

***Overture to La Gazza Ladra (The Thieving Magpie)***

**Gioacchino Rossini (1792–1868)**

Written: 1817

Style: Romantic

Duration: Ten minutes

By the time Gioacchino Rossini retired at the grand old age of 37, he had slowed a bit. When he was in his twenties, he composed nearly three operas a year, but when he was in his thirties he wrote *only* one per year. Still, 39 is a remarkable achievement. “Give me a laundry list and I will set it to music,” he supposedly said. His retirement brought a dramatic change. Continually ill and idle for nearly twenty-five years, he never wrote another opera. It wasn’t until 1855, when he settled in Paris, that he regained both health and humor. He started composing again, but this time he wrote only little pieces that he called his “sins of old age.” The cream of Parisian society filled his salon where he continually pontificated on artistic matters. When he finally passed away, he was a revered elder-statesman of a musical style long gone.

*La Gazza Ladra (The Thieving Magpie)* was Rossini’s twentieth opera. He wrote it when he was 25! The plot of the opera comes from a real-life incident where a servant girl received a death sentence for stealing some silverware. The real thief was a magpie. (In the opera, there is a happy conclusion when the perpetrator is found.)

The overture begins with a surprising solo snare drum roll. A rather bombastic march follows, with an occasional light-hearted woodwind utterance here and there. The march ends with a couple more snare drum rolls. The minor melody in the next section comes from the part of the opera where the hapless servant is in prison contemplating her fate. Stern trombones seem to indicate that the judge’s decision is a serious one. A second theme comes from the scene where the judge is preparing the court. The melody begins softly, and in typical Rossini

fashion, with multiple repetitions, gets louder and louder. Both themes get a second statement, and then there is a fast and furious ending.

The author Thomas Pynchon seemed to prefer the music of Rossini over Beethoven. “The point is . . . a person feels *good* listening to Rossini,” he wrote. “There is more of the sublime in the snare-drum part of *La Gazza Ladra* than in the whole *Ninth Symphony*.” Well . . . maybe.

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### ***The Pines of Rome***

**Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936)**

Written: 1924

Movements: Four

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 23 minutes

Because of his conservative nature, Ottorino Respighi never made it into the pantheon of the great twentieth-century composers like Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. Nevertheless, in terms of mastering the craft of writing for orchestra, he has few equals. Respighi didn’t want to be *avante-garde*. Instead, “he desired above all to compose music that would speak to his compatriots about all aspects of their beloved country in a musical language that was beautiful and easy for ordinary people to accept and enjoy.” The works for which he is best known are a series of three symphonic pictures called *tone poems*. The first, written in 1916, is called *The Fountains of Rome*. He wrote the second, *The Pines of Rome*, in 1924, and the third, *Roman Festivals*, in 1928.

For the first performance of *The Pines of Rome* Respighi provided the following commentary:

In *the Pines of Rome* [I use] nature as a point of departure, in order to recall memories

and visions. The century-old trees which dominate so characteristically the Roman landscape become testimony for the principal events in Roman life.

1. "The Pines of Villa Borghese." Children are at play in the pine grove of the Villa Borghese, dancing the Italian equivalent of "Ring around a Rosy"; mimicking marching soldiers and battles; twittering and shrieking like swallows at evening; and they disappear. Suddenly the scene changes to –

2. "The Pines near a Catacomb." We see the shadows of the pines, which overhang the entrance of a catacomb. From the depths rises a chant which reechoes solemnly, like a hymn, and is then mysteriously silenced.

3. "The Pines of the Janiculum." There is a thrill in the air. The full moon reveals the profile of the pines of Gianicolo's Hill. A nightingale sings (represented by a recording of a nightingale song, heard from the orchestra).

4. "The Pines of the Appian Way." Misty dawn on the Appian Way. The tragic country is guarded by solitary pines. Indistinctly, incessantly, the rhythm of innumerable steps. To the poet's fantasy appears a vision of past glories; trumpets blare, and the army of the Consul advances brilliantly in the grandeur of a newly risen sun toward the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph the Capitoline Hill.

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***Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman, No. 2***

**Joan Tower (1938–)**

Written: 1989

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Four minutes

Joan Tower spent her childhood in South America, where her father was a mining engineer. In an interview with Brenda Sokolowski she explained:

South America is a dancing culture and, also, if you're in the Catholic areas, they're celebrating every saint's day, which is about every three days. . . . My nurse was a young Inca Indian, looking for a man. She'd drag me to these festivals and toss me a percussion instrument to get rid of me. I had a ball! I would be playing maracas and castanets. That started a real love for percussion, for dancing, for rhythm. My music is basically rhythm. The action is the rhythm. In my orchestra music, it's all over the place.

After returning to the United States, Joan studied at Bennington College in Vermont and then Columbia University where she received her doctorate in 1968. She is the first woman to receive the prestigious Grawemeyer Award, and the first composer to be commissioned by the Ford Made in America consortium commission. She is currently Asher Edelman Professor of Music at Bard College.

Speaking to Ann McCutchan, Tower recalled when she wrote something as a “real honest-to-God, raw attempt at being myself . . . it was a real gutsy move for me. It meant that I had to stand up for myself and say, Hey, I like drums—I like rhythmic energy—I like simple colors! It was a real door opener for me, because after that my own voice started to take shape.”

This is what Joan Tower says about her *Fanfares for the Uncommon Woman*:

*Second Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, commissioned by Absolut Vodka, is the second composition in what [is] a trilogy of fanfares. The first fanfare was composed for the Houston Symphony (for the sesquicentennial of the state of Texas) in 1986. At that

time, Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* inspired both the music (theme and instrumentation) and the title. The second fanfare is a tribute not only to Aaron Copland but also to women who are adventurous and take risks. This work is dedicated with love and admiration to Joan Briccetti, general manager of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. The third fanfare was commissioned to celebrate Carnegie Hall's 100th Anniversary in 1991.

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***Concerto in A Minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 7***

**Clara Schumann (1819–1896)**

Written: 1833–35

Movements: Three (played without pause)

Style: Romantic

Duration: 22 minutes

Clara Schumann's story is one of impetuous young love, of an obsessive and controlling father, of a reckless young man who dies too soon, of a remarkably talented young woman who becomes a devoted wife and mother at the expense of her own creative impulse.

Clara's father, Friedrich Wieck, was a respected piano teacher in Leipzig. He vowed even before his first child was born that he would make her into a musician of consummate artistry. Before she turned ten, Clara had made her public debut at the most important concert hall in Leipzig. When Robert Schumann, nearly ten years her senior, came to study with Papa Wieck, he was initially amused by this little girl with all the talent. Over the following five years, Robert's amusement turned into attraction. By now, the sixteen-year-old Clara was stunning the European music world. Goethe praised her as "a noble phenomenon," and she was hailed

by many of the greatest musicians of the day, including Liszt, Mendelssohn, Paganini, and Chopin.

Robert Schumann eventually asked his teacher for Clara's hand in marriage. Friedrich vehemently rejected the proposal. The couple eventually took Clara's father to court. They won the case, and were married the day before Clara's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Married life conflicted deeply with Clara's career as a performer and her interest in composition. The noise of her practicing got in the way of Robert's composing. And she was raising eight children. Somehow, she continued to perform and compose with the time she had, and after Robert's death in 1856, she was again able to make a considerable impact with concert tours throughout Europe and Russia.

Clara originally intended her *Concerto in A Minor* as a one-movement concert-piece. That piece eventually became the last movement in its present three-movement form. The opening *Allegro* begins typically, and seems to promise us a traditional concerto. However, at just the point we would expect the central development section to begin, there is a brief transition into the slow, haunting second movement. It is a beautiful duet for piano and solo cello, drawing on the themes of the opening movement. As the movement winds down, timpani rolls signal a change in mood. Trumpets herald the return of the piano, and we're off on a rollicking dance-like final movement.

***Francesca da Rimini, Fantasy after Dante, Opus 32***

**Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)**

Written: 1876

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: 25 minutes

Ill-fated love seemed to be one of Tchaikovsky's fortes (e.g. *Romeo and Juliet*).

Tchaikovsky considered writing an opera about a scene in Dante's *Inferno* about the two adulterous lovers Francesca and Paolo. When his librettist suggested that he was expecting music à la Richard Wagner (who Tchaikovsky detested), Tchaikovsky begged off and instead wrote a symphonic tone-poem. Tchaikovsky provided a synopsis of the piece in the program:

Dante, [along with Virgil], descends into the second circle of hell's abyss. . . . In the sepulchral gloom a storm blows up and rages. . . . From the countless human souls spinning there, Dante's attention is specially drawn to the two lovely [spirits] of Francesca and Paolo spinning in each other's embrace. . . . Dante summons them and asks them to relate the crime for which they have been prescribed so terrible a punishment . . . [Francesca] loved Paolo but was, against her will, given in marriage to the hateful brother of her beloved, the . . . deformed, jealous tyrant, Rimini. The bonds of a forced marriage could not drive from Francesca's heart her tender passion for Paolo. Once they were reading together the romance of Lancelot. "We were alone," Francesca narrated, "and were reading without apprehension. . . . When, finally,

Lancelot gained the first kiss of love, he, from whom nothing will now separate me, kissed my trembling mouth, and the book that had revealed to us for the first time the secret of love fell from our hands." At that moment, Francesca's husband had entered unexpectedly and killed both her and Paolo with blows from his dagger. And, having said this, Francesca was again borne away in the embrace of her Paolo by the furiously and wildly raging whirlwind.

In Tchaikovsky's tone-poem, a brooding slow introduction depicts the poet's descent into Hell. The music becomes ever more impassioned. After a brief reprise of the opening bars, a violent storm sequence ensues. The storm finally abates, leading to an extended rhapsodic episode depicting the love of Francesca and Paolo. A solo clarinet introduces the melancholy principal theme associated with the tragic heroine. A quickening tempo leads to a broad climax. There is a brief violent outburst and then the storm returns. Francesca and Paolo are swept away.

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