 (1738); Seven **Sonatas** or Trios, op. 5 (1739); *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, HWV 76 (1739); Oboe Concerto no. 1 in B-flat Major, HWV 301 (1740); Six Organ Concerti (1740)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

Handel composed his set of Twelve **Concerti Grossi**, op. 6, within a remarkable period of focused creativity from the end of September to the end of October 1739. Their publication as his **Opus 6**, though purely incidental, might nevertheless have caught the notice of the musical public: twenty-five years earlier, Arcangelo Corelli had published his seminal Opus 6 set of concerti grossi (which includes the famous *Christmas Concerto*). Indeed, Handel's Opus 6 concerti evoke the Corellian model rather than the concerti of Vivaldi, which so captivated J. S. Bach. Like Corelli's, Handel's concerti comprise six **movements** instead of Vivaldi's and Bach's three and call for a solo **concertino** of two violins and cello with four-part **ripieno** strings and **basso continuo**. (Handel later added optional oboes, which simply double existing string lines.) Handel moreover resisted Vivaldi's hot-blooded virtuosity in favor of a noble elegance that recalls Corelli.

But despite these cosmetic similarities to Corelli's concerti, Handel's Opus 6 contains music of fierce originality and striking inventiveness. Three of the concerti, including the Concerto in D Major, op. 6, no. 5, draw material from the **overture** to Handel's own *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, yet even this borrowing, writes Handel scholar Anthony Hicks, "does not diminish the achievement, since the adaptations are fascinating and often radical in themselves." Hicks continues, "The set is an apotheosis of the **Baroque** concerto, to be set alongside the *Brandenburg* Concerti of Bach, as well as an epitome of Handel's art, drawing on many sources and influences and uniting them in a style uniquely his own."

In its first, second, and sixth movements, Handel arranged the aforementioned three-movement overture to the *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*. A confident proclamation by the solo first violin launches the French overture-style first movement, distinguished by its regal dotted-rhythmic gait. Charles Burney wrote of this movement in 1785, "The opening of this piece always impressed me with the idea of its being the most spirited and characteristic of all the music written by Handel, or any other composer, on Lully's model of opera overture, which seems to require a convulsive, deliberate, and military craft." A fugal **Allegro** follows, marked by lively exchanges between concertino and ripieno. While these two sets of musicians traditionally comprised, respectively, skilled virtuosos supported by less skilled amateurs, the distinction here seems simply a textural consideration—Handel's **fugue** is rife with **divisi**, intricate **counterpoint**, and solo lines for the ripieno and for the concertino.

Textural dynamism likewise characterizes the **Presto** third movement, whose lithe, **marcato**, **leggiero** gestures look ahead to Mendelssohn's celebrated *Midsummer Night's Dream* **schzerzo** style. The **Largo** fourth movement contrasts the **Presto** with sinewy **legato** lines. As the perky **Allegro's** main **theme**, Handel adapts the twenty-third sonata of Domenico Scarlatti's *Essercizi per Gravicembalo* (1738).

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 94.

The concerto concludes with a splendid **minuet**. Burney writes, "The finale, or minuet of this concerto, has been so much admired by English composers of Handel's school, as to have been frequently thought worthy of imitation."

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

(Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany; died November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany)

Fugue in E-flat Major for String Quartet, op. 81, no. 4

Composed: Completed November 1, 1827

Published: parts: 1850; full score: 1851

Other works from this period: Detailed in the notes below

Approximate duration: 5 minutes

Mendelssohn completed seven string quartets, spanning the whole of his creative life. The early, and rarely heard, Quartet in E-flat Major, completed in 1823, predates the magnificent Octet—an emblem of the teenage Mendelssohn's youthful genius—by two years. The Quartets in E-flat Major and a minor, opp. 12 and 13, composed in the late 1820s, reflect Mendelssohn's mastery of the idiom of Mozart and Beethoven. The Three Opus 44 string quartets show Mendelssohn at the height of his creative powers, while the Quartet in f minor, op. 80, cries with the composer's profound melancholy in the wake of his sister's death in 1847, just six months before his own.

In addition to these, Mendelssohn left four individual quartet movements, likewise spanning his oeuvre but posthumously published together as his Opus 81. They appeared in print in reverse chronological order: the **Andante** in E Major (no. 1) and Scherzo in a minor (no. 2) were penned in the same year as the Opus 80 Quartet; the **Capriccio** in e minor (no. 3) dates from 1843, and the set's nominal finale, the Fugue in E-flat Major, is the earliest of the four miniatures.

Mendelssohn completed the fugue on November 1, 1827, six days after finishing the Quartet in a minor, op. 13. (Further confusing the chronology, the Quartet in E-flat Major, published as Mendelssohn's Opus 12, was composed two years later.) It is an expertly wrought fugue, demonstrating the teenage Mendelssohn's thorough study and internalization of Bach's art. But its airtight contrapuntal construction does nothing to compromise its expressive impact. The fugue begins with a lyrical, gently arching **subject**; the order in which the individual voices enter—viola, second violin, first violin, and cello—itself mimics the melodic line's rise and fall. A second subject of flowing sixteenth notes, introduced in the same order, echoes the contour of the opening theme. The two subjects ultimately come together.

The fugue offers a study as much of **Romantic** pathos as of Bachian technique. Here, as throughout Mendelssohn's early music, we find the precocious young composer thoroughly steeped in the work of past masters yet emerging as an essential voice of the new century.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

(Born October 12, 1872, Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, England; died August 26, 1958, London)

Songs of Travel

Composed: "Whither Must I Wander?": 1901; remainder: 1904

Published: Detailed in the notes below

First performance: Detailed in the notes below

Other works from this period: *Fantasia* for Piano and Orchestra (1896–1902, rev. 1904); *Symphonic Rhapsody* (1901–1903); *Sound Sleep* (song cycle) (1903); Quintet in c minor for Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello, and Bass (1903, last rev. 1905); *A Sea Symphony* for Chorus and Orchestra (1903–1909)

Approximate duration: 25 minutes

Following the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, English musical culture fell dormant. Aside from contributions by foreign-born composers—most notably Handel and Haydn—the English musical voice remained silent for two centuries. Throughout the **Classical** and Romantic eras, German music dominated, while the musical cultures of Italy, France, Central Europe, and Russia likewise flourished. The German critic Oscar A. H. Schmitz famously derided England as *Das Land ohne Musik* (“The land without music”).

But with the premiere of Edward Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* in 1896—two centuries after Purcell’s death—England’s composers reawakened to the richness of their own musical heritage. Over the subsequent three decades, Elgar, Ralph Vaughan Williams, William Walton, and others worked to cultivate a distinct revitalized national musical identity.

In Elgar, England’s musical renaissance had its first standard-bearer and international celebrity. However, despite his concern for the welfare of English music, Elgar’s voice nevertheless bore an audible debt to the German composers whom he most admired, particularly Brahms and Strauss. Though Vaughan Williams was fifteen years Elgar’s junior, it was not in his constitution to absorb those composers’ influence and give it as genuine an expression as Elgar. Rather, Vaughan Williams turned to folk sources to articulate a distinct English musical perspective. Vaughan Williams wrote in an article titled “A Future for English Music”:

A composer’s style must be ultimately personal, but an individual is a member of a nation. And the greatest and most widely known artists have been the most strongly national: Bach, Shakespeare, Verdi, Reynolds, Whitman. Their appeal may be cosmopolitan, but the origin of the inspiration is national. We had made the mistake in England of trying to take over ready-made a foreign culture: a culture which is the result of generations of patient development, and of attempting to fit it onto our own incompatible conditions. This is merely to reap where we have not sown, and the result must be failure.

Folk song bears a deep influence in Vaughan Williams’s *Songs of Travel*, his set of nine songs on texts by Robert Louis Stevenson. Though they are early works, predating *A Sea Symphony* and other scores generally regarded as the markers of Vaughan Williams’s artistic maturity, the *Songs of Travel* nevertheless demonstrate the emergence of a significant compositional voice and found quick popularity. “To us musicians in Cambridge,” recalled Arthur Bliss, “Vaughan Williams was the magical name; his *Songs of Travel* were on all pianos.”

Any set of songs concerned with love, loss, and wanderlust inevitably evokes Schubert’s famous travelogues, *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*. (The march-like figure that begins the first song, “The Vagabond,” might even call to mind the trudging opening figure in *Winterreise*’s “Gute Nacht.” But whereas Schubert’s wanderer sings, “A stranger I arrived, a stranger I depart,” Vaughan Williams’s hardier vagabond demands, “Give to me the life I love, Let the lave go by me, Give the jolly heaven above, and the byway nigh me.”) Indeed, Vaughan Williams’s *Songs of Travel* played a role in accomplishing for English song what Schubert did for German *lieder*—namely, elevating the form from the parlor or salon to the realm of high art. In their substance, however, the *Songs of Travel* markedly distinguish themselves from Schubert’s cycles.

Naturally, the **meter** of Stevenson’s texts, in English, imparts a particular inflection to Vaughan Williams’s settings. Even more so, the musical sensibility throughout these songs is uniquely English—“the origin of the inspiration,” in the composer’s own words, “is national.” The chords underpinning “The Vagabond” seem the very air of the English countryside. The unassuming melody of “The Infinite Shining Heavens,” set to rolled piano chords, evokes a troubadour accompanying himself on the lute.

“Whither Must I Wander?” has the beguiling simplicity of an English folk song, befitting Stevenson’s nostalgic text. (“Home was home then, my dear, happy for the child. Fire and the windows bright glittered on the moorland; Song, tuneful song, built a palace in the wild.”) The resolute chords that begin “Bright Is the Ring of Words,” as well as the song’s speech-like cadence, might suggest an Anglican hymn.

Though the work was conceived as a cycle, marketing considerations dictated the publication of *Songs of Travel* in two volumes of four songs apiece. The poignant final song, “I Have Trod the Upward and the Downward Slope,” appeared later, intended as an epilogue to the cycle when performed in its entirety. The first eight songs received their first performance on December 2, 1904, at Bechstein Hall (now Wigmore Hall) in London by baritone Walter Creighton with the composer Hamilton Harty at the piano. The nine-song cycle was not published or performed in toto until 1960, when Harvey Allen and Frederick Stone performed *Songs of Travel* in a BBC broadcast.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

(Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft, Suffolk, England; died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, England)

Suite for Violin and Piano, op. 6

Composed: 1934–1935

Published: 1935

First performance: March 13, 1936, by violinist Antonio Brosa with the composer at the piano

Other works from this period: *Phantasy* for Oboe, Violin, Viola, and Cello, op. 2 (1932); *Sinfonietta* for Chamber Orchestra (1932); *Simple Symphony* for Strings, op. 4 (1933–1934); *Holiday Diary Suite* for Solo Piano, op. 5 (1935); *Russian Funeral* for Brass and Percussion (1936)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

The year 1934 was an auspicious one for the twenty-one-year-old Benjamin Britten. His *Phantasy* Quartet premiered in Florence to widespread acclaim, garnering the young English composer recognition abroad. The BBC presented a performance of his *Sinfonietta*, further fueling his international reputation. Also that year, Britten traveled for the first time to Vienna, where he set to work on the Suite for Violin and Piano, op. 6.

Upon the completion of his studies at the Royal College of Music, Britten had wished to study privately with Alban Berg, one of an exclusive set whom he deeply revered. “The real musicians are so few and far between, aren’t they?” Britten wrote to a friend. “Apart from the Bergs, Stravinskys, Schönbergs, and Bridges, one is a bit stumped for names, isn’t one?” But Britten’s parents were led by RCM officials to believe that Berg was “immoral...not a good influence” and forbade their son from studying with the Austrian composer. (Britten’s mother chaperoned his trip to Vienna, precluding a surreptitious meeting with his idol.)

A disjunct five-note ascent launches the suite’s fleeting introduction; the piano responds with clangorous *martellato* figures. This music, buoyant and bright, proceeds *attacca* to the proper first movement, a playful march. Puckish hocketing between violin and piano precludes any semblance of a military air. Britten’s deft handling of

both instruments here belies his youth at the time of the suite's composition. Expertly conceived **harmonics** and **double-** and **triple-stops** in the violin combined with subtle pedaling techniques in the piano result in a broad palette of timbres, as does the *Moto perpetuo's* mischievous fusillade of sixteenth notes bowed a *punta* (at the tip of the bow). The violin croons speech-like **portamenti** as the piano assumes the sixteenth-note figures. This music's esprit is moreover so self-assured—and, stylistically, a world apart from Berg's hyper-**Expressionism**—that, the listener must conclude, Berg's instruction might ultimately have hindered Britten in finding his voice.

The third movement is a heartfelt lullaby, played by the violin **con sordino** above delicate chords in the piano. Britten's singular melodic and **harmonic** sensibility is on display here; sly **chromatic** turns pique the ear, without ever puncturing the music's gentle reverie. An exuberant **waltz** concludes the suite on a spirited note. As throughout the work's previous movements, Britten here demonstrates startling facility and originality in equal measure. The familiar dance form of the waltz serves as something of a Trojan horse for Britten's wicked inventiveness: this finale abounds with unexpected melodic twists and coloristic effects. Though an early, lesser-known work, this deceptively innocuous suite nevertheless heralds the arrival of a major musical voice.

EDVARD GRIEG

(Born June 15, 1843, Bergen, Norway; died September 4, 1907, Bergen, Norway)

Holberg Suite for Strings, op. 40 (Fra Holbergs tid)

Composed: 1884–1885

Published: 1885, Leipzig

Other works from this period: Cello Sonata in a minor, op. 36 (1882–1883); *Walzer-Capricen* for Piano, Four Hands, op. 37 (1883); *Neue lyrische Stückchen* (Lyric Pieces) for Solo Piano, op. 38 (1884); *Rejseminder fra fjeld og fjord* (Reminiscences from Mountain and Fjord), op. 44 (song cycle) (1886); Violin Sonata no. 3 in c minor, op. 45 (1886)

Approximate duration: 21 minutes

The Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg ranks as the preeminent Scandinavian musical voice of his generation. His music demonstrates an especial gift for lyricism and a keen ear for folk song, which animate the span of his oeuvre, from the famous *Peer Gynt* Suite and Piano Concerto to his songs and exquisitely crafted piano miniatures.

Grieg composed his *Holberg Suite*—properly known as *Fra Holbergs tid* (From Holberg's Time)—in 1884. The suite is one of two works, along with a **cantata** for men's voices, that Grieg composed to commemorate the Norwegian playwright Ludvig Holberg's bicentenary. Though Holberg, celebrated as a founding figure in Norwegian and Danish literature, spent most of his life in Denmark, Norway was nevertheless eager to celebrate its native son. Grieg was especially so: the composer had previously contributed a portion of his publishing fees towards the construction of a statue of Holberg in their shared birthplace of Bergen.

The *Holberg Suite* was originally composed for piano; Grieg scored the suite for string orchestra the following year. Subtitled "Suite in the Olden Style," the work draws on eighteenth-century dance forms that the composer supposed would have been familiar to Holberg. Thirty-five years before Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, the work credited with heralding the **neoclassical** movement, the *Holberg Suite* reveals Grieg, ahead of his time, looking to the past.

The suite comprises five movements in the style of a Baroque dance suite. The opening **praeludium**, a bright, open-armed overture, impresses with its textural clarity and expert handling of string

sonorities. Grieg voices full ensemble chords with a masterful touch, achieving limpid delicacy here, majestic splendor a moment later.

The second movement is a **sarabande**, originally a Spanish dance form that typically served as the slow movement in, for example, Bach's cello suites. Grieg's sarabande is accordingly poignant. A brief passage midway through the movement, scored for three solo cello and accompanied by solo bass **pizzicati**, is as piercing as it is ephemeral. This yearning strain exhales into the dance's cinematic climax.

A sprightly **gavotte**, a courtly French dance, follows. The fourth movement **air**, given the tempo marking *Andante religioso*, begins with a mournful **arioso**. Its middle section again deploys solo cello to heartrending effect, in amorous dialogue with the full ensemble.

The final movement takes the form of a **rigaudon**, a French folk dance, and Grieg's finale is accordingly brimming with folk character. Solo violin and viola kick things off with country fiddling fit for a hoe-down. A slower middle section interrupts the *fête* only briefly before a reprise of the opening festivities.