

The Tempest "Fantasy-Overture," Op. 18

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Written: 1873

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: 22 minutes

Pyotr Tchaikovsky was a fringe member of a group called "The Mighty Handful." They were amateur composers who met together to discuss Russian music and help each other with their compositions. The *Romeo and Juliet Overture*, Tchaikovsky's early masterpiece, was a result of the group's leader's suggestion. Following that tremendous success, the music critic Vladimir Stasov—who came up with the group's name—suggested to Tchaikovsky another overture based on a Shakespeare: *The Tempest*. Stasov's suggestions were no mere hints:

Let your storm rage and engulf the Italian boat with the princes in it, and immediately afterwards subside. And now, after this picture, let another begin: the enchanted island of wonderful beauty, and Miranda passing across it with light tread, a creation of even more wonderful beauty—all sun, with a smile of happiness. . . . I think a motif of someone who is falling in love, a substantial crescendo that bursts into bloom . . . should exactly match the requirements of your talent. . . . After this, I would suggest the appearance of Caliban, a bestial and base slave, and then Ariel toying with the Italian princes. . .

Tchaikovsky accepted Stasov's suggestion and dashed off the piece in eleven days. What was Stasov's review?

What an incomparable piece! Of course, the storm itself is inconsequential and isn't marked by any originality, Prospero is unremarkable and finally, near the end, there is a very ordinary cadence just like something out of an Italian operatic finale. But these are three tiny blemishes. . .

Tchaikovsky's *Tempest Fantasy-Overture* has an unusual form. The various themes that you hear in the first part of the overture reappear transformed and in reverse order at the end, like a palindrome. The calm sea opens and closes the overture. Solemn chords at the beginning depict the magician Prospero. The faster music that follows represents Ariel who has been sent to conjure up a terrific (and unmistakable)

storm. A magic island appears, and then there is the sumptuous love music for Miranda and Ferdinand. Cunning Caliban enters along with Ariel, toying with her captives. The love theme returns. We hear Prospero's theme again, this time triumphantly, as he renounces his magical powers. The music of the sea ends the overture as the characters in the play return home.

©2019 John P. Varineau

“Depuis le jour ou je me suis donnee” from Act III of Louise
Gustave Charpentier (1860–1956)

Written: 1896

Style: Romantic

Duration: Five minutes

There have been numerous books, plays, movies and operas about the carefree lives of college students (e.g. Puccini's *La Bohème*). Gustave Charpentier lived that life. His father was a baker but encouraged his son's interest in music. As a teenager, Gustave studied violin, joined a municipal band, and formed a musical society. While working in a spinning mill, he taught his boss violin. (That eventually paid off when the employer sponsored Gustave's entrance into the Lille Conservatory.) The good citizens of his home town paid for his annual tuition at the Paris Conservatory. Then things started to go badly. He developed a passion for the “bohemian life” and the Montmartre district—notorious for its nightclubs and “artistic” population—in particular. He also developed an “active distaste for authority” which did not sit well with his violin professor, who got him expelled. Amazingly, he was readmitted as a composition student and, after a brief military stint, joined Jules Massenet's studio. Even more amazingly, Charpentier won the coveted *Prix de Rome* in 1887. (Night-life-loving students like Gustave

found Rome—where prize-winners were sent to study—a bit of a bore, so he somehow escaped briefly back to Paris.)

Gustave started writing his opera *Louise* while living at the Villa Medici in Rome. He took nearly nine years to complete it. In the opera, he tried to portray the normal lives of the poor in a realistic way, (much like his counterpart the novelist Emile Zola). *Louise* tells the simple story of a young girl (Louise) living with her parents, and her love for the young artist Julien. In the third act, the two lovers have moved into an apartment in the Montmartre district. In act III, Louise sings *Depuis le jour (Since the day)*, proclaiming her happiness and her love for Julien. *Louise* premiered in February 1900. Its promiscuous theme was something of a scandal, but assured a box office success. Some have called it the first opera of women’s liberation. Of his music Charpentier said, “My works represent the ideal synthesis of a destiny. *Louise* represents a period of my life . . . that is why I need ten years to write a work; I need to live first.”

©2019 John P. Varineau

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Samuel Barber (1910–1981)

Written: 1947

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: Eighteen minutes

Samuel Barber knew his destiny early on. As a young boy, he wrote a note to his mother. “I was meant to be a composer, and will be I’m sure. I’ll ask you one more thing – Don’t ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football – Please.” He entered the first class at

the Curtis Institute of Music when he was only fourteen and went on to become one of America's premier composers. The broad American public got its first real taste of Barber's music in 1938, during a radio broadcast of two of his works—the *First Essay* and the *Adagio for Strings*—conducted Arturo Toscanini.

In that same year, the American novelist, poet, screenwriter, and film critic James Agee published his prose-poem *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* in the *Partisan Review*. Agee claimed that the work took him about ninety minutes to write:

I was greatly interested in improvisatory writing, as against carefully composed, multiple-draft writing: i.e., with a kind of parallel to improvisation in jazz, to a certain kind of "genuine" lyric which I thought should be purely improvised.

The text captivated Samuel Barber, because it reminded him of summer evenings in his home town of West Chester, Pennsylvania. Barber was also struck with how he and Agee had similar backgrounds. They were the same age, and

we both had back yards where our families used to lie in the long summer evenings, we each had an aunt who was a musician. I remember well my parents sitting on the porch, talking quietly as they rocked. And there was a trolley car with straw seats and a clanging bell called "The Dinky" that traveled up and down the main street . . . I think I must have composed *Knoxville* within a few days.

Barber extracted about a third of Agee's prose-poem and started setting it to music without a singer in mind. When the American operatic soprano Eleanor Steber commissioned him to write a piece for soprano and orchestra, he provided *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. She premiered it in April of 1948 with the Boston Symphony, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. The

music perfectly encapsulates Barber’s description of Agee’s work: “You see, it expresses a child’s feeling of loneliness, wonder, and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep.”

©2019 John P. Varineau

Symphonic Dances, Op. 45

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Written: 1940

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 35 minutes

While recuperating from an illness at a Long Island resort, Rachmaninoff set to work on a piece he called *Fantastic Dances*. (He later called it *Symphonic Dances*.) He completed the work in two short months—remarkable speed for his normally laborious style. It is a reflective look at mankind’s journey from youth, through maturity to old age, and eventually death.

The first movement begins softly and quickly develops into a robust march. With the short, angular chords which the orchestra plays near the beginning, Rachmaninoff quotes music from *The Golden Cockerel* by his old teacher Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov. The march dissolves into a quiet undulating figure played by the oboe and clarinet. This serves as accompaniment to that rare commodity in symphonic music: a saxophone solo! After the string section gets a crack at the same beautiful tune, it’s back to the march. At the very end of the movement, Rachmaninoff quotes another tune from his youth. This time it is the main tune from his own *First Symphony*.

Muted brass introduce the second movement with sinister sounding chords. The flute and clarinet answer with flighty arabesques. A solo violin attempts to get a waltz started. Finally, the English horn plays the main melody of this movement. It is a sort of melancholic waltz, filled with luscious melodies played by the strings and occasional interruptions from the brass. After a final rhythmic outburst, the waltz disappears as if it were simply a swirling dream.

The final movement begins with a slow, somber introduction and then quickly launches into a rhythmic distortion of the *Dies Irae* from the Roman Catholic mass for the dead. Then Rachmaninoff quotes other classical works associated with death: the chiming of bells from the last movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*; the xylophone from the *Skeletons* movement of Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*; and Liszt's *Totentanz (Dance of Death)*. More importantly, he uses a rhythmic variation of the hymn "*Blessed Be the Lord*"—an old chant from the Orthodox Church. After a slower, somber middle section, Rachmaninoff juxtaposes the *Dies Irae* and the *Blessed Be the Lord* for a rhythmic push to the end.

The *Symphonic Dances* is Rachmaninoff's last composition. Twenty-six measures from the end of the last movement, Rachmaninoff had taken care to write in the word "Alliluya" above the music of the Russian hymn. And he closed the score with the words, "I Thank Thee."

©2019 John P. Varineau