Carl Maria von Weber
(1786 – 1826)

Overture to Der Freischutz

Before Weber, the world of opera was dominated by two styles: Italian and French. But with the premiere of Der Freischutz in 1821, the Romantic German opera was born.

Weber’s genius was to distill themes and ideals of German Romanticism, with its elevation of spirit and feeling over dry rationality, into a boldly expressive musical language unlike anything ever heard before. Weber plunged opera into a realm of folk tales, dark forests, and supernatural events.

The result, a contemporary writer reported, “set the German people’s pulse racing” and, at a shot, propelled Weber to international fame. Beethoven himself was so impressed that he said “Weber must now write operas, nothing but operas.”

Little up to this point in Weber’s career as a composer, which included four earlier operas, could have foretold the impact he had so suddenly made. From the time he was 18, he worked continuously as a Kapellmeister (music master) at various noble courts in Germany, with just a short stint at a Prague opera house in between princely appointments.

It was not an easy life, as Weber’s letters reveal. He would recount the unceasing demands of his employment, which included “organizing all the contracts, new regulations for orchestra and chorus, bringing a muddled library into order, as well as being overrun by hordes of people—it’s indescribable…I get up at six and work through midnight.”

His problems were compounded by frail health. Born with a lame foot, he began to exhibit symptoms of tuberculosis in his early 20s. Yet, despite it all, he was one of the most celebrated virtuoso pianists of his day, and almost single-handedly transformed the role of conductor from that of a timekeeper at the keyboard to that of a magisterial leader standing in front of the orchestral forces.

Weber wrote two more operas after Freischutz, but neither achieved its wild success. His last opera, Oberon, was written to fulfill a commission from London’s Covent Garden. By this time, Weber’s health was perilously weak, but he felt compelled to work as long as possible to support his family. “Whether I go to London or not,” he wrote, “in a year I’m a dead man. But if I go, my children will eat when their father’s dead, and if I stay, they’ll starve.”

Two months after the premiere, Weber died in London. Eighteen years later, Richard Wagner arranged for his remains to be reburied in Dresden.

The composition of Der Freischutz grew out of Weber’s fascination with German Romantic writers and their themes of nature mysticism, nationalist soul, medieval
knights, and tales of long ago. Weber also collected folk songs and incorporated them into his music.

The opera tells the story—a variant of the Faust legend—of the “free-shooter” who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for magic bullets that will always hit their target. In traditional versions of the tale, the free-shooter is damned and dies violently. Weber made the story about a naïve hero, Max, who wants to win the hand of his love, Agathe, by gaining the magic bullets he needs to become the best huntsman in the region. Weber saw the story as a conflict between good and evil, light and darkness—portraying the latter with “…the lowest register of the violins, violas, and basses, particularly the lowest register of the clarinet…the mournful sound of the bassoon, the lowest notes of the horn, the hollow roll of drums.”

The Overture contrasts the same elemental forces of darkness and light. (But you’ll have to wait till the end to see who wins.)

Ralph Vaughan Williams
(1872 – 1958)

*Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*

One of the first things to know about Vaughan Williams is that his first name is pronounced “Rafe,” not “Ralph.” Another is that he wrote a lot more than just “Greensleeves.”

Vaughan Williams was, in fact, one of the most prolific and wide-ranging of 20th-century composers. His output includes nine symphonies, five operas, five ballets, more than two dozen choral works, chamber music, concertos, songs, and ten film scores.

This body of work is all the more impressive for the effort with which it was accomplished. Vaughan Williams was already 30 by the time any of his compositions achieved recognition, and 38 when his first symphony was premiered. “It would be hard,” said his fellow-composer George Butterworth, “to name any other first-rate composer who had ‘found himself’ with such apparent difficulty.”

Determined to resist the influence of German and Austrian musical models, Vaughan Williams searched for a path more his own. He found it in British folksong, which he began collecting in 1903. These discoveries, he recounted, “…freed us from foreign influences which weighed on us, which we could not get rid of.”

Another major influence was his work as editor of *The English Hymnal*. Although the task of collecting, selecting, and arranging the best of English church music took time away from composing, it gave him a long immersion in an essential British musical tradition.
(Despite his long involvement in church music and frequent use of religious texts, Vaughan Williams was described by his second wife as “an atheist ... [who] later drifted into a cheerful agnosticism.”)

Vaughan Williams’ varied experiences found expression in an individual and uniquely English musical language. This was well described by writer Peter Ackroyd: “If that Englishness in music can be encapsulated in words at all, those words would probably be: ostensibly familiar and commonplace, yet deep and mystical as well as lyrical, melodic, melancholic, and nostalgic yet timeless.” A contemporary music critic observed that, in Vaughan Williams’ music, “one is never quite sure whether one is listening to something very old or very new.”

In 1908, after completing the *Hymnal*, Vaughan Williams went to France to study with Maurice Ravel. Although, as Ravel later said, that Vaughan Williams was the only pupil who never tried to imitate him, Ravel still had a significant effect on Vaughan Williams, awakening him to the possibilities of sonority and instrumental color.

We can hear all of these influences—British folksong, the English church tradition, the exploration of sonority—in the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*.

Tallis (1505–1585) was one of the greatest of earlier British composers, and a respected source for Vaughan Williams, who was often inspired by music of the English Renaissance.

The theme that forms the foundation of the *Variations* came from Tallis’ hymn setting of Psalm 2:1-2, “Why fumeth in fight?” (Vaughan Williams used the melody as a setting for another text in *The English Hymnal*.)

The “fantasia” was a widely used musical form in Elizabethan times, in which a number of related themes are developed in independent sections. Fantasias were often performed by consorts of viols—a group comprising string instruments of different sizes.

In the *Tallis* fantasia, Vaughan Williams also uses strings alone, which he employs to create a striking variety of sonic and spatial effects. One of the ways he does so is by breaking the strings into three separate groups, each smaller than the other:

1. A general string choir,
2. A smaller group of violins, violas, 2 cellos, and bass, and
3. A string quartet.

The result is a piece that evokes a sense of both timelessness and vast space—one that creates, for many listeners, the feeling of standing in contemplation in the middle of a towering Gothic cathedral.
Anton Bruckner  
(1824 – 1896)  
*Symphony No. 4, “Romantic”*

In late 19th-century Vienna, an imperial capital and one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, Bruckner might have cut a rather odd figure. The son of a provincial Austrian organist and schoolteacher, he retained many of his small-town ways. Where many of his contemporary composers were highly individualistic, scornful of convention, and agnostic, Bruckner was unassuming, naïve, respectful of tradition, and deeply religious.

The conductor Bruno Walter, a close associate of Mahler, once wrote: “Mahler was always searching for God; Bruckner had found God.” He described Bruckner’s physical appearance as a “short, corpulent, comfortable figure. “But,” he adds, “…upon the drab body is set the head of a Roman Caesar, which might be described as majestic, were it not for the touch of meekness and shyness about the eyes and mouth, giving the lie to tide commanding brow and nose.”

“Almost all reports,” said Walter, “agree upon the peculiar fascination exerted by his naïveté, piety, homely simplicity, and modesty, bordering at times on servility…I explain this attractive power of his strange personality to myself as due to the radiance of his lofty, godly soul, the splendor of his musical genius glimmering through his unpretending homeliness.”

For much of his life, Bruckner was better known as an organ virtuoso and teacher at the Vienna Conservatory and other schools than as a composer. He wrote diligently, concentrating on large forms like symphonies and masses, but with little success. His *First Symphony* was turned down by the Vienna Philharmonic; the same orchestra called his *Second Symphony* “nonsense’ and “unplayable,” and his *Third* “unperformable.” His *Fourth Symphony* (the “Romantic”) was somewhat better received, but his *Fifth* had to wait 18 years to be heard, and the *Sixth* was never performed in its entirety in his lifetime.

It took Bruckner until his late thirties to begin writing symphonies, but once he found his voice, he remained remarkably consistent. From his first symphony to his unfinished last, the “Bruckner sound” is unmistakable. Possibly reflecting his deep religious devotion, his music has been described as resembling a cathedral in its massive scale, soaring melodies, overwhelming climaxes, and evocation of the sublime.

But if Bruckner’s music didn’t change, his audience must have, because his *Seventh Symphony*, premiered when he was sixty, was a towering triumph. “How is it possible,” wrote one critic, “that he could remain so long unknown to us?”

Success was late in coming for Bruckner, but it was lasting. His symphonies, scorned at their birth, are now universally considered masterpieces and an essential part of the repertoire.
The title, “Romantic,” of Bruckner’s *Fourth Symphony* is a name added by Bruckner himself. Chronically short of confidence in his own work, he had allowed friends to persuade him that a story and a title appended to the work might help audiences accept his music. Although Bruckner was less than enthusiastic about the idea, his description of the symphony’s opening (“Dawn at a medieval citadel…knights ride forth on proud chargers…the wonder of nature surrounds them.”) certainly appeals to the imagination; and the third movement, with its exuberant horn calls, paints a vivid picture of a hunting party.

The successful Vienna premiere of the “Romantic,” during which Bruckner was called out for a bow after each movement, marked the first turn for the better in his career as a composer. There is a story that Bruckner was so happy after one rehearsal of the symphony that he pressed a coin into the hand of the conductor, the very aristocratic Hans Richter, and urged him to go buy himself a beer.

There is no record of Richter taking him up on the offer.

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{Draft 1 – TMM-Segal – 9-20-13}