

The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba from “Solomon”

Georg Frideric Händel (1685—1759)

Written: 1748

Style: Baroque

Duration: Three minutes

Even though Georg Frideric Händel was born in Halle, Germany, he spent most of his life in England. He went there because, for an opera composer, “England, of all European countries, was the least exploited.” Arriving in 1710, Händel spent the next three decades writing dozens of operas. However, Italian opera was never a financial success in England. They were expensive to produce and audiences were slim. The superstar Italian imports demanded exorbitant salaries. The English audiences preferred less serious fare and, frankly, something in a language they could understand. By 1741, Händel had endured the financial collapse of several opera companies. There were rumors that, after nearly thirty years, Händel was giving up and returning to Germany.

Occasionally, Händel wrote dramatic works in English – called Oratorios . These appealed to a broader audience, including even the middle-class, because they had Biblical subjects—as opposed to some forgotten Greek god—and they were in a language people actually spoke! Sometimes, they were even a financial success. Still, Händel resisted switching completely over to the English oratorio. Now, seeing Händel’s financial distress, Charles Jennens – the man who assembled the texts for Händel’s other oratorios – tried to get him to write another one: “I hope I shall persuade him to set another Scripture collection I have made for him The subject is Messiah.” Today, in this country, that choral masterpiece makes Händel’s name familiar to just about everybody. However, Händel wrote *other* oratorios, too: *Israel in Egypt, Saul, Belshazzar, Judas Maccabeus, Joshua, Samson, Semele, Susanna* and

Solomon—about twenty-seven in all.

Händel started writing *Solomon* in May of 1748. With his usual facility, he finished it in about five weeks. It tells various stories from the life of Israel's king Solomon, taken from the Bible's First Book of Kings and the Second Book of Chronicles. Händel also included material from Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*. Each of the three parts of *Solomon* begins with a short orchestral prelude. The one starting the third scene and preceding the aria "From Arabia's spicy shores" was *not* given the title *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* by Händel. He simply called it a "sinfonia;" Sir Thomas Beecham is credited with the fanciful title.

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Dances Concertantes

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Written: 1941–42

Movements: Five

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 20 minutes

One of the towering musical giants of the twentieth century, Igor Stravinsky made his reputation with three ballets that he wrote when he was in his thirties: *The Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. Contemporary opinions ran hot and cold. One called *Le Sacre du printemps (the Rite of Spring)* "The Twentieth Century's Ninth Symphony," while

another called it a “*Massacre du printemps*.” Stravinsky was the “cave man of music,” or “Bach on the wrong notes.”

In the 1920's, Stravinsky began investigating the music of Bach and Mozart. He abandoned the stylistic excesses of his youth, and for the next thirty years, he wrote in a sort of lean and “intellectual” style known as his “neo-classical” style. He would also occasionally “borrow” music of older composers and refashion it.

With war looming in Europe, Stravinsky left France for the United States in 1939. He first went to Cambridge where he presented his *Poetics of Music* lectures at Harvard, and then spent time in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. Soon, Stravinsky and his new wife Vera—his first wife died in March, 1939—settled in Hollywood, California. The first orchestral work that Stravinsky *completed* in the United States was his *Symphony in C* for the Chicago Symphony. However, he had started that work in Paris. *Dances Concertantes*, on the other hand, is the first orchestral work that he started in the United States.

It was commissioned by the Werner Janssen Orchestra of Los Angeles. Given the title, and the titles of the separate movements, one could assume that Stravinsky intended the work for some sort of ballet. One can imagine all of the dancers entering and exiting the stage during the *Marche* and then dancing as an entire troupe during the *Pas d'Action*. The *Thème varié* would present dancers in varying combinations while the *Pas de Deux* would feature the principal dancers. However, Stravinsky wrote this as a purely orchestral work. (George Balanchine did choreograph the work three years later.)

Dances Concertantes is Stravinsky at his neo-classical best. The melodies and rhythms can seem so straightforward. If you don't look at the conductor, you can imagine a steady beat.

But then there are all of those rhythmic hiccups and odd distortions of the melody. So clear, so simple. Not! So Stravinsky!

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Overture to “The Creatures of Prometheus” Op. 43
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Written: 1801

Movements: One

Style: Classical

Duration: 5 minutes

In 1800, Beethoven was still new to the city of Vienna. On April 2 of that year, he gave his first public concert for his own benefit. The program featured his *First Symphony*, his *First Piano Concerto*, and his *Septet for Winds*. The critics were decidedly cool. A year later, he premiered his ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*. It was a resounding success and had another twenty-three performance shortly thereafter.

Even though Beethoven was just beginning to make his mark, he knew that he would someday challenge the supremacy of Mozart and Haydn. There is a story of Haydn meeting up with Beethoven: “Well, I heard your ballet yesterday and it pleased me very much!” Fawning somewhat, Beethoven replied, “O, dear Papa, you are very kind; but it is far from being a *Creation!*” (referring to Haydn’s monumental oratorio). Haydn, surprised and almost offended by the answer, said after a short pause: “That is true; it is not yet a *Creation* and I can scarcely

believe that it will ever become one.” The men said their goodbyes, both somewhat embarrassed.

The story of the ballet centers on the first man and woman who have been formed from the clay by Prometheus. Unable to give them reasoning powers, he decides to destroy them, but a higher voice stops him. So, he takes his creations to Parnassus where they become acquainted with music. As a result, they develop the powers of reasoning and feeling, and begin to appreciate the beauties of nature, drama, and dance.

Even though the music to *The Creatures of Prometheus* was a success, Beethoven wasn't entirely happy. He wrote to his publisher, “I have written a ballet, in which, however the ballet master has not made the best of his part.” The overture is a gem of classical form. After a short, slow introduction, you will hear two themes, one brilliant, and the other more lyrical. Both are taken from the music at the end of the ballet. After a short working out section, the two main themes come back. The ballet rarely is performed today, but the overture remains a staple of the orchestral repertoire.

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Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K. 551
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)
Written: 1788
Movements: Four
Style: Classical
Duration: 35 minutes

In 1788, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was in a precarious financial situation. The prospect of a new, lucrative job had just fallen through. In order to economize, Mozart moved his family to smaller accommodations further away from the center of activity. Even with that, Mozart was desperately in need of cash. In spite of his straightened circumstances, Mozart was churning out music at a furious rate. In the space of just over two months, he wrote the three symphonies that are the crowning achievements of his entire symphonic output. You might expect Mozart's music from such gloomy circumstances to be gloomy itself. Not so! Instead, he gives us the full range of classical emotions in those three symphonies.

The *Symphony No. 41 in C Major* is the last of the last three. The title "Jupiter," was added by Johann Peter Salomon. (Perhaps it is the "pomp of the opening of the first movement, with its military use of trumpets and kettledrums and stately dotted rhythms . . . calculated to evoke images of nobility and godliness in the eighteenth-century mind" that conjured up the image of Jupiter for Salomon.)

The first movement is stately – at times. However, for a secondary theme in the first movement, Mozart re-used a tune from an aria he wrote a few months earlier, "Un bacio di mano" (A kiss on the hand). Some of the words are "'you are a bit dense, my dear Pompeo, go and study the ways of the world.'" Hardly noble and god-like! The second movement, with its muted strings, has its occasional passionate outbursts. The third movement is a dignified minuet. In the fourth movement, it is as if Mozart has decided to show off all of his skills as a composer by his clever interlacing of melodies. He weaves no fewer than five different tunes together. Of this remarkable movement, Eric Blom writes:

There is a mystery in this music not to be solved by analysis or criticism, and perhaps only just to be apprehended by the imagination. We can understand the utter simplicity;

we can also, with an effort, comprehend the immense technical skill with which its elaborate fabric is woven; what remains forever a riddle is how any human being could manage to combine these two opposites into such a perfectly balanced work of art.

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