

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

Exodus

April 16, 2004 - Town Hall Seattle

April 17, 2004 - Rialto Theater Tacoma

Dvorak: Notturmo

Prokofieff: Classical Symphony

Hindemith: Der Schwanendreher

Stravinsky: Suites No. 1 & No. 2 for Small Orchestra

Program Notes by Ron Drummond

An Inner Emigration

Throughout the 20th century there was an exodus from all the world to America. America was the great destination. All four of the composers featured tonight - one Czech, one German, two Russian - came to America at various points in their careers and for various reasons. Two of them became citizens, though only one stayed. Two fled strife in their homelands. Three came at the height of their careers, and were welcomed with acclamation. All four came because the opportunities were abundant. Only one left disappointed.

The antipodes of 20th century composition were defined by the innovations of two men: the serialism of Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951) and the neo-classicism of Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971). As radical as Schönberg was, he nevertheless subscribed to the late Romantic doctrine of "continuous evolution," a stance rejected by many composers between the world wars, some of whom led an "exodus" into the past, beyond romanticism, in search of older ideals and musical forms that could be adapted for use in the present. These "neo-classical" composers scrubbed clean the old bottles they found and filled them with new wine. And so we examine the roots of the neo-classical branch of 20th century music, and one early bloom of dusky hue.

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Best known for his last three symphonies and the concertos for piano, violin, and cello, Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) was arguably the greatest string quartet composer of the Romantic Era. Yet his early quartets are mostly undisciplined exercises in prolixity. By the time of his String Quartet No. 4 in E Minor, written late in 1870 (near the end of his nine-year tenure as principal violist of the Provisional Theater Orchestra in Prague, the last five under Smetana's leadership), Dvořák was starting to gain a measure of control over his inspiration. Though the outer movements are overwrought, the slow middle movement, *Andante religioso*, is a gem. Five years later, on the brink of mastery, Dvořák recast it as a *Notturmo* for string quintet. Later still, he adapted it for violin and piano, and wrote an expanded version for string orchestra. Written in the unusual key of B major, the soulful theme has an almost Wagnerian open-endedness, played on unison strings and taken up by first violins as constantly moving inner lines emerge on second violins and violas over a sustained F in the cellos and quiet pulsations in the bass. The music slowly gains speed and urgency, soaring over a striding bass-line before settling once more into vistas of sweet repose.

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The preeminent German composer between the world wars, Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) blended Baroque forms with pugently modern harmonies to create a refreshingly idiosyncratic style. Scion of a poor Protestant/Catholic family (his father was a house painter), Hindemith was appointed leader of the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra at age 19. He served in a regimental band during the First World War, and afterwards began com-

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

posing in earnest. He soon developed a reputation as a "revolutionary musical agitator," causing scandals with three provocative one-act operas. By 1922, performances of his String Quartet No. 2 and *Kammermusik* No. 1 served to establish him as the leading young composer in Germany.

An advocate of new music, Hindemith introduced works by Schönberg and Webern to the annual Donaueschingen Festival. He performed throughout Europe as violist in the Amar-Hindemith Quartet and later as a concert soloist, premiering viola concertos by Walton and Milhaud. In 1927, he became professor of composition at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin.

Rejecting atonality, Hindemith sought to push tonal harmony to the limits of coherence. Later, his work with students and amateur musicians led him to compose in a more lyrical vein; critics charged him with betraying his mission as a German composer. His 1934 opera and symphony, *Mathis der Maler* (Mathias the Painter), which explored the relation between art, artist, and society, triggered a campaign against him by the Nazi Kulturgemeinde.

Withdrawing into a private sphere, an "inner emigration" (the phrase is Michael Kube's), Hindemith wrote his third viola concerto in the summer and fall of 1935. The work's title, *Der Schwanendreher* (The Swan-Turner), is frankly puzzling: a medieval term, it refers to the kitchen helper who turns roasting swans on a spit! Yet Hindemith clearly had more than that in mind, as the picture he drew to illustrate the concerto suggests (see below). In a preface, he writes, "A minstrel visits a happy company of people and plays for them the music he has brought from far away: songs grave and merry and at the end a dance. According to his fancy and ability he develops and decorates the old tunes with preludes and fantasias." The four melodies Hindemith brings us come from a book he acquired as a young man and drew on throughout his career: Franz Magnus Böhme's 1877 collection of medieval German folk songs, *Altdeutsches Liederbuch*.

The concerto calls for a small orchestra with woodwinds and brass but no violins or violas (save the soloist). Solo viola sings passionate prelude to the opening theme, which is played by horns and trombone and comes from the song *Zwischen Berg und tiefem Tal*. "Between the mountain and the deep valley, there is an empty road, and if your lover grows tiresome, let him walk it." Hindemith wildly embellishes this melody, adding motoric rhythms and jagged counterpoint to the mix.

The second movement begins with a lovely prelude for viola and harp leading into the melody from *Nun laube, Lindlein laube* ("Now an arbor, the little linden bower," which Michael Steinberg glosses as "Now put forth your leaves, little linden tree"), played softly by a choir of woodwinds. A bassoon interrupts with an impish melody, *Der Gutzgauch auf dem Zaune sass* - the cuckoo sits on the fence, gets rained on, dries off, flies away over the lake. In folk tales the cuckoo often plays a demonic role, and there's something distinctly edgy in the fugue Hindemith builds out of this melody, with its bass-line running through the strings. But the cuckoo flies away; the linden bower melody returns, accompanied now by its own prelude, and sadder for it.

The finale's theme poses the question, *Seid ihr nicht der Schwanendreher?* ("Are you not the swan-turner?") Hindemith creates eleven incredibly diverse variations on that interrogative melody, including two cadenzas for the soloist. The final variation brings the concerto to a brilliantly emphatic conclusion, but without providing an answer. Perhaps Hindemith knew. Another glance at his illustration gives us pause: swans caught in full flight on a wheel, long slender necks treadled into cork-screws. In the two years after the concerto's premiere, the Nazis banned Hindemith's music and forced him from the Berlin Hochschule and thence from his homeland. Who, then, is the swan-turner? Perhaps it's a question still relevant today.

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NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

When Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) wrote his "Classical" Symphony, his choice of title was as much in homage to the style of Haydn and Mozart as it was a capricious wager that the symphony's future fame would justify its self-proclaimed status, as indeed it has.

The dual conceit was typical of the young Prokofiev. A child prodigy who composed steadily from age 5, doted on by famous composers from Gliere to Glazunov, Sergei gained entry to the St. Petersburg Conservatory at 13, and stayed for a decade. Unruly and arrogant, he was a middling student at best. But he composed prolifically, and soon embraced the St. Petersburg avant garde. Though his debut as a composer-pianist in 1908 wowed the audience, reviews calling his music "unintelligible" and "ultra-modern" became typical.

As a pianist, if Prokofiev deigned to play Mozart at all, it was only with his own "improvements." It took the modernist on the Conservatory staff, Nikolai Tcherepnin, to cure Prokofiev of his disdain and instill in him a love for Haydn and Mozart.

By continuing his studies, Prokofiev avoided fighting in the war. Later, ignoring signs of incipient Revolution, he arranged to spend the summer of 1917 in the countryside outside Petrograd, alone and, by choice, without a piano. As he recalled, "I noticed that thematic material composed without the piano was often better," and so he decided to experiment by writing his first symphony without that crutch. Next, Prokofiev speculated that "had Haydn lived to our day, he would have retained his own style while accepting something of the new at the same time. This was the kind of symphony I wanted to write . . ." His success is demonstrated by how scrupulously its four movements conform structurally and functionally to Classical conventions, and even more so by the abundance of beautiful melodies, snappy rhythms, witty harmonies, and colorful orchestrations that fill them.

At fourteen minutes, Prokofiev's First Symphony is shorter than the majority of Haydn's symphonies. Yet its invention is so prodigious, its means so economical, one can only imagine that a sophisticated late 18th century Viennese audience would have found it so profuse as to dwarf any Mozartian over-abundance of notes in any Josephine ear. As it was, the work received its actual premiere in Petrograd in April 1918, as throughout Russia the Red Army consolidated its power. Sensing that his homeland had little use for new music, in May Prokofiev left the soon-to-be Union of Soviet Socialist Republics for a far-away country called the United States of America.

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After the riot that greeted *The Rite of Spring*, Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) had some thinking to do. The radical musical vocabulary he had created for his celebration of pagan ritual had been uniquely suited to the expressive needs of that celebration; it simply wasn't useable in other works. So his quest, for a personal style that would replenish itself with each new composition, had to continue.

Taking haven in Switzerland during the First World War, Stravinsky kept busy with *Les Noces*, a cantata based on folk songs celebrating wedding customs of old Russia. The work required that he develop new techniques and broaden his mastery of dance forms. To this latter end, and to create something fun for his children to play, between November 1914 and April 1917 he wrote a series of easy piano duets based on a variety of dance forms. Later, he orchestrated the pieces and arranged them into suites of four movements each. The results are outrageous, witty, and utterly charming. Stravinsky outdoes himself in the inventiveness of his orchestrations, which are filled with unusual instrumental juxtapositions and surprising changes in rhythm and texture.

The First Suite opens with an *Andante* to warm us up, followed by dances Neapolitan and Spanish in origin,

NORTHWEST
Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

and concludes with a delightful orchestral imitation of a balalaika, that most popular of Russian folk instruments. The Second Suite presents four dance forms: March, Waltz, Polka, and the perfect conclusion, a Gallop. Stravinsky amused himself by making some of the dances portraits of colleagues: the Italian composer Alfredo Casella (March); composer Erik Satie (Waltz); and the impresario of Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev (Polka). But finally our ears are alert for the ways in which Stravinsky, at a time when he thought of everything in terms of Russian folk song, fills the pattern of each dance with music that is joyously, unmistakably his own.