

THE EMPEROR WALTZ (*Kaiser-Walzer*) op. 437
Johann Strauss (1825-1899)

Johann Strauss's Vienna, with its imperial splendor and rooms full of delicate twirling couples, is mirrored for us today in his music. His waltzes, the popular music of the day, spilled constantly from the city's coffeehouses and ballrooms—eventually carrying the charming spirit of Vienna all across the world and into its great concert stages. A Viennese waltz still conjures up grace and elegance today.

Before the waltz, Austrians had such popular country dances as the Landler, with its “one-two-three, one-two-three” rhythm and heavy workboot-hopping steps. The waltz is a city cousin to these country dances. Quicker, lighter, and smoother, the waltz is a dance of ballrooms rather than barns.

Strauss's father, also named Johann, along with Joseph Lanner, broadened and standardized the simple structure of the waltz—an introduction and a coda with as many as 10 or 12 waltzes in between. Soon the era's biggest craze was in full swing, with one in four Viennese characterizing themselves as frequent dancers.

If Strauss's father civilized the waltz, Johann Strauss elevated it. He took the foundations laid out by his father and expanded and enriched them. He reduced the number of waltzes in each piece to five or six and deepened the complexities of the introductions and codas to an aspiring symphonic level—evidenced so beautifully in *The Blue Danube*, arguably the most famous waltz ever written.

For fifty years, Johann Strauss, Vienna's Waltz King, captured in music everything that happened in Vienna. The Emperor Waltz (1888) commemorates the 40th anniversary of Emperor Franz Joseph's coronation. Its slow and rather prolonged introduction announces the Viennese spirit—a military march and a graceful procession all at once. Strauss allows a brief glimpse of the waltz to shine through, but it is cunningly overshadowed by the introductory march theme. When the brass pushes to a brief silence, the strings at last are allowed the freedom of introducing the first waltz. When, after the succession of lovely waltz tunes, the dancing finally concludes, the march theme from the introduction returns at the coda—a musical image of the happiness of the people surrounded by the majesty and honor of their emperor.

HUNGARIAN DANCES (1, 3, 5 and 6)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Folk music played a significant role for Brahms throughout his life. While still in his teens he filled notebooks with sketches of European folk songs, writing by hand those he could not find in manuscript form. The Hungarian Dances owe their existence to the 1848 Magyar revolution and the influx of its refugees into Germany. Brahms, then just 20 years old, befriended the Hungarian folk violinist Eduard Remenyi and through him absorbed a priceless amount of Hungarian and gypsy music. Brahms was always careful to insist the Hungarian Dances were not original works, calling them in a letter to his publisher, “Genuine gypsy children which I did not beget but merely brought up with bread and milk.”

Brahms heard these melodies the way the people of Hungary had for generations—from street performers. Musicians uprooted by the revolution in Hungary reappeared on the street corners of Germany, making every walk through the cities an open-air concert of folk melodies. Traditional ensembles of violin, hammered dulcimer, and bass would begin with one of these melodies and spin from it endless variations. In transforming these melodies for the concert stage, Brahms successfully retains a sense of the spontaneity and endless possibilities of these street-side trios.

Originally written for four-hand piano (two pianists playing one piano), but today most frequently performed in the more popular orchestral arrangements, the Hungarian Dances were published in two sets: Dances 1-10 in 1869 and 11-21 in 1880. Each dance melody has a unique character developing from either Magyar or gypsy traditions (a distinction Brahms did not always adhere to). A recurring feature of the dances is the alternation between a slow *lassan* section and a lively *friska* section—a convention of traditional gypsy dances. Heavy reliance on mixed meters, irregular accents and rhythms, triplet figures, and varied dynamics help contribute to the freewheeling folk spirit of these very popular pieces.

Brahms himself transcribed Dances 1, 3, and 10 for orchestra while other composers, notably Antonin Dvořák, completed the rest—a testament to the respect for Brahms’s original conception. In the move from piano to orchestra the concession of transposition to a more orchestra-friendly key was occasionally made. For example, the famous Number 5 moves from the vexing F-sharp minor to a more manageable G-minor. Pianists never got the same sympathy—as a recital pianist himself, Brahms was always willing to stretch the players of that instrument to the very limit!

The Hungarian Dances are among Brahms’s most loved pieces—lighter than most of his works, but no less accomplished in form and style. In the words of composer Walter Niemann, the pieces “delight and enchant everybody: the amateur by their natural quality, the specialist by their art.”

DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS from *Salome*, op. 54
Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

When Richard Strauss's third opera, *Salome*, opened in Dresden in December 1905, there were thirty-eight curtain calls. When it opened at the Metropolitan Opera in New York two years later, the show closed after just one performance. In its review the next morning, the *New York Tribune* wrote that the opera "left the listeners staring at each other with starting eyeballs and wrecked nerves".

Some of those wrecked nerves no doubt came from the subject matter (biblical, erotic, and violent) but the music itself shook up the audience as well. It was Strauss's boldest composition and included periods of wild noise and a free use of dissonance—something that was, at that time, only beginning to emerge in opera. During rehearsals, Strauss was said to have admonished his musicians with, "That is too gentle—we want wild beasts here! This is no civilized music; it is music which must crash!" Take this with Strauss's other famous quote from these thundering rehearsals, "No consideration for the singers!" and we get a pretty good picture where modernist opera was heading—at least as a vestige of Romanticism.

Portrayed as being at Herod's palace in Judea, *Salome* tells the same legend, with a few embellishments, that appears in the Gospel of Mark. Having fled the attentions of her uncle/step-father Herod, Salome runs into the captive Jochanaan (John the Baptist). He curses and turns from her ardent advances towards him but Salome is determined to have him one way or another. When Herod promises Salome her heart's desire if she dances for him, Salome delivers a provocative orient-flavored dance, removing each of seven veils until she lies naked before Herod. Claiming her reward, Salome rejects jewels, peacocks, and other treasures for her one heart's desire: Jochanaan's head on a silver tray so that she may at last kiss the mouth of the one who rejected her.

In The Dance of the Seven Veils, the opera's famous final scene, Strauss included careful instructions in the musical manuscript as to when each of the seven veils was to be removed. The music embraces the drama occurring onstage by weaving together several musical ideas: two dance themes, one of Salome's themes, and recurrences of motifs representing enticement, charm, ecstasy, and grace. The thundering climax occurs during a build of the ecstasy motif shadowed underneath by the first dance theme. As the scene winds down and diminishes in volume, the enticement motif returns and the last veil falls.

CONSECRATION OF THE HOUSE OVERTURE

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven used the 1822 opening of Vienna's Josefstadt Theatre to finally write something he had been intending to write for years—an original overture in the style of Handel. He nearly blew the deadline. The players received their parts the day before the performance—and found them riddled with mistakes. They had one frenzied rehearsal as the audience filed into the theatre. The premiere performance was, by all accounts however, a rousing success.

The last of Beethoven's eleven overtures, Consecration of the House was a substantial ten-minute piece, in which Beethoven fully realizes the dramatic intensity of the overture form—using his unmistakable energy and rhythmic play to drive the grand flourishing style through which he pays homage to Handel.

The overture is divided into two parts (as in the French overture style so popular in Handel's time): a slow introductory *Maestro e sostenuto* followed by a brisk *Allegro con brio*. The first section opens in dramatic fashion with five isolated chords and a slow processional march. The stately build-up of the march arrives with trumpet fanfares and timpani. Lively strings in scurrying runs seem to announce the main section of the overture, but are delayed by a brief quiet passage. The brass and timpani return as the orchestra launches fully into the celebratory body of the overture: a brisk *Allegro* showcases the composer's flair for dramatic counterpoint of Handelian proportions. A vigorous six minutes pass developing and turning the intertwined musical ideas before the coda brings the overture to its grand conclusion.

A favorite of Beethoven's, though not among his most often played works today, Consecration of the House was chosen by the composer to open the program on the night Beethoven's unparalleled 9th Symphony premiered in 1824.

VIOLIN CONCERTO in E-minor, op. 64
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

On this, the 200th anniversary of his birth, the Sioux City Symphony joins orchestras and musical groups around the world in honoring the musical legacy of Felix Mendelssohn. A Romantic composer with Classical principles, Mendelssohn never allowed himself to run amok with emotion like some romantics but he didn't remain stuck in the past either. This concerto spun the art of concerto writing in a new direction. Composers such as Tchaikovsky, Liszt, and Sibelius soon made use of some of Mendelssohn's tricks to bring a new vibrancy to the violin repertoire.

Mendelssohn wrote his Violin Concerto, perhaps his greatest work, in 1838 over the course of the summer. Then he shelved it, rewriting in fits and starts, for six years. The problem was, Mendelssohn wanted the perfect concerto. He wrote the piece for his violinist friend Ferdinand David and the combination of wanting to do right by his friend and wanting to do right by his friend's immense talent kicked Mendelssohn's perfectionist tendencies into overdrive.

The delay though probably did some good as David was able to contribute to some of the extensive rewrites, most notably to the cadenza. Mendelssohn finally ended up with the concerto he wanted—a piece with a unique sensitivity to the voice of the violin and one that performers have treasured for over 150 years.

Some call Mendelssohn's the first Romantic violin concerto. It kills off its first tradition at the start by axing the orchestral introduction. Whereas the earlier concert form kept the soloist in firm control of the melody, Mendelssohn's groundbreaking innovation was to impart to the orchestra a more equal melodic development with the soloist, at times, deftly taking up the role of accompanist.

In another nod to integration, the three movements play without interruption in a fluid emotional unfolding. The final movement is a culmination of all that has come before, a brilliant call and response between the orchestra and soloist, dazzling in its challenges and answers and for its final moment of united exultation.

This piece has been an established favorite among violinists almost since its premiere. It is the mountain that all aspiring prodigies must conquer and is a perennial choice at major competitions. While famously a showpiece of technical ability, performers of this violin concerto are also able to enjoy the lyricism and grace of its passages. Mendelssohn is currently enjoying a surge in popularity as more and more audience members and performers rediscover his innovative and elegantly-crafted music—just in time for his 200th birthday!