~Program Notes~
Berkshire Symphony Orchestra
April 21st, 2017

Reinhold Glière

Harp Concerto, 1st mov. (1874-1956)

Of Belgian descent, but born in Kiev, Ukraine, Glière was a close contemporary of Rachmaninov and became a pupil of Arensky, Taneyev and Ippolitov-Ivanov at the Moscow Conservatoire. He later taught in Moscow and Kiev, researched Azerbaijan, Uzbek and Ukrainian folksong and finally settled in Moscow in 1920. His early works show the colorful Russian cosmopolitan style, imbued with accents of Russian folk music but treated with considerable orchestra sophistication that he learned from his teachers, and he did not modify his idiom much throughout his long life – certainly not with the transition of Tsarist Russia to the Communist USSR. While keeping himself out of the political limelight, Glière managed to prosper under the new regime, for whom his brand of colorful nationalism, romantic aspiration and classical form was the officially-approved idiom.

Glière is best known for such vivid orchestral scores as his massive Third Symphony (Ilya Murometz) and the colourful Soviet ballet The Red Poppy, but he wrote works in a wide variety of genres and sometimes for unusual combinations. He composed his Harp Concerto in E flat major, op 74 in 1938 for the harpist Ksenia Erdeli (1878-1971), whom he consulted so frequently on the effectiveness of his harp writing that he eventually offered to name her as joint composer of the work—an honour she declined. Scored for a comparatively small orchestra, the Harp Concerto could easily be performed by a chamber orchestra, which enhances its quality of charm and intimacy.

There is in fact little in its idiom to tell the listener in which century it was composed, and virtually nothing that couldn’t have been written 50 years before its actual date. Stylistically it is redolent both of Viennese classical style, with a tincture of Russian romantic nationalism—an ‘archaic’ mixture we are most familiar with in works like Tchaikovsky’s Mozartiana Suite. The three movements are conceived on an ample scale. The first is a full-scale, rather dreamy sonata-form movement with a highly melodic second subject that has been compared with Rachmaninov for its sweeping lyricism.

— Malcolm MacDonald
**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)**

*“Hai gia vinta la causa,” from Marriage of Figaro.*

"Hai già vinta la causa!" is perhaps the most actorly aria in the Da Ponte operas of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The Count is frustrated that he cannot enjoy the droit du seigneur—an old custom, long outdated, through which a lord would spend the first post-wedding night with the bride of a subordinate—with Figaro's bride, Susanna. At every turn in *Le Nozze di Figaro* the Count has been stifled, leading to this great aria, in which he vacillates from frustration to pomposity. These emotional fluctuations change with every few measures. The aria has immense power, but its energy is constantly checked with doubt. It is a perfect soliloquy for an actor.

— Keith Kibler

**Jacques Ibert (1890-1962)**

*Flute Concerto, 1st mov.*

Jacques François Antoine Ibert was born in 1890 to a successful Parisian businessman and an accomplished pianist, who encouraged the young boy to learn violin and piano from a young age. After finishing school Ibert began to support himself playing music, gaining a diverse set of musical experiences teaching lessons, freelancing as an accompanist, and playing the piano for the cinema. The aspiring composer gained entry to the Paris Conservatoire in 1910 but his time at the Conservatoire was interrupted when he was called to serve as a naval officer in the First World War. However, the young composer quickly demonstrated that he was quite able to forge his own stylistic path, however: upon returning from the war, he managed to win the coveted Prix de Rome on his first attempt in 1919. Ibert has been described by some as musically conservative on account of his continued dedication to elements of the classic French tradition of Saint-Saëns and Fauré, but he was also profoundly influenced by the abundance of artistic philosophies circulating around Paris during his formative years.

The Flute Concerto has remained one of the most popular works for the instrument, regardless of the composer’s overall canonical status. Ibert began work on the piece in 1932 after Paris Conservatoire professor and accomplished flutist Marcel Moyse asked him to write a piece for the instrument, which he premiered 1934 to widespread acclaim. Indeed, the piece was so popular and technically challenging that the Paris Conservatoire began that year to use the final movement as a test piece for
student auditions. The concerto’s Finale (Allegro scherzando) provides clear evidence that Ibert was not simply a musically conservative, steadfastly French composer. The complex rhythmic fabric of the movement, alternating between sections of four and three beats, is obviously influenced by American jazz, and is likewise evocative of some of Ibert’s film scores based on popular music. The final movement makes a range of technical demands of the soloist, from swift leaps to even swifter scale passages and tongue-twisting melodic material, which are combined in the final cadenza and punctuated by the movement’s energetic orchestral conclusion.

— Lindsay Wright

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

*Piano Concerto No. 2, 1st mov.*

Pianist Anton Rubenstein was performing on a series of concerts in Paris in 1868 when he mentioned a desire to conduct a program with Saint-Saëns as soloist. Since the hall was not available for a few weeks, Saint-Saëns suggested the composition of a new work and hurriedly put together the 2nd Concerto. The premiere did not go very well, partly because Saint-Saëns had not budgeted much time for practice in his rush to complete the score but also due to unpredictable swings of mood in the music. The famous critical quote from the evening came from fellow pianist and composer Sigmond Stojowski who claimed that the concerto “began with Bach and ended with Offenbach.” A witty remark to be sure, but not such an indictment on closer inspection. There is a Bach-like atmosphere as the work opens and there is an abrupt shift of temperament into the scherzo, but it feels more like the other side of the same coin than a crime of disconnection. The fleet and frantic finale only serves to confirm a certain delightful totality borne of the concerto’s quick-change antics. Saint-Saëns was never shy in his opinions and he would become quite the conservative killjoy in his later years. In 1868, however, he was still the good-spirited man of the hour and the 2nd Concerto reflects his active and often witty mind. It remains his most popular.

— Jeff Counts
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Coriolan Overture, Op 62

Beethoven knew and admired the works of Shakespeare in the prose translation of Eschenburg. The composer's Coriolan Overture was not inspired by the Bard's Coriolanus, however, but rather by a much less elevated source, a play by Matthaus von Collin that had enjoyed a brief vogue in Vienna during the years from 1802 to 1805 as a vehicle for the actor Lange. Originally the play was performed with second-hand music, adapted by Abbe Stadler from Mozart's Idomeneo. Beethoven apparently admired the somewhat hackneyed poetic tragedy for the ideals of classical virtue embodied therein (and the author was, in any case, a friend of his, and an influential one at that, since he served as Court Secretary).

The only information we have for the dating of the work is Beethoven's own indication "1807" on the manuscript and the fact that it had been performed by March of that year not once but twice in subscription concerts given at the home of Prince Lobkowitz. It seems also to have been given early in March (a press notice appeared on the 8th) at a private musicale sponsored by another aristocrat with whom Beethoven had not been on the best of terms in recent months, Prince Lichnowsky. The preceding autumn, while staying at Prince Lichnowsky's country home near Troppau, Beethoven was pestered by other guests to play the piano for them. He refused, objecting to their evident expectations that he undertake "menial labor" as if he were a servant; a threat of arrest certainly made as a joke caused him to explode and leave on the spot. He walked to the nearest town and took the post carriage back to Vienna. The outburst was characteristic, but it blew over quickly. By March Beethoven was happy to allow the prince to use his new manuscript overture.

The program of the two subscription concerts sponsored by Lobkowitz included the first four symphonies, a piano concerto, arias from Fidelio, and the new overture. According to an evaluation in the Journal des Luxus und der Modem: "Richness of ideas, bold originality and fullness of power, which are the particular merits of Beethoven's muse, were very much in evidence to everyone at these concerts; yet many found fault with lack of a noble simplicity and the all too fruitful accumulation of ideas which on account of their number were not always adequately worked out and blended, thereby creating the effect more often of rough diamonds. Yet the overture must have made a fairly strong impression, for by April 24 the management of the Imperial Theater (the Burgtheater) mounted a single performance of Collin's drama, using Beethoven's overture, so as to unite the play with the music that it inspired. It is most likely that this happened at the suggestion of Prince Lobkowitz himself, who was a director of the theater."

The combination of music with drama seems to have been no improvement over the music alone; the play has apparently never been performed since. Beethoven's overture, on the other hand, recognized from the first as being "full of fire and power," is one of his most
admired short orchestral works, a probing essay in musical drama. The tension of Beethoven’s favorite dramatic key, C minor, is heightened by orchestral chords punctuating the weakest beat of the measure at the phrase endings in the Allegro theme. Formally the design is striking in that the second thematic group, representing Coriolanus’ mother Volumnia, is the only part of the exposition that is recapitulated. Finally the opening theme returns in the home key, but it is transformed rhythmically into a short series of lamenting fragments, and the whole overture ends with a wonderfully dramatic use of silence—a musical suggestion of tragedy far more potent than that accomplished by the prolix rhetoric of Collin’s verse.

— Steven Ledbetter

Igor Stravinsky (1875-1954)
Firebird Suite (1919 edition)

The notorious inability of Anatol Liadov to finish his scores in time gave Stravinsky his first big break. In 1909, Sergei Diaghilev needed to find a fast-working composer for a new ballet based on the old Russian legend of the Firebird. Having been impressed by Stravinsky’s Fireworks, which he had heard a few months earlier, Diaghilev went to Stravinsky to discuss a possible commission for The Firebird. Though deeply engrossed in his opera The Nightingale, Stravinsky naturally recognized that a ballet commission from Diaghilev with a production in Paris was an opportunity he could not turn down. In fact, he was so enthusiastic that he began sketching the music before the formal commission finally reached him. He composed the large score between November 1909 and March 1910; the final details of the full score were finished by May 18. The premiere of the lavishly colorful score marked a signal triumph for the Ballets Russes and put the name of Stravinsky on the map. Diaghilev quickly signed him up for more ballets, and in short order he turned out Petrushka and The Rite of Spring, with which he brought on a musical revolution.

The scenario of The Firebird involves the interaction of human characters with two supernatural figures, the magic Firebird (a sort of good fairy), and the evil sorcerer Kashchei, a green-taloned ogre who cannot be killed except by destroying his soul (which is preserved in a casket in the form of an egg), and who has an enchanted garden in which he keeps thirteen captured princesses. Many valiant knights have tried to rescue the princesses, but all have been captured and turned to stone.

The suite opens with the ballet’s introduction, with its mood of magical awe. The double basses present a melodic figure (two semitones and a major third) that lies behind all the music of the Firebird. Following a culminating shower of brilliant
harmonics on the violins (played with a new technique invented by Stravinsky for this passage), a muted horn call signals the rise of the curtain on a nocturnal scene in the “Enchanted Garden of Kashchei,” which continues the mysterious music of the opening (a chromatic bassoon phrase foreshadows the sorcerer). Suddenly the Firebird appears (shimmering strings and woodwinds), pursued by a young prince, Ivan Tsarevich. The Firebird performs a lively dance, all shot through with brilliant high interjections from the upper woodwinds. But Ivan Tsarevich captures the magic bird (horn chords sforzando) as it flutters around a tree bearing golden apples. The Firebird appeals to be freed in an extended solo dance, but Ivan takes one of its feathers—a magic feather—as a token before allowing it to depart.

Thirteen enchanted princesses, the captives of Kashchei, appear—tentatively at first—shake the apple tree, then use the fallen apples for a game of catch. Ivan Tsarevich interrupts their game, for he has fallen in love with one of them. They dance a khorovod (a stately slow round dance) to one of the favorite passages of the score, a melody first introduced by the solo oboe (this is an actual folk song).

In pursuit of the princesses, Ivan Tsarevich enters the palace, where he is captured by the monsters that serve as Kashchei’s guards. The suite then jumps to the point at which Kashchei begins to turn Ivan into stone, making a series of magic gestures: one… two… But before he can make the third and final gesture, Ivan Tsarevich remembers the Firebird’s feather; he waves it, summoning the Firebird to his aid. Kashchei’s followers are enchanted by the magic bird, who sets them dancing to an “infernal dance” of wild syncopation and striking energy.

The Firebird also indicates to the Prince where he can find—and destroy—the soul of Kashchei, whereupon all the knights that had been turned to stone before come back to life (in a sweetly descending phrase of folklike character) and all take part in a dance of general happiness (a more energetic version of the same phrase). The Firebird has disappeared, but its music, now rendered more “human” in triadic harmony, sounds in the orchestra as the curtain falls.

There are things in the Firebird that already foreshadow the revolutionary composer to come: the inventive ear for new and striking sounds, the love of rhythmic irregularities (though there is much less of it here than in The Rite of Spring), and the predilection for using ostinatos to build up passages of great excitement. In listening to this familiar score, we may be able to sense afresh the excitement of being on the verge of a revolution.

—Steven Ledbetter