

Igor Stravinsky

Born: June 17, 1882, Orianenbaum, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, New York City, New York

Igor Stravinsky was one of the most important and influential composers of the twentieth century. A stylistic chameleon, Stravinsky made important innovations in areas of music from form and rhythm to tone color and harmony. Early studies with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov had an important influence on Stravinsky's first mature works. Those compositions got the attention of impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who commissioned Stravinsky to compose his still-popular trio of ballets, *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1911-13) – the riot that broke out at the latter's premiere remains one of the famous events in music history. Stravinsky subsequently embraced jazz idioms, found inspiration in Russian folklore, was one of the leaders in the return to past musical traditions known as Neoclassicism, and even, late in his career, turned to twelve-tone composition. He toured frequently, and made many important recordings of his works. Among his collaborators were some of the most important artists of his time, including Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, and W.H. Auden. Long in exile from his native Russia, Stravinsky lived in Switzerland and France before emigrating to the United States in 1939; he lived in the Los Angeles area until his death at age 88.

Concerto in E-flat major “Dumbarton Oaks”

Composed: 1937-38

Duration: 15 minutes

Instrumentation: flute, clarinet, bassoon, 2 horns, strings

Stravinsky explored a wide variety of sound worlds in his early years, from the lush Impressionism of *The Firebird* to the primal rhythms and unusual tone colors of *The Rite of Spring*. Another change in course was announced in 1920 with his ballet score *Pulcinella*. The work's “backward look” (in Stravinsky's own words), its light textures and dance rhythms, placed Stravinsky firmly within the Neoclassical revolution that many other composers were embracing.

Another of his Neoclassical works is the Concerto in E-flat major. Its nickname “Dumbarton Oaks” makes reference to the Dumbarton Oaks estate in Washington D.C. of diplomat Robert Woods Bliss and his wife Mildred Barnes Bliss, who commissioned the work for their thirtieth wedding anniversary. The work was premiered on May 8, 1938 in the music room at Dumbarton Oaks. At that time Stravinsky was ill with tuberculosis – the same disease that had taken the lives of his eldest daughter and wife as he was composing the Concerto, a period he called “perhaps the most difficult time of my life.” That first performance was therefore conducted by the famed teacher and pedagogue Nadia Boulanger.

Stravinsky's work is essentially a concerto grosso, that Baroque era form based on a dialogue between solo instruments and the larger ensemble. As the music proceeds, each of the instruments gets a chance to shine in a solo role. Likewise, many of the sounds and textures of Baroque era music – fugues and contrapuntal passages, repeating ostinatos, regular bass lines – are employed by Stravinsky. He even makes references to the *Brandenburg Concertos* of Johann Sebastian Bach. As Stravinsky put it, “I do not think that Bach would have begrudged me the loan of these ideas and materials, as borrowing in this way was something he liked to do himself.”

The three movements of the Concerto in E-flat major are played without pause. The first is lively,

mostly in sixteenth notes, with sparkling woodwind colors. The opening theme of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3* makes an early appearance in the viola, becoming more clear as the music progresses. Quiet chords link the first movement to the second, a lyrical Allegretto with a regular walking rhythm. More slow, restrained chords lead into the third movement, which is launched by marching horns, cellos, and basses. Solo instruments interact with the larger group, before some Baroque-like counterpoint and a small fugue lead to the staccato chords that conclude the work.

Zhou Tian

Born: 1981, Hangzhou, China

Grammy-nominated Chinese-American composer Zhou Tian seeks inspiration from different cultures and strives to mix them seamlessly into a musically satisfying combination for performers and audience alike. His music – described as “absolutely beautiful,” “utterly satisfying” (*Fanfare*), and “a prime example of 21st-century global multiculturalism” (*Broad Street Review*) – has been performed by leading orchestras and performers in the United States and abroad, including the Pittsburgh Symphony, Hong Kong Philharmonic, and pianist Yuja Wang. His *Concerto for Orchestra*, commissioned and recorded by the Cincinnati Symphony and Music Director Louis Langrée, earned him a Grammy Award nomination for Best Contemporary Classical Composition. Zhou came of age in a new China marked by economic reforms, and was in the United States by his twentieth birthday. Trained at the Curtis Institute of Music, Juilliard School and University of Southern California, he studied with Jennifer Higdon, Christopher Rouse and Stephen Hartke. He is associate professor of composition at Michigan State University College of Music. Visit ZhouTianMusic.com for more.

Flute Concerto

Composed: 2022

Duration: 24 minutes

Instrumentation: solo flute, 2 flutes (one doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

Zhou Tian's Flute Concerto was commissioned for flutist Mimi Stillman by Dolce Suono Ensemble, Marine Chamber Orchestra of “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band (Col. Jason K. Fettig, Music Director), Chamber Orchestra of the Triangle (Lorenzo Muti), Annapolis Chamber Orchestra (J. Ernest Green), Allentown Symphony Orchestra (Diane Wittry), Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra (Eckart Preu), Portland Symphony Orchestra (Eckart Preu), and Youth Orchestra of San Antonio (Troy Peters), with generous support from Carolyn and James Barnshaw and Jonathan S. Tobin. It was premiered on May 8, 2022 in Alexandria, Virginia by flutist Mimi Stillman and “The President’s Own” United States Marine Chamber Orchestra conducted by Col. Jason K. Fettig.

Zhou Tian has provided the following note on his work:

“Iris. Capriccio. Arioso. Toccata. These are four movements that infuse my Flute Concerto, written for long-time musical partner Mimi Stillman. From tranquil meditations to wild rituals, the concerto explores the diversity of musical styles through reflection on the flute’s long and rich heritage (hence the Baroque-inspired subtitles). There are hints of my musical lineage from Barber to Piston to traditional Chinese music, as I sought a coexistence of clarity of form with passionate expression, exploring the richness of orchestral timbre yet always embracing purity of line.

“The work begins with 'Irises,' a movement of mixed moods of long singing lines and airy dances. The flower makes me think about the flute – sensuous and yet strong. 'Capriccio' is a scherzo in perpetual motion. The rapid, repeated notes and the concise form drew its inspiration from Baroque dance pieces. 'Arioso' is a meditation. As the soloist joins the plush strings, dashing harp and woodwinds, the sonic color is altered frequently, masking the hinted atonality in the melody with romanticism. 'Toccata,' the finale, is a virtuosic dance. An accumulation of materials sends the piece to a climax at the end.”

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Born: May 29, 1897, Brno, Czech Republic

Died: November 29, 1957, Los Angeles, California

Korngold started as one of the most gifted of child prodigies, and ended as one of the greatest of composers for Hollywood films. He was playing piano at age five, started composing at seven, was called a “musical genius” by Gustav Mahler at nine, and had a hit ballet at eleven. By his teens, he had composed operas, ballets, orchestral and chamber works, and songs. In his twenties he was busy writing and conducting operas and theater works, which brought him to the attention of famed producer-director Max Reinhardt. It was Reinhardt that invited Korngold to Hollywood, initially to write music for a star-studded film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935). Korngold went on to compose scores for films including *Captain Blood* (1935), *Anthony Adverse* (1936), *The Sea Hawk* (1940), *Kings Row* (1942), and perhaps his greatest and most influential, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). He won two Academy Awards, and was nominated for three others. In his later years, he turned increasingly to concert music. His frequently-performed Violin Concerto (1945) employs themes from several of his film scores.

Suite from the Incidental Music for *Much Ado About Nothing*, Op. 11

Composed: 1919

Duration: 16 minutes

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, clarinet, bassoon, 2 horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, strings

Composing orchestral scores to accompany plays was once something of a tradition in Europe: think of Ludwig van Beethoven's music for Goethe's *Egmont* (music written 1810), or Felix Mendelssohn's for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826/1842), or Edvard Grieg's for Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1875). At around the time that he was experiencing one of his greatest early successes, the opera *Die tote Stadt*, Korngold wrote an incidental score for a German-language version of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. The music was composed in 1919 for a production at Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace the following year. Originally arranged for chamber orchestra, and played in the original production by members of the Vienna Philharmonic, Korngold also created a version for violin and piano, as well as several suites from the music.

One of the suites for chamber-sized orchestra, including five of the eighteen pieces Korngold wrote, was, due to delays in getting the production up and running, performed a few months before the play's opening night. That suite, heard in this concert, was a great success and called even more attention to the forthcoming play.

Opening with a mock-serious gesture, the *Overture* soon moves to lighthearted, sometimes festive music. The sweep of the melodies can't help but call to mind the music of Korngold's film scores. The

graceful, delicately-scored second movement, *Maiden in the Bridal Chamber*, depicts Hero, the bride-to-be, on her wedding day.

Titled *Holzappel und Schlehwein* in German, the Suite's third movement, *Dogberry and Verges (March of the Watch)*, depicts the pompous constable Dogberry, his partner Verges, and the other men of the watch in a mock-heroic march, with some unexpected rhythmic changes adding to the humorous tone. Korngold's film music is again anticipated in the fourth movement *Intermezzo (Garden Scene)*, a slow and nostalgic waltz. The concluding *Hornpipe* is a rousing dance, with drone notes evoking folk music, that ends the suite with great cheer.

Kurt Weill

Born: March 2, 1900, Dessau, Germany

Died: April 3, 1950, New York City, New York

Kurt Weill was one of the most important composers of stage works of his time. After starting to play piano and compose at age twelve, he continued his studies in Berlin, working with, among others, composers Engelbert Humperdinck and Ferruccio Busoni. He quickly established himself as a composer, pianist, conductor, and teacher in Germany, enjoying his first big composing successes with his collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, including *The Three-Penny Opera* (1928), and its worldwide hit "Mack the Knife." Those works written with Brecht created a new kind of opera: sharp and topical, with social and political satire and music that, while modernistic, also made frequent references to jazz and popular music. In 1924 he met singer-actress Lotte Lenya, whom he married in 1926 and again, after their divorce, in 1937. In 1933, Weill moved from Germany, where he and his music had become anathema to the Nazis, to the United States. He became an American citizen in 1943 and continued to compose operas, musicals, and film scores, working with writers as diverse as Maxwell Anderson, Ira Gershwin, Langston Hughes, and Ogden Nash.

Symphony No. 2

Composed: 1933-34

Duration: 26 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, percussion, strings

A comparison has been made between Weill and Leonard Bernstein, in that both musicians had one foot in the world of serious classical music and the other in the world of musical theater and popular song. In Weill's case, while he is largely remembered for his many theatrical works, he also composed, especially early in his career, symphonies, a violin concerto, chamber music, and vocal-orchestral works.

Weill's Symphony No. 2, one of only two he wrote, was commissioned by and dedicated to the Princesse Edmond de Polignac, Winnaretta Singer, an heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune and patron of the arts. Begun in Berlin in January of 1933, the composition was interrupted both by Weill's flight to France after the rise of the Nazis, and by his work on the ballet *The Seven Deadly Sins*. In his early writings, Weill sometimes referred to this work as his First Symphony, as the real Symphony No. 1, composed back in 1921, hadn't yet been performed.

After a private performance in Paris, the actual premiere of the Symphony No. 2 took place in

Amsterdam on October 11, 1934 by the Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Bruno Walter. Walter had asked Weill for a more fanciful title than the plain Symphony No. 2, and Weill reluctantly agreed to call the work *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphonic Fantasy), although that title is seldom used today. While the work was well-received by the general public, the critics, apparently feeling he should stick to musical theater, were not kind, and the Symphony No. 2 proved to be Weill's last purely orchestral work.

The first movement is in traditional sonata form, with a slow introduction. All the main ideas in the movement seem to make reference to the work's introductory trumpet theme. Once the tempo speeds, the music is tense and angular, and filled with ironic touches. Weill even makes brief reference to the famous four-note motto from the first movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. Marked Largo, the slow second movement is a funeral march, somber and eloquent. More than one commentator has remarked that, in its desolation, this music evokes Weill's recent exile from his home in Germany.

The third movement is rough and energetic, joyful and riotous, with more satirical gestures. The music makes reference, in its fast coda, to ideas from earlier in the work, in particular the funeral march theme of the preceding movement. In a preface to the score, David Drew has written, "In the clarity and brilliance of the sound, Weill reveals his affinity for Mozart's music, while the romantic and folksy traits of the work show what he learned from Schubert and Mahler."

Program notes by Chris Morrison