

## ***Octet***

**Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)**

Written: 1922

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Fifteen minutes

People expected to be shocked by Stravinsky's music. He was known as the "cave man of music" or "Bach on the wrong notes." There was a full-scale riot at the premiere of his *Rite of Spring* in 1913. Ten years later, he shocked people again, but for the opposite reason. When people first heard his *Octet*, they thought he was joking. Aaron Copland was there and remarked,

I can attest to the general feeling of mystification that followed the initial hearing. Here was Stravinsky . . . now suddenly, without any seeming explanation, making an about-face and presenting a piece to the public that bore no conceivable resemblance to the individual style with which he had hitherto been identified. . . .

Stravinsky wasn't just making a reversal from the extremes of his previous music. He was reacting to the excesses of German romanticism and ushering in a new, objective style of music dubbed "neo-classicism." Describing the *Octet*, he wrote:

This sort of music has no other aim than to be sufficient in itself. In general, I consider that music is only able to solve musical problems; and nothing else, neither the literary nor the picturesque, can be in music of any real interest. The play of the musical elements is the thing.

"My *Octet* is not an 'emotive' work but a musical composition based on objective elements which are sufficient in themselves," he claimed. The idea of writing for just eight wind instruments came to him in a dream. Later, he gave further reasons: "[They] seem to me to be more apt to render a certain rigidity of the form I had in mind . . . this ensemble forms a complete sonorous scale and consequently furnishes me with a sufficiently rich register . . . the difference of the volume of these instruments renders more evident the musical architecture."

Stravinsky resurrected the musical forms from the Classical era for his *Octet*. The three movements have the outline of almost any Haydn symphony (without the minuetto): The first, with its slow introduction, two contrasting themes, and a development section is a sonata form; the second is a theme with variations and the third a spritely rondo. Outside of form, however, the musical language is all Stravinsky.

***Oboe Concerto in D Major***  
**Richard Strauss (1864–1949)**

Written: 1945

Movements: Three (played without pause)

Style: Romantic

Duration: 25 minutes

At the end of World War II, an American officer pulled up to a large house in the village of Garmisch to requisition it for the occupying troops. An old man of 80 came out. "I am Richard Strauss," he said. "I am the composer of *Der Rosenkavalier*. Please leave me alone." But he wasn't left alone, because many ordinary G.I.'s wanted to meet the famous composer.

One of those visitors was Alfred Mann, who later became an eminent music professor at the Eastman School of Music. He brought along another soldier, John de Lancie who, before he was drafted, was the principal oboist in the Pittsburgh Symphony. "I asked him if, in view of the numerous beautiful, lyric solos for oboe in almost all of his works, he had ever considered writing a concerto for oboe," de Lancie recalled. "He answered 'no' and there was no more conversation on the subject." The seeds were planted, however, and in 1945, Strauss completed his *Oboe Concerto*.

After the war, de Lancie received a note from Strauss' publisher offering him the American premiere of the work. By now, de Lancie had moved to the Philadelphia Orchestra, but he was playing second oboe to his teacher, the great Marcel Tabuteau. It would be impolitic for him, instead of the principal, to premiere an important work by a great composer. He passed the privilege on to oboist Mitch Miller (of *Sing Along with Mitch* fame).

De Lancie eventually played the concerto, but only once, with the Philadelphia Orchestra. (He later made a recording of it.) Other than politics, there may be a reason he did not perform it more often: It is *really* hard. "From the first moment I saw the *Concerto*," he writes, "I had concerns about the many inordinately long passages in the first, second and third movements—passages more suitable for violin than for oboe." You'll hear that long passage writing at the beginning of the concerto where the oboist goes for 57 measures with no place for a breath!

Like Stravinsky's *Octet* on tonight's concert, Strauss's *Concerto* is a step back to classicism. While there are arduous technical demands on the soloist, the melodies are expansive, the texture transparent, and the form clear. Like Strauss's beloved Austrian Alps, gorgeous—but challenging!

***Symphony No.1 in C Major, Op. 21***  
**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Written: 1800

Movements: Four

Style: Classical

Duration: 25 minutes

All three works on today's program have their roots in the Classical era. Both Stravinsky and Strauss, after establishing themselves as modernists of their age, looked backwards and wrote in a "neo-classical" style. With his *First Symphony*, Beethoven declared his classical credentials. His great American biographer Alexander Thayer felt that 1800, the year Beethoven wrote his *First Symphony*, was "the year . . . he asserted his claims to a position with Mozart and the still living and productive Haydn in the higher forms of chamber and orchestral composition—the quartet and the symphony."

Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792. He took lessons from a variety of performers and composers, including Haydn. As a pianist, he quickly gained a reputation as an excellent improviser and played frequently in aristocratic salons. His first public performance (on one of his piano concertos) was in 1795,. His compositions included piano variations and sonatas, chamber music (primarily piano trios), and two piano concertos. He premiered his *First Symphony* on a benefit concert for himself, which also included a symphony by Mozart and selections from Haydn's *Creation*.

It is not surprising that the first movement of Beethoven's *First Symphony* begins with a slow introduction. What is surprising is that it avoids the home key for so long. The main, faster, part of the movement starts with a hush, but soon develops an impetuous character, marked but impulsive accents. The oboe states the gentle second theme. The genteel second movement starts with a small fugue. The central section is more urgent while the return of the fugue involves a more involved orchestra accompaniment. Beethoven takes the normally staid menuetto of the third movement and ramps the tempo up into a boisterous romp. The woodwinds predominate in the trio section, accompanied by rippling strings. The last movement also begins with a slow introduction in a hesitant attempt at building an ascending scale. Suddenly, the tempo takes off as the orchestra tosses the scales back and forth like fireworks streamers.

Beethoven's *First Symphony* was among his most popular during his lifetime. With it, he was bidding farewell to the eighteenth century and the classical style. Soon, he would strike out on a "new path."