

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
September 24-25-26, 2021
96th Season
Michael Allsen

Welcome back to Overture Hall! As a special concert to open this season, the Madison Symphony Orchestra presents this program of three works for strings, opening with our first-ever performance of Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*. Featured in this work is the Rhapsodie Quartet, the resident ensemble of our award-winning HeartStrings educational program: Suzanne Beia and Laura Burns, violins, Christopher Dozoryst, viola, and Karl Lavine, cello. The MSO's principal organist, Greg Zelek, then takes center stage for Poulenc's brilliant *Concerto in G minor for Organ, Strings, and Timpani*. Our closing work, Tchaikovsky's gorgeous *Serenade*, is among the finest Romantic pieces written for string orchestra

This sumptuous work for strings was written in 1905 to showcase the principal string players and string section of the newly-created London Symphony Orchestra

Edward Elgar

Born: June 2, 1857, Broadheath, Great Britain.

Died: February 23, 1934, Worcester, Great Britain.

Introduction and Allegro

- **Composed:** 1905.
- **Premiere:** March 8, 1905, in Queen's Hall, London, with the composer conducting the London Symphony Orchestra.
- **Previous MSO performance:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 15:00.

Background

By 1905, when he composed his *Introduction and Allegro*, Elgar was tremendously successful: widely recognized at home and abroad as one of England's leading composers. The work was written for the newly-founded London Symphony Orchestra, at the suggestion of his friend August Jaeger (immortalized as *Nimrod* in Elgar's famous *Enigma Variations*). Elgar frequently sketched musical ideas as they came to him, and would come back to these sketches months or years later in creating new works. In this piece, he drew upon a theme he called the "Welsh tune," reportedly a melody he had heard in the distance when he and his wife were on holiday in Wales in 1901. He had intended to use it in a planned, but never completed *Welsh Overture*. In the *Introduction and Allegro*, it became the unifying main theme. Scored for strings only, this work was designed to display the virtuosity of the orchestra's principal string players—parts played here by the Rhapsodie Quartet. Writing for strings came naturally to Elgar, who, as a young man, had earned much of his living as a violinist. He had a keen awareness of the capabilities of the instruments, and wrote challenging but idiomatic parts for the soloists and accompanying string orchestra.

What You'll Hear

The *Introduction* opens with a bold, tragic statement from the full ensemble, but the solo viola soon introduces the flowing, wistful “Welsh tune.” A brief return to the opening music and a hushed passage for the quartet usher in the main body of the work (*Allegro*). This broad scherzo is set in sonata form, and works with three primary ideas: a wide-ranging opening theme, a rather tense sixteenth-note idea introduced by the quartet, and a soaring closing idea. This exposition ends with a languid version of the opening idea from the *Introduction* and brief reminder of the Welsh tune. In place of a conventional development section, Elgar wrote an extended fugue on a new theme, but which eventually incorporates most of the other musical ideas. (In a letter to Jaeger, he described this as a “devil of a fugue.”) Rather than coming to some kind of climactic ending, the fugue dies away into a brief recapitulation of the main *Allegro* themes. The coda returns to the Welsh theme, now in a lushly-scored version for the full ensemble, before a brisk closing passage.

This concerto, written by one of the 20th-century French masters, Francis Poulenc, frequently pays tribute to the great organ works of J. S. Bach.

Francis Poulenc

Born: January 7, 1899, in Paris, France.

Died: January 30, 1963, in Paris, France,

Concerto in G minor for Organ, Strings, and Timpani

- **Composed:** Poulenc completed this work in 1938.
- **Premiere:** It was premiered privately at the home of the Princesse de Polignac in Paris in December of that year, and the first public performance, also in Paris, took place in June 1939.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 2006, with organist Samuel Hutchinson.
- **Duration:** 22:00.

Background

Poulenc, born into wealth, had the enviable position as a composer of not having to worry about making a living. Likable, humorous, and friendly, he circulated easily in the social world of the French upper class. This didn't mean he was not serious about his work, however. Poulenc was a member of the influential group of French composers known as Les Six, together with Honegger, Milhaud, Auric, Durey, and Tailleferre: an informal association founded when most of them were Paris Conservatory students in the late 1910s. The members of Les Six sought a more naturalistic style of modern French music, rejecting the Romantic excess of Wagner, the harsh atonality of Schoenberg, and what they saw as vagueness of form in Debussy. Poulenc's music, often dry and witty, fits these goals perfectly.

There is also a deeply spiritual and serious side to much of Poulenc's music. He rediscovered his Catholic faith while in his late 30s, and many of his choral works, from the *Mass in G Major* of 1937 to the well-known *Gloria* of 1960, were settings of Latin religious texts. Poulenc's religious vision reflected his own *joie de vivre*, and his religious music is never pompous or conventional. His organ concerto, though not intended as church music, clearly draws on the organ fantasias of Bach and other Baroque composers and on the great 20th-century French

organ tradition. It was originally commissioned in 1934 by the Princesse de Polignac, a wealthy patroness who had earlier commissioned his concerto for two pianos. The Princesse—American-born Winnaretta Singer, heiress to the Singer sewing machine fortune—was a talented musician who had a large organ installed in her salon in Paris.

The *Concerto*'s composition was uncharacteristically drawn-out and difficult for Poulenc. He was not himself an organist, and was unsure about technical details of writing for the instrument. He also seems to have had in mind a piece of greater emotional depth than many of his earlier works, writing at one point to the Princesse that: "It is not the amusing Poulenc of the *Concerto for Two Pianos*, but more like a Poulenc on the way to the cloisters." After four years of off-and-on frustration, he wrote to her in May 1938 that "Yes, you will *finally* have your *Concerto*. The word *finally* sums up the joy I feel on being at peace with my conscience and even more specifically, with my artistic conscience, as the work is now truly ready. Never, since I first began composing, have I had so much trouble finding my means of expression, but I nevertheless hope that it now flows freely without giving the impression of too much effort."

What You'll Hear

Though the original commission was apparently for a relatively easy organ piece that the Princesse herself could play, the solo part of Poulenc's concerto ended up as music calling for considerable virtuosity. (For the premiere, Poulenc enlisted the eminent Maurice Duruflé, organist at the church of St. Etienne-du-Mont, and organ professor at the Paris Conservatory.) The piece is laid out in several linked sections, which do indeed "flow freely" from one to another. There is a severe and distinctly "Bach-like" introduction, which eventually leads to, stormy music carried by the strings with short bursts from the organ. There is a full stop, and then a short recitative by the organ leads to long section marked "very calm." A long period of increasing tension culminates in an outburst from the organ, a short quiet interlude, and another furious scherzo. In the end, there is a brightening of the harmony, and a quiet passage of almost religious mystery, before a final Baroque explosion from the organ and a closing chord.

Tchaikovsky's *Serenade* is filled with delightful music: a tribute to Mozart in the opening movement, a swirling *Waltz*, an emotional *Elegy*, and a forceful Russian-style finale.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Russia.

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Serenade in C Major for String Orchestra, Op. 48

- **Composed:** Between September 21 and November 4 of 1880.
- **Premiere:** It was first played at a private concert at the Moscow Conservatory on December 3, 1880, and the public premiere was in St Petersburg on October 30, 1881.
- **Previous MSO performances:** The complete *Serenade* has been played twice at these concerts: in 1926 (at the orchestra's inaugural performance) and 1993
- **Duration:** 31:00.

Background

In October of 1880, Tchaikovsky wrote to his patron and *confidante* Nadezhda von Meck: “You can be assured, dear friend, that my muse has been benevolent lately, when I tell you that I have written two long works very rapidly: a festival overture for the upcoming Exhibition and a serenade in four movements for string orchestra. The overture [the famous *1812 Overture*] will be very noisy. I wrote it without much warmth and enthusiasm—therefore it has no great artistic value. The serenade, on the other hand, came from an inward impulse. I felt it, and I venture to hope that this work is not wholly lacking in artistic qualities.” The new work was played in December 1880 by his colleagues and students at the Moscow Conservatory as a surprise for the composer, who was returning to Moscow after a long absence. In 1881, he sent a copy the score to Eduard Nápravník, conductor of the Russian Musical Society in St. Petersburg. Nápravník conducted its public premier in October, and the *Serenade* was an immediate success. It was apparently one of Tchaikovsky’s personal favorites among his works, and it remains is one of the most popular Romantic works for string orchestra.

What You’ll Hear

Tchaikovsky described the opening movement (*Pezzo in forma di sonatina*) as “...my homage to Mozart; it is intended to be an imitation of his style.” The opening passage clearly hearkens back to the slow introductions to a few of Mozart’s symphonies, and the middle section of the work is set in one of the lightest of Classical forms, the sonatina: a sonata form with very little in the way of development. The *Waltz (Moderato)* is lilting and graceful, spinning out two lovely themes, and occasionally slowing to hold the highest note in a phrase for moment before continuing its forward motion. The *Elegy (Largo elegiaco)* is also in a very simple form. The beginning is a emotional passage for the entire orchestra, which gives way to a more agitated section (*Poco più animato*). The opening music returns at the end, and is expanded in a brief coda.

The *Finale, Tema Russo* is the most nationalistic of the *Serenade*’s movements. For the opening passage (*Andante*), Tchaikovsky borrows a folk tune from the Volga region, passing it from the upper strings to the lower. The main theme of the movement, marked *Allegro con spirito*, is a popular dancelike tune from Moscow, and this is pitted against a more songlike melody of distinctively Russian character. Tchaikovsky skillfully weaves these themes together until the very end, when he brings back the very opening music of the first movement. After this reminiscence, the tempo quickens gradually for a lively coda.