

AN EVENING AT THE OPERA

PROGRAM NOTES

*Overture to *Der Freischütz*, Op. 77

Der Freischütz (the title is translated variously as "The Freeshooter," "The Magic Bullets," etc., but is not satisfactorily translatable at all), to a libretto by Friedrich Kind based on an old folk-tale, was composed between the summer of 1818 and May 1820; the first performance of the opera was given at the Schauspielhaus in Berlin on June 18, 1821, Weber himself conducting. The Overture, which quickly became a staple of the concert repertory, was performed by the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra for the first time on November 12, 1908.

In 1820, when Weber was completing his masterwork, *Der Freischütz*, Gasparo Spontini was director of the Berlin Opera and the reigning opera composer in that city; most of the successful works by German composers were not German operas, but Italian. In Vienna, Mozart had produced some successful German works, in the form of the *Singspiel*--among them both the still underrated *Entführung aus dem Serail* and the glorious *Zauberflöte*--and Beethoven, after numerous revisions, had produced the final version of *Fidelio* in 1814. Weber spent the last nine years of his life as director of the opera in Dresden, and the Saxon capital was already free of the Italian influence; one of his first productions there was *Fidelio*, and he had ample opportunity to develop his own ideals of a new German opera. It remained for him to create a German opera on a specifically German theme (the Mozart and Beethoven works cited are in German, but do not have German settings), a work which would be a "national" expression, in the sense in which the Czechs were to revere *The Bartered Bride*. This he accomplished gloriously in *Der Freischütz*.

Weber himself selected the story, which he found in the *Gespensterbuch*, the Apel and Laun collection of supernatural tales. The libretto, fashioned by Friedrich Kind working always in the closest collaboration with the composer, treated the tale and its characters in a familiar, straightforward manner to which the audience was able to relate at once. The story deals with ordinary folk, an engaging pair of young lovers, a shooting contest, and an ill-advised bargain with the Evil One (in this case known as Samiel) for enchanted bullets that go straight to their mark. Despite the dabbling in the black arts, goodness prevails and all ends well. The music, like the story itself, has the ring of folklore. When Weber conducted the premiere in Berlin, he enjoyed the greatest triumph of his life--in no small part because the delirious Berliners felt it was *their* triumph, too.

Berlioz, who conducted *Der Freischütz* in Paris, was the first to salute Weber for the unprecedented mastery of the orchestra shown in his score. The overture (which bears an opus number of its own because it was published separately as a concert piece) is neither a miniature tone poem nor a mere potpourri of the big tunes, but an evocation of some of the opera's most striking scenes. The horn quartet of the opening transports us to the Wolf's Glen, Samiel's domain, where the seven magic bullets are cast amid lightning bolts and other menacing manifestations of nature; the magnificent coda is built on the theme first heard at the end of Agathe's air "*Leise, leise*," in Act II and used again for the work's exultant final chorus.

Casta diva from *Norma*

Norma, a high priestess of the Druids of Gaul, is secretly in love with Pollione, proconsul of the Romans who have occupied her land. She has betrayed her sacred vows and has borne him two children. The scene of Act I takes place at night in the sacred forest. Norma, trying to avert her people's threatened revolt against the oppressor, prays for peace with the certain knowledge that she must turn away from the man she has loved.

Bell Chorus from *Pagliacci*

The townspeople of a rustic Italian village make ready for the visit of a troupe of traveling players. When it arrives, Canio, the leading player invites all to the evening performance. A church bell sounds, announcing vespers to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption. The villagers assemble and sing the famous chorus of the bells.

Final Psalmody from Prologue in the Heavens from *Mephistopheles*

The Prologue is a series of sections depicting a discourse at the edge of heaven between the angels of God and the fallen angel, Mephistopheles, who stands in the shadows amidst the scene mocking God's work and the praises sung by the celestial choir. Man to him is a worthless creature who has sunk to such a ridiculous state he is not even worth tempting.

The final section of the Psalmody begins with the Salve Regina (supplication to the Virgin), sung by spirits and earthly penitents, and it builds into a powerful hymn to the Lord of Creation, joined by a chorus of cherubim chattering in a disembodied chant.

Donde lieta from *La Bohème*

In Act III, Mimi, seriously ill, makes her way through the snowy night to an inn on the outskirts of Paris. She seeks Marcello, friend of her lover Rodolfo, to ask his counsel and to then break her relations with Rodolfo because his constant jealousy makes their life so unbearable. Rodolfo comes out of the inn and Mimi hides behind a tree to avoid a confrontation. She overhears the two men talking about the seriousness of her condition, and her weeping and spasm of coughing betrays her hiding place. She bids Rodolfo a tender farewell, saying they must part, but that it must not be with misgiving.

Vissi d'arte from *Tosca*

Act II is set in the apartment of Baron Scarpia, Roman Chief of Police, who is infatuated with Floria Tosca, an opera singer. He has arrested her lover, the painter Mario Cavaradossi for giving asylum to an escaping political spy. Scarpia's real intent is to destroy the painter to gain Tosca's attentions. She arrives to beg for Mario's release and Scarpia offers a bargain--he will authorize a mock execution and aid the lovers' escape, but first, Tosca must give herself to him. She is overwhelmed and revulsed . . . in her anguish she responds that her entire life has been devoted to love and music and asks why she should come to this.

*Polovetzian Dances and Chorus from *Prince Igor*

Borodin left his opera *Prince Igor* unfinished when he died; it was completed and orchestrated by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov, and first produced on November 4, 1890, in St. Petersburg (various segments having been performed in concerts, both in Russia and elsewhere in

Europe, before that date). The Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra's first performance of the Polovetzian Dances from the opera's second act took place on November 7 and 8, 1924.

While the Dances are frequently performed in concert by orchestra alone, there are portions for chorus--some for women's voices, and some of men's, and a final one for both--in the original version as performed in the opera, and these vocal parts are included in the present performance.

Borodin was not a full-time musician; he was by profession a chemist and physician, and quite an important one, as documented by the statues erected in Russia in honor of Borodin the scientist. *Prince Igor*, his most ambitious musical work, occupied him for some 18 years, but his other commitments left him no time for completing the opera. He wrote his own libretto, with the help of the critic Vladimir Stasov, based on *The Epic of Igor and His Army*. He studied the lore and music of the Turkomans and Tartars, and he set about to write a thoroughly Russian opera, as Mussorgsky had done, owing little or nothing to Italian or German tradition. Portions of *Prince Igor* were performed during Borodin's lifetime, but he never got around to orchestrating the opera or drawing it together in finished dramatic shape, both of which tasks were left to his friend Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Rimsky-Korsakov's brilliant young pupil and colleague Alexander Glazunov.

One of Glazunov's feats was the reconstruction of the opera's overture, which Borodin had played once on the piano but had never troubled to write down. He and Rimsky-Korsakov divided the orchestration between them, and Rimsky-Korsakov is generally credited with orchestrating the entire second act, in which the famous Dances occur; recent research, however, indicates that Borodin himself had actually completed the orchestration of the Polovetzian Dances, leaving little for Rimsky-Korsakov to do in this section beyond a little editorial polishing.

The epic on which the opera is based is the story of Prince Igor Sviatoslavich of Sversk and his campaign, in 1185, to save his city of Putivl from raids by the Tartar tribe of Polovtsi. He and his son Vladimir are captured by the Polovtsi, whose chief, Kahan Konchak, treats them as honored guests and offers Igor his freedom in exchange for his pledge not to resume the fight. Igor, refusing that offer, manages to escape, rejoin his wife and deal with the intrigues that have arisen in his absence, but his son remains with the Polovtsi and marries the Khan's daughter.

The Polovetzian Dances which end Act II represent the culmination of the lavish entertainment the Khan stages for Igor. Slave girls, warriors and young boys take part in the various numbers, which range in mood from seductive languor to barbaric abandon--and incorporate actual folk themes from the Caucasus and as far from Russia as the Moorish segments of North Africa. A dance for the archers is accompanied by a warlike chant, and at the end, the full chorus sings the Khan's praises.

Gloria all'Egitto from *Aida*

The famous Triumphant Chorus occurs in Act II when the victorious Egyptian army returns from its conquest of Ethiopia. Among the captors is the disguised King Amonasro, father of Aida, who has been enslaved to the daughter of the Pharaoh. Both women are in love with Rhadames, the hero of the battle and he, in turn, loves Aida. Amid the pomp and splendour of the scene there exists the interplay of these varying emotions.

Va, Pensiero from *Nabucco*

Verdi's third opera, *Nabucco*, was a tremendous success, due in large part to the majesty of his choral writing and because the most famous example *Va, pensiero*, appealed directly to the passionate nature of the Italian people with its fervent defense of freedom and homeland at a time when Italy was in the midst of political strife. It is sung in Act III as a lamentation of the Hebrews who have been enslaved by their Babylonian captors under King Nebuchadnezzar. They recall with nostalgic pathos the beauties of their country and their sorrow over its loss.

At the time of Verdi's funeral a group of people who had come to pay their last respects, began an impromptu rendition of this beautiful melody and, a month later, when the caskets of Verdi and his wife were taken to their final burial place, Maestro Arturo Toscanini conducted a huge massed chorus in final tribute.

Pace, pace mio Dio from *La Forza del destino*

For five years Leonora has sought refuge in a monastery. She is tortured by feelings of grief and remorse because her lover, Alvaro, accidentally killed her father when he tried to prevent their elopement. Now, not having found peace of mind and still consumed with love for Alvaro, she prays that God will relieve her of her sorrow. Her supplication is interrupted by the sound of an intruder.

Coronation Scene from *Boris Godunov*

Boris Godunov has ascended to the Czar's throne by arranging for the murder of the rightful successor Dmitri. Scene 3 of Act I takes place in the square between the cathedrals. It is the day of the coronation and a jubilant crowd has gathered to pay homage to the ruler, not knowing the conditions by which he has attained the crown. Boris promises the people he will work for the glory of Russia and entreats them to join him in prayer.