

Keweenaw Symphony Orchestra – Conductor's Notes

Jeffrey Bell-Hanson, guest conductor, and the Keweenaw Symphony Youth Orchestra perform the music of Sibelius, Dvorak, Leopold Mozart, and Gregory Youtz.

Saturday, March 1, 2008

Rozsa Center, 7:30 pm

Presented by the Michigan Technological University Department of Visual and Performing Arts

Karelia Suite by Jean Sibelius

Jean Sibelius, often considered Finland's most important composer and a standard-bearer of Finnish culture, followed a winding path through his artistic development toward that distinction. Moreover, the story of the embrace of his own national heritage is a familiar one among composers of his generation.

Like Dvořák and Grieg, Sibelius initially gravitated toward the Germanic influence that pervaded European music in the mid-nineteenth century. As a young man he went first to Berlin to study, and later to Vienna. It is in the Austrian capital, enthralled by the music of Anton Bruckner, that he discovered his affinity for the orchestral medium.

At the same time, he was secretly engaged to Aino Järnefelt, the young Finnish speaking sister of Armas Järnefelt, a conductor of Sibelius' acquaintance. Sibelius, whose first language was Swedish, only began to embrace the native Finnish culture during this period. When he returned to Finland in 1891 he began to seek out folk musicians and folk literature, beginning a self-education that would transform his music and his career.

Much of the Finnish cultural heritage was centered in the region of Karelia in the southeastern portion of Finland and beyond, inside Russia. This is the region where the folk traditions and the traditional ways of pre-industrial life were still preserved most authentically. Sibelius even extended his honeymoon travels with Aino in 1892 into this area, where he recorded many folk songs.

The *Karelia Suite* is comprised of music that originally appeared in *En Saga*, a tone poem that the composer wrote for a student association in 1892. While it is based on authentic folk material, it was only later in the decade that he turned to the

Kalevala, the Finnish national epic poem, for the inspiration for some of his best-known nationalist works. This suite was published in its present form in 1906.

“Toy” Symphony by Franz Josef Haydn *or* Leopold Mozart *or* Michael Haydn

One of the most interesting things to say about the *“Toy” Symphony* or *Kindersymphonie* on tonight’s program is that we really don’t quite know who wrote it. It is a delightful piece of musical humor of the kind that would have been characteristic of the musically good-natured Franz Josef Haydn. Humor is a common trait in his music, though it is often related more to oddly constructed phrases or intentionally jarring or clumsy cadences and transitions.

In fact, during the year when this work was composed (1786) Haydn had a commission for a series of works for an unusual instrument, a kind of hurdy-gurdy called the *lira organizzate*. King Ferdinando IV of Naples had become proficient on it and wanted some music for his own amusement. (Prince Esterházy, Haydn’s patron, apparently also played this instrument.) The music that Haydn supplied is of a light-hearted nature. It is not hard to imagine that once in this vein Haydn’s wry sense of humor might have led him to carry it to the extreme by writing a work for some really unusual sounds.

One writer, Louis Biancolli, relates a story about Haydn purchasing a set of toys at a famous toyshop during a visit to Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, or possibly at a toy fair in Vienna. This acquisition apparently occasioned an “impish moment of practical joking,” the sort to which Haydn was reputedly given on occasion.

The vagueness of the details is one of the problems with this story. It is also impossible to actually trace the work definitively to Haydn in part because the records of his prolific instrumental output during the Esterházy period were not carefully kept, especially with regard to small works like this divertimento.

It is also common during this period for works of other composers to be attributed to the more famous Haydn. Sometimes this misattribution may result from confusion. Sometimes it would have been intentional as a way of boosting interest in a work for commercial reasons.

This piece is now recognized as the work of one of three possible composers: Franz Josef Haydn, Leopold Mozart or Michael Haydn. The most likely of the three may be Leopold Mozart. There does exist a version of the piece more clearly traceable to the elder Mozart that includes additional music.

Trains of Thought by Gregory Youtz

From the composer... *Trains of Thought* is a fantasy for orchestra inspired by the sounds of trains. After an introduction evokes the whistles, rhythms and rumbles of a train passing through a crossing, three 'trains of thought' spin themselves out – an afternoon train thundering nearby, a chorus of night trains heard from afar, and a morning train whose powerful engines hurtle us through the dawn.

All material is derived from the initial "train" sounds: the descending parallel first inversion triad of the whistle, the whistle rhythm (long-long-short-long) used by trains at a crossing, and the percussive sounds and rhythms of the wheels and tracks.

The piece was commissioned for the Auburn Symphony and the premiere led by conductor Stewart Kershaw in 2000. The request was for a piece that in some way reflected the history or character of the City of Auburn. Other than the fact that the town was originally called "Slaughter" (!) all I could think of regarding Auburn was trains. Lots of them!- Trains are a major topic of letters to the editor in Auburn- usually for tying up traffic in town and making the residents unhappy. The piece is thus a kind of good-humored meditation on trains, things one might think about while waiting at a crossing for a train to pass. I did serious research on trains sounds down at my local crossing by Titlow Park in Tacoma, and turned them into the material of the introduction, upon which the three sections of the piece then ruminate.

Note provided by Gregory Youtz

Symphony in G Major, No. 8, Op. 88 by Antonín Dvořák

When Antonín Dvořák began to enjoy some international success as a composer in 1877, it was in no small part due to the decision he had made earlier that decade to abandon a heavily chromatic Wagnerian style for one tinged with the folk music of his native Bohemia. It was, in fact, the first set of *Slavonic Dances*, Op. 46, published by Simrock at the urging of Johannes Brahms that put his music into drawing rooms all over Europe.

His eighth symphony was composed in 1890, just two years before he was invited to the United States to help encourage composers here to define their

own national voice. It seems thoroughly Bohemian in the sense that it is filled with folk-like melodies with a touch of melancholy. Its heavily folk-inspired character is something of a departure from the weightier seventh symphony of 1885. That may be because the new work was written as a thank-you of sorts for his election to the Prague Academy, an institution founded by Emperor Franz Josef for the encouragement of Bohemian artists and writers.

The eighth symphony (at one time numbered "4") has been characterized often as pastoral. There are evocations of birdcalls, of peasant dances from the countryside and of folk musicians. Above all its enduring popularity seems to stem from its apparent straightforward simplicity.