

Dances of Galánta

Zoltan Kodaly (1882–1967)

Written: 1933

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 16 minutes

In Steven Spielberg's classic 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, communication between earthlings and aliens finally takes place using hand-signs that correspond to the notes in a musical scale. Those signs are an important part of an extensive music education technique known as the *Kodaly Method*, developed by the Hungarian composer and ethnomusicologist, Zoltán Kodály. His contributions to the music of Hungary are at least as important as his educational works. His friend and collaborator Béla Bartok once said, "If I were to name the composer whose works are the most perfect embodiment of the Hungarian spirit, I would answer, Kodály."

Zoltán Kodály was born in the Hungarian countryside, and when he was just a toddler his family moved to the village of Galanta in northern Hungary (now a part of Slovakia). His father played violin and his mother piano, but he essentially taught himself how to play piano, violin, viola, and cello. He enrolled at Budapest University at the same time that he studied at the Academy of Music. Within six years, he had his Ph.D. in music. At about the same time, he started collecting Hungarian folk music by going out into the field. It was there that he met Bartok.

In addition to his wide-ranging educational and ethnographic endeavors, Kodály composed extensively. Kodály wrote his *Dances of Galánta* for the 80th anniversary of the Budapest Philharmonic Society. In the preface to the score, Kodály wrote Galánta is a small Hungarian market town known to travelers between Vienna and Budapest. The composer passed seven years of his childhood there. At that time there existed a famous Gypsy band that has since disappeared. This was the first "orchestral" sonority that came to the ears of the child. The forebears of these gypsies were already known more than a hundred years ago. About 1800 some books of Hungarian dances were published in Vienna, one of which contained music "after several Gypsies from Galánta." They have preserved the old traditions. In order to keep it alive, the composer has taken his principal themes from these old publications.

Kodály patterned his *Dances of Galánta* after the *Verbunkos*, the typical Hungarian military recruiting dance. The first three sections of the piece, in a slow tempo, are

the *lassú* (slow), and the final four sections, with increasingly frenetic tempo, are the *friss* (fresh).

©2018 John P. Varineau

Serenade, after Plato's "Symposium"

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)

Written: 1953–54

Movements: Five

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: 30 minutes

If the classical music world ever had a “Renaissance Man,” Leonard Bernstein was it. He was a composer, pianist, and conductor. As a composer, he was at home in both worlds of “classical” and popular music. Both American and European audiences admired him as a conductor! His discourses on music could be hi-falutin’ enough for the esteemed Norton Lectures at Harvard, but almost every baby-boomer learned the basics of music from his inimitable television broadcasts of *Young People’s Concerts*.

He started composing his *Serenade* in 1953 as a response to two commitments: a commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation and a promise to write a piece for violin and orchestra for Isaac Stern. He included the following [here greatly condensed] description of the *Serenade* in the completed score:

There is no literal program for the *Serenade*, despite the fact that it resulted from a re-reading of Plato's charming dialogue, *The Symposium*. The music, like [Plato's] dialogue, is a series of related statements in praise of love, and generally follows the Platonic form through the succession of speakers at the banquet. . . .

I. Phaedrus—Pausanias. Phaedrus opens the symposium with a lyrical oration in praise of Eros, the god of love. Pausanias continues by describing the duality of lover and beloved. . . .

II. Aristophanes: Allegretto. Aristophanes does not play the role of the clown in this dialogue, but instead that of the bedtime story-teller, invoking the fairy-tale mythology of love.

III. Eryximachus: Presto. The physician speaks of bodily harmony as a scientific model for the workings of love-patterns.

IV. Agathon: Adagio. Perhaps the most moving speech of the dialogue, Agathon's panegyric embraces all aspects of love's powers, charms and functions.

V. Socrates—Alcibiades: Socrates describes his visit to the seer Diotima, quoting her speech on the demonology of love. . . . The famous interruption by Alcibiades and his band of drunken revelers ushers in the Allegro If there is a hint of jazz in the celebration, I hope it will not be

taken as anachronistic Greek party music, but rather the natural expression of a contemporary American composer imbued with the spirit of that timeless dinner party.

©2014 John P. Varineau and Leonard Bernstein

Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55, "Eroica"

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Written: 1802–04

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 47 minutes

Music historians frequently make the year 1800 as the dividing line between the "classical" and "romantic" eras of music. It is a handy date, and easy to remember. However, the "classical" composer Franz Joseph Haydn outlived that date by nearly a decade, and there were intimations of romanticism long before the turn of the century. 1800 does line up, however, with an important change in Beethoven's style: away from the classicism of his youth and toward something really quite new and remarkable. The signature piece of that change was his *Third Symphony*.

Of course, there were other things happening at about that time which marked a dramatic shift in thinking. Revolutionary fervor was successful in America in the 1770s and 80s, but it was running amok in Europe. Heads were rolling in France by 1792. Napoleon Bonaparte, first only a general, then part of a consulate, then "First Consul for Life," and finally Emperor declared, "I alone represent the People." Beethoven initially dedicated this symphony to Napoleon, but upon hearing of his self-elevation to emperor, Beethoven remarked: "So he too is nothing more than an ordinary man. Now he will also trample all human rights underfoot, and only pander to his own ambition; he will place himself above everyone else and become a tyrant." With that, he removed the dedication from the title page with a knife.

The *Eroica Symphony* really is a new approach to writing music. A symphony is no longer a collection of loosely related movements. Now, some underlying and often ineffable theme connects them together. In other words, the symphony means *something*. The first movement of the *Eroica*, while written in a traditional form, is longer and has more dramatic contrast than virtually any other symphony by Mozart or Haydn. The second movement has a simple plan. It is a slow march with a contrasting middle section—a profound treatment of a funeral march! The third movement, a rollicking scherzo, has a trio section that expects heroism on the part of the horn section. The final movement, based upon a theme Beethoven originally wrote for his ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, takes the concept of theme and variations beyond any previous symphonic treatment. Taken as a whole, Beethoven's *Third Symphony* somehow is a musical picture, a "heroic symphony . . . composed to celebrate the memory of a great man."

© 2018 John P. Varineau

