



## 2010 SUMMER SOLSTICE FESTIVAL

STORIES AND LEGENDS

FRIDAY, JUNE 18, 2010

8 PM

CONVOCAATION HALL, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

### PROGRAM NOTES

BY DAVID BERG

#### A pre-concert talk by D.T. Baker begins at 7:15 PM

We love a good story. Music cannot recount a narrative with the exactitude of prose, but the dramatic form and transformation of ideas often suggest the emotional shape of a story. With the addition of extra-musical elements — evocative titles, poetic epigrams, even long poems or prose passages meant to accompany the musical text — composers can augment and elucidate the meaning of their music.

One such famous storytelling is the baroque composer Kuhnau's collection of six "Biblical Sonatas" which illustrate colorful scenes from the Bible. It is in this spirit that **J. S. Bach (1685-1750)** composed his **Capriccio Upon the Departure of his Most Beloved Brother, in B-flat Major, BWV 992**. Probably composed in 1704 when Bach was 19, the occasion for the work's program is the departure of Bach's older brother, Johan Jacob, to take up service in the orchestra of the king of Sweden. This is the only known programmatic piece by Bach. Notations in the score tell the story. **Arioso: Adagio (Friends gather and try to dissuade him from departing)**. This tender movement is permeated by an imploring, chromatic plea. **Andante (They picture the dangers which may befall him)**. The abrupt key change to minor of this fugato, along with rapid wandering to distant keys, suggest the cascade of warnings from his friends. **Adagissimo (The Friends' Lament)** begins with a grieving chromatic descent over a repeated bass ground, illustrating the friends' weeping and sighing. **(Since he cannot be dissuaded, they say farewell)**. Abruptly, the friends accept the decision with resolute music, which ingeniously returns to the opening key. The **Allegro poco: Aria of the postilion** prepares for the brother's departure with the arrival of the carriage (the octave horn call motive). The **Fugue in Imitation of the Post horn** is perhaps the most refined movement and one of the earliest known fugues by Bach. This double-fugue magnificently exploits the horn motive from the previous movement, bringing the Capriccio to a joyful conclusion.

The mature compositions of the Czech composer, **Leoš Janáček (1854 – 1928)**, first appeared around the time the composer was nearly 50. He continued to hone and experiment with his compositional language throughout his later years. Janáček was "an innovator in his old age," as author Milan Kundera states it. This evening's **Pohádka (Fairy Tale) for cello and piano** demonstrates the emotional power of Janáček's music, whether it is the insistent motivic fabric, short melodies, or simply its inexorable energy. Begun in 1907 with the first version completed in 1910, the work was based on a Russian fairy tale. Janáček was steeped in Russian literature. He spoke the language and was intimately familiar with the works of Gogol, Dostoevsky, Lermontov and others. He was also well acquainted with fairy tales, including that of Tsar Berendyey, a story of family, empire and loss. The composer's program for the work relates the tale of "Tsar Berendyey ... married for three years and lived with his wife in

perfect harmony; but God still hadn't given them any children, which grieved the Tsar terribly. One day the Tsar felt the need to inspect his kingdom. He bade farewell to his consort and for eight months he was on his travels." A child is born to the Tsar's wife during his long absence; unfortunately, due to plot twists and turns, he promises the child to a terrible villain.

Janáček revised the work extensively, settling on the definitive form in 1923. Despite its drift from the more literal programmatic, the three movements of the work give the feeling that one has been on a journey to a fairy tale kingdom. The first movement opens with a tender melody accompanied by rippling rhythmic energy, leading to a noble announcement by the cello. A two-note descending motive leads to an expansive emotional section. The second movement juxtaposes a spirited and fresh motive with a longer, more reflective song. The final movement is marked by a regal motive, combined with rhythmic vigor and lyrical melodies.

Although his music is not as widely performed as the younger Dvořák, many would consider **Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)** as the father of Czech music. After returning permanently to his homeland in the 1860s, Smetana championed Czech music. His dedication during this period of burgeoning nationalism (and movement toward independence) left an indelible mark on the attitude of his fellow composers, as well as those that followed, including Dvořák and Janáček.

The **String Quartet No. 1 in E Minor (1876)** is subtitled "From my Life." We have evidence of the autobiographical nature of this work from a letter written by Smetana some years later describing the basis for each movement. "My intention was to paint a tone picture of my life." In this letter from 1878, Smetana comments on each of the four movements. "The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning of something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of future misfortune." In the second movement, a "quasi-polka brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance . . . being known myself as a passionate lover of dancing." The third movement is a reflection on "the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my first wife." Regarding the fourth movement, he writes "The discovery that I could treat national elements in music, and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret." Smetana continues, remarking about the point where the music halts and, above a low string tremolo, the violin plays a glassy high E, referring to the "fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which, in 1874, announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke because it was so disastrous to me." Smetana reflects on moments from prior movements, and then lets the music subside with resignation.

The symphonic poem, ***Danse macabre, op. 40* (1874)** by **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)**, began as a song for voice and piano. Saint-Saëns transcribed this into a tone poem for orchestra sometime later. Tone poems or symphonic poems were musical compositions based on an extramusical program. Some of these programs (like the narrative for Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*) were quite extensive. The current version of the program for *Danse macabre* is half of the original song text (excluding the erotic activities of the dancing dead, e.g., "Un voile est tombé! La danseuse est nue! Son danseur la serre amoureusement."). The dead, awakened by Death's violin, enjoy a rambunctious celebration, abruptly interrupted by the cock's crow. This evening's arrangement is a violin and piano arrangement of the tone poem. The chiming of the bell is interrupted by Death shrilly tuning his violin (modified of course by the brash, strident tritone [the devil in music] instead of a perfect fifth). Elegance and restraint generally mark Saint-Saëns' music, but this work, dominated by a marked dancing motive, showcases a voluptuous chromatic waltz melody. The dance builds to a climax with the two ideas played simultaneously until interrupted by the morning crow of the rooster, signaling to Death that the fun is over for now.

***Histoire du soldat* (1918)** was composed by **Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)** in the last months of the First World War. This unusual theater piece was originally scored for seven instruments (violin, double bass, clarinet, bassoon, cornet, trombone and percussion), with a narrator and actors portraying the soldier, the princess and the devil. The libretto for *Histoire du soldat* is based on a Faust-bargain type of Russian fable, where a poor soldier trades his dear violin (a symbol for his soul) to the Devil for a magic book. Despite all his newly acquired wealth, he finds himself missing the simple life. The Devil gives back his violin, but the soldier cannot remember how to play. The soldier hears of a king's sick daughter; anyone who can heal her may have her hand in marriage. The soldier learns

that if he loses all of his new money to the Devil, he will regain his violin playing skills. After losing his money in a game of cards with the Devil, he triumphantly plays his violin and the princess becomes well. There is just one problem: the soldier cannot leave the castle. When he attempts to leave to see his mother, the Devil takes his soul.

Stravinsky later arranged the music into a five-movement suite for clarinet, violin and piano, dedicated to the Swiss philanthropist Werner Reinhart. Reinhart, an amateur clarinetist, also commissioned the original work and paid for the performers and its production. The music in the suite includes five of the best sections. **The Soldier's March** is an irregular march, conveying the military orientation of the story's hero. **The Soldier's Violin** is a charming exercise in melodic minimalism with boundless rhythmic play. In the story, the soldier is also trying to tune his instrument, which he declares "is cheap and it is always out of tune." After losing his money to the Devil, the soldier takes up the violin and celebrates with the joyful music of **The Little Concert**. After the soldier marches up to the Princess' room (who is miraculously cured), she celebrates by dancing to the music of **Tango, Waltz and Ragtime**. These three dances are clearly less about imitating popular dance styles than transforming them through Stravinsky's cubist ear. **The Devil's Dance** is the soldier's taunt, forcing the Devil to dance to his whirlwind tune.

***L'apprenti sorcier* (1897)** is **Paul Dukas' (1865-1935)** most famous work. The tone poem is based on the comic story of a master sorcerer, "Der Zauberlehrling," written in 1797 by Goethe. In this fourteen-stanza poem, the master sorcerer leaves his workshop, directing his apprentice to complete his chores. The overconfident apprentice decides to try his hand at magic and animates a broom to prepare a bath for himself, using powers of which he has only a novice's command. The master's workshop is soon flooded with rushing water; the apprentice cannot remember the spell to stop the broom from retrieving water. Out of exasperation, the apprentice splits the broom with an axe, but each of the pieces comes to life as a broom and begins collecting water. As the catastrophe mounts, the master sorcerer returns, casts the correct spell and returns all to as it was before.

This evening's version, a transcription for two pianos by Léon Roques, emphasizes the shimmering harmonic inventiveness of the work. The magical aura of the sorcerer's workshop is made vivid by the glittering harmony of the opening. We can easily tell when we are left in the presence of the naïve apprentice by the buffoonish dotted rhythmic figure of the bass. Dukas uses this motive throughout and later employs it during the climax of the apprentice's mayhem, as though we hear the apprentice's desperation. All comes to an assured close as the master appears and rescues his presumptuous pupil.