



HOME
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PROGRAM NOTES

Christmas Overture, Op. 74, No. 1

SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR (1875 - 1912)

The origins of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Christmas Overture* are murky. The piece was first published in 1925—some years after the composer's death at the young age of 37—in an arrangement by fellow English composer Sydney Baynes. Coleridge-Taylor most likely wrote the piece around 1910 as incidental music to accompany a production of *The Forest of Wild Thyme* by his friend Alfred Noyes. This Christmas play, “for children under ninety,” explores a fantasy world of fairies and cheerful forest creatures. Coleridge-Taylor's light, gossamer music for the production draws inspiration

from Noyes's poetic material, as well as Felix Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Although the performance of *The Forest of Wild Thyme* never came to fruition, the *Christmas Overture* has found a foothold in the orchestral holiday repertoire. The piece opens with the carol "Good King Wenceslas" before transitioning to a lively jig played in counterpoint with Big Ben's chime. A spirited rendition of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" (whose music, incidentally, was written by Mendelssohn) brings the overture to a joyful conclusion.

— *Mark Seto*

Scottish Fantasy, Op. 46

MAX BRUCH (1838 - 1920)

Max Bruch is most famous for his iconic, lyrical, violin works, the Concerto No. 1 in G minor, and Scottish Fantasy, whose success he owed to his friendship with the great violinists of his day, Pablo de Sarasate, Joseph

Joachim, and Ferdinand David. *Scottish Fantasy* departs somewhat from the three movement standard form of a concerto, opting instead for four movements, each based on a Scottish folk melody. After a dark and brooding introduction, the first movement proper begins with "Through the Wood Laddie". The lively jig-like second movement uses the tune of "The Dusty Miller," the third features "I'm A' Doun for Lack O' Johnnie", and the fourth a stirring rendition of the anthem "Scots Wha Hae."

Ethnomusicology in the 19th Century was not as rigorous a discipline as it became during the 20th, and Bruch didn't visit Scotland until over a year after *Scottish Fantasy's* premiere. Consequently, his interpretations of the source material were not particularly faithful to the originals. In order to placate critics who insisted on pointing this out, he introduced the work as "Third Violin Concerto (with free use of Scottish melodies)" in several early performances. Nevertheless, the concerto's soaring melodies, gorgeous

harp part, and brilliant finale have earned it a well deserved place in the modern violin canon.

– *Joseph Morag*

Five Bagatelles, Op. 23

GERALD FINZI (1901 - 1956)

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956) was born in London and lived for most of his adult life in the countryside of South West England, where in addition to composing, he devoted himself to reading and studying English poetry, philosophy and literature; to growing apples (conserving rare species from extinction); to walking, keeping assorted animals, and conducting a community chamber orchestra. A pacifist and agnostic, Finzi was a shy and introspective man whose views and outlook on life were influenced by a series of early tragedies – loss of his father when he was seven, the death of his three elder brothers before he reached adulthood, and the loss of his first composition teacher, whom he revered, in the trenches on the Western Front in 1918. His own life,

sadly, came to an early end as well, as he succumbed to Hodgkin's disease and related illness at the age of 55.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, Finzi's confidence as a composer had grown and he was frustrated by the interruption that war service would impose on his composing and career. Shortly before being drafted to work in the Ministry of War Transport in 1941, he completed three character pieces for clarinet and piano using "old bits and pieces" of earlier or abandoned works. Together with a fourth added in 1942, the pieces were premiered as part of the renowned daily lunchtime concert series held during wartime London at the National Gallery. On seeking to have the pieces published, the publisher (Boosey) insisted that he add a fifth movement as a quick finale. The *Five Bagatelles* quickly became Finzi's most popular work – much to his consternation. Although he dismissed them as "trifles" and "not worth much", the *Bagatelles* have stood the test of time. Presented today in an arrangement (by Lawrence Ashmore) for clarinet and string orchestra, the pieces contain beautiful lyrical writing that exploits and

showcases the full range, color, and character of the clarinet.

The *Prelude* shows the influence of Bach on Finzi and combines a spirited opening and closing with a melodic, wistful central section. A peaceful and quietly evocative *Romance* follows, then a simple and tender *Carol* (originally a setting for a poem), and a lilting *Forlana*. The *Finale*, returning to Bach for inspiration and providing the lively finish the publisher demanded, brings the piece to an exuberant and playful conclusion.

– *Christine Todd*

Sleigh Ride

LEROY ANDERSON (1908 - 1975)

“I began *Sleigh Ride* in the summer of 1946 in a cottage in Woodbury, Connecticut, where my wife and I were spending the summer with our 18-month-old daughter. The original version began with what later became the middle section. I recall working on it in the middle of a

heat wave, so there is no basis for the music except the title itself.

“That same summer I also worked on *Fiddle-Fiddle* and *Serenata*. After moving to Brooklyn, New York in the fall I finished *Fiddle-Fiddle* on January 1, 1947 and *Serenata* on February 12, 1947 in addition to making arrangements for the Boston Pops concerts in the spring.

“I had felt that the original theme of *Sleigh Ride* was not strong enough to start the number but would make a good middle section. I finally worked out a satisfactory main theme, introduction and coda and finished the orchestra score on February 10, 1948. *Sleigh Ride* was first performed on May 4, 1948 in Symphony Hall, Boston as an extra at a Pops concert conducted by Arthur Fiedler.”

– ***Leroy Anderson on Sleigh Ride***

The Night Before Christmas

AARON DAI (B. 1967)

When Clement Clarke Moore wrote the poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas*—also known as *The Night Before Christmas*—in 1822, his large country estate called “Chelsea” extended all the way from what is now Eighteenth Street to Twenty-Fourth Street, and from Eighth Avenue to Tenth Avenue in Manhattan. A wealthy gentleman and devout Episcopalian, Moore lived with his family atop an enormous hill (now long gone) near the corner of Twenty-First Street and Ninth Avenue. Today’s Chelsea district takes its name directly from Moore’s estate, and The Chelsea Symphony therefore has a kind of native connection to the man and his legacy.

Originally written for Moore’s children, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* is primarily responsible for establishing the contemporary American conception of Santa Claus, including his appearance, the night he visits, his method of transportation, the number and names of his reindeer,

and his act of bringing toys to children. Before the poem, American ideas about St. Nicholas and other Christmastide visitors varied tremendously, with significant differences between ethnicities, religions, and social classes. Moore's vision of Santa Claus created a happy medium among these often competing ideas—a quintessentially American tradition in and of itself.

— *Aaron Dai*