

Program Notes

Lieutenant Kijé Suite, Op. 60

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Prokofiev's musical gifts embraced a rare mix of grotesquerie, wit, satire, and a sentimental lyricism -- qualities on vivid display in this suite. The work draws upon a 1934 film score he composed for "Lieutenant Kijé," one of the earliest sound films made in the Soviet Union. Prokofiev's biographer Harlow Robinson has described the music as "a satire on the stupidity of royalty and the particularly Russian terror of displeasing one's superior."

The story begins when Tsar Paul I (1754-1801) is roused from his sleep by a shriek, thanks to a dalliance between two courtiers. Enraged, the tsar demands that his officials produce the culprit, while an unnerved clerk, by the slip of a pen, includes the fictitious "Lieutenant Kijé" on a military roster. When the tsar inspects the list he is intrigued by this name, and asks that the officer be presented to him. Too terrified to admit the lieutenant is an outright fabrication, court officials then proceed to spin a yarn about their creation's phantom career; including his involvement with and marriage to a princess, not to mention his final demise.

The suite's five movements are as follows:

I. The Birth of Kijé

This opening movement is introduced by a trumpet fanfare. A jaunty satirical march follows featuring snare drum, piccolo and flute. Strings interject with a series of martial accents, and the brass choir chimes with its own response before we hear the theme associated with the phantom Kijé. There are reprises of the march and the Kijé theme -- this time on tenor saxophone -- before the trumpet fanfare closes out the movement.

II. Romance

Prokofiev's principal material here is based on an old folk song, "The Little Grey Dove is Cooing." This theme is then developed, drawing upon a rich instrumental palette. The movement closes with a return of "The Little Grey Dove is Cooing," now embellished by birdsong.

III. Kijé's Wedding

A rather pompous quasi-ceremonial melody -- "Allegro fastoso"-- for brass and woodwinds opens this movement. A celebratory trumpet solo follows, together with variations on the Kijé theme.

IV. Troika

With a principal melody based on an old Hussar song, this movement evokes the experience of a fast winter's journey on a traditional three-horse sled.

V. The Burial of Kijé

This final movement has been described as “wistful, touching farewell” -- largely a series of reminiscences of Kijé's imaginary life. We hear a return of the opening trumpet fanfare, and a reprise of Kijé's theme, together with "The Little Grey Dove," this time intertwined with the wedding music. We then hear the trumpet fanfare one last time.

Original Theme with Variations (arr. Zachary May)

Luise Adolpha Le Beau (1850-1927)

Zachary May, William Eckfeld's successor as orchestra leader at White Plains High School, brings his arranging talent to this work by a composer who remains a marginal figure, like too many women of her generation. Up against the male establishment, Luise Adolpha Le Beau enjoyed relatively few major successes during her lifetime. Although a composer and concert pianist starting in her teens, she came to depend upon mainly her piano pedagogy and newspaper reviews for steady income.

She began formal studies in piano and composition with local teachers in her hometown of Rastatt in the Rhineland, before moving to Munich in the 1870s, where she studied with the renowned composer and organist Josef Rheinberger. During this period, she gained some recognition for her compositions, including works for piano, vocal music, chamber music, and orchestral pieces. However, her relationship with Rheinberger deteriorated. Initially, he recognized her talents, but disagreements over musical style and artistic direction led to a parting of ways.

Le Beau's career was further complicated by her relationship with the famed pianist and composer Clara Schumann. Although Schumann was initially supportive of Le Beau's work, their relationship soured when Le Beau sought to establish herself as an independent artist. Schumann, an influential figure in the music world, was reportedly dismissive of Le Beau's efforts to carve out her own path, believing that women composers should adhere to the established norms of their male counterparts.

Despite these setbacks, Le Beau continued to compose, perform, and publish her works. She traveled to several European cities, including Paris and Berlin, to promote her music. Over her lifetime, she composed a wide range of music, including piano works, songs, chamber music, and larger-scale orchestral and choral pieces. In her later years, she focused more on writing about music and reflecting on her experiences as a woman composer in a male-dominated field. Her memoirs, "Lebenserinnerungen einer Komponistin" ("Memoirs of a Female Composer"), published in 1910, provide valuable insights into her life and the challenges she faced.

The Le Beau music on our program originated as a solo piano piece, Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 3. It has the feel of an early work with a certain didactic quality. By the same token, in its present string arrangement it makes for very effective teaching material for aspiring players.

There are ten variations, differentiated largely by rhythmic embellishment. May's arrangement, transposed to E minor from the original F minor, follows the original sequence of variations, including the shift to the parallel major, E major, for the lyrical variations 5 and 6.

Symphonie Fantastique, Op. 14

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique: Episodes in the Life of an Artist" was premiered at the Paris Conservatoire on Dec. 5, 1830. This happened at the end of one of the most tumultuous years in the French capital. In February, Victor Hugo had shattered the status quo with demonstrations when his drama "Hernani" was introduced -- a play where a Spanish noblewoman at the court and her eponymous bandit-lover end up drinking a fatal cup of poison. What followed was the July Revolution, when Louis-Philippe, the bourgeois "Citizen King" was swept onto the throne - an event immortalized in Eugene Delacroix' tableau, "Liberty Leading the People."

Berlioz's work, radically new for its time, has inspired a rich repertoire of orchestra pieces stretching over more than a century. They cover program music or tone poems -- compositions where the composer associates the work with some extra-musical source such as a play, an historical event, a poem, painting, or scene.

In 1830, Berlioz was described in the local press as "a young man, lanky, skinny, with long blond hair whose disorder has something that reeks of genius." A 27-year-old student at the Paris Conservatoire, he had recently won the coveted Prix de Rome. But what was obsessing him was Shakespeare and the Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson, a member of an English touring company that was causing a furor. For Berlioz, her portrayals of Ophelia and Juliet were overwhelming.

On Sept. 11, 1827, he had attended a performance of "Hamlet" and was thunderstruck. "This sudden and unexpected revelation of Shakespeare overwhelmed me. The lightning flash of his genius revealed the whole heaven of art to me, illuminating its remotest depths in a single flash ... It was long before I recovered. A feeling of intense, overpowering sadness overwhelmed me and I fell into a nervous condition."

There were sleepless nights and aimless wandering about the streets of Paris. Four days later, he was back for more Shakespeare, this time "Romeo and Juliet." He wrote: "It was too much. By the third act, hardly able to breathe -- as though an iron hand gripped me by the heart -- I knew that I was lost." Yet, he went on to say that he was fired up, declaring "I shall marry that woman." He would make a supreme effort to bring himself to her attention. "I would show her that I too was a dramatic artist."

Hector and Harriet, his idealized muse, did indeed eventually marry in 1833, but by 1840 the relationship turned sour as his career began to soar as hers plummeted. Besides, what is worth noting is that melody unifying the five movements of “Symphonie Fantastique,” the “idée fixe,” believed to represent the once-beloved Harriet, has been traced back to when Berlioz was all of 12 years old and was smitten by a country beauty, Estelle Dubeouf, six years his senior, who dismissed him as a mere child. His obsession with her lasted a lifetime, unrequited though it was. He even went so far to leave her an annuity in his will.

The commentary, the purple-prose program Berlioz has provided is meant to arouse the passions and imagination of the listener. This is all achieved by his phenomenal command throughout of orchestral color and texture, not to mention by how the character of the “idée fixe” changes in the course of the work’s five movements.

Excerpts from his program follow, beginning with this preamble:

A young musician of morbidly sensitive temperament ... poisons himself with opium in a fit of lovesick despair. The dose of the narcotic, too weak to kill him, plunges him into a deep slumber accompanied by the strangest visions ... the loved one herself has become a melody to him, an idée fixe, that he encounters and hears everywhere.

I. REVERIES, PASSIONS

He recalls first that soul sickness, that haze of passions, the volcanic love, his frenzied suffering, his jealous rages, his returns to tenderness and his religious consolations.

II. A BALL

He encounters the loved one at a dance, in the midst of the tumult of a brilliant party.

III. SCENE IN THE COUNTRY

One summer evening in the country, he hears two shepherds’ piping a song of Swiss cowherds; this pastoral duet, the scenery ... trees gently brushed by the wind ... an unaccustomed calm ... But she appears again ... what if she were deceiving him? One of the shepherds takes up his simple tune again; the other no longer answers ... distant sound of thunder ... loneliness ... silence.

IV. MARCH TO THE SCAFFOLD

He dreams he has killed his beloved, that he is condemned to death and is being led to the scaffold ... a march ... now somber and fierce, now brilliant and solemn.. At the end, the idée fixe returns for a moment, like a last thought of love, interrupted by the fatal blow.

V. DREAM OF A WITCHES’ SABBATH

He sees himself at the sabbath in the midst of a frightful troop of ghosts, sorcerers, monsters of every kind, come together for his funeral. Strange noises, groans, bursts of laughter ... The beloved melody appears again ... it is no more than a dance tune, mean, trivial, and grotesque ... She takes part in the devilish orgy. Funeral knell, burlesque parody of the "Dies irae." Sabbath round dance. The sabbath round dance and the "Dies irae" combined.

We can mention here only very few of the many remarkable orchestral effects to listen for. Aside from the changing character of the *idée fixe*, there are:

- the opening of the third movement, where a shepherd melody on English horn is answered on a seemingly distant second shepherd playing an oboe an octave higher,
- the ending of the same movement makes the novel use of four timpani to suggest distant thunder,
- the climax of March to the Scaffold is stunning in its depiction of sheer gore. In rapid succession, we hear a squelched version of the *idée fixe* on a high-pitched clarinet, the drop of the guillotine blade, the rolling of the head into the basket, and the rabble's roar,
- the suggestion of rattling skeletons in the Witches' Sabbath, where violins and violas play *col legno*, that is, with the wooden part of the bow.

Joshua Berrett © 2024

A member of the first violin section and an ESO board member, Dr. Berrett is a professional musicologist and is internationally recognized for his publications in such diverse areas as the history of the symphony and jazz. Dr. Berrett, along with Lynne Berrett, his wife, created and maintain Agelessmindproject.org, a 501c (3), which now has a Substack presence as well.