Charles T. Griffes (1884-1920)
Poem for Flute and Orchestra

Charles Griffes fits uneasily within the usual story of the development of American music in the early 20th century. Born in Elmira, NY, Griffes studied piano and composition in Germany—a typical path for aspiring American musicians of his generation. But his interest in Asian and Celtic cultures—seen in pieces like 5 Poems of Ancient China and Japan (1917) and 3 Poems of Fiona Macleod (1918)—foreshadowed the exoticist impulses of ultra-modernists like Henry Cowell. And his delicate, brilliant orchestration connected him to French trends, which would captivate American composers in the 1920s.

Griffes’ Poem is a one-movement flute concerto that suggests Claude Debussy’s Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun as a reference point. The initial ascending rumble in the strings sets the scene for the flute and generates most of the piece’s melodic material. The flute enters with a version of this opening motive and then forges a rhythmically and harmonically indistinct course. The instrument’s rhythmic energy ebbs and flows, and the strings interrupt its motion periodically. About halfway through the piece, a passage for echoing French horns signals a transition from this hazy, rhapsodic section to one with clearer rhythmic profiles. String tremolos and a brief, feverish flute solo usher in a lively folk dance, at one point radiantly accompanied by tambourines. The dance episode culminates in a brilliant descending passage as the opening material returns, this time with a solo viola playing a newly prominent role.

Griffes was 35 when the New York Symphony Society first presented his Poem with flutist Georges Barrère. The New York Tribune called it a “composition of much grace and variety of expression, rich in melodic ideas and written with an unusual feeling both for the solo instrument and for the orchestra. If Americans can but continue to produce such works, all talk of the unrequited native composer will be speedily set at rest.” Griffes died just a few months later, leaving to his successors the task of realizing the Tribune’s prediction for American music.

—Matthew Mugmon

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)
Violin Concerto No. 1 in A Minor, op. 99

In February 1948, for the second time in his life, Shostakovich found himself the object of a bitter, politically motivated public attack. (The first came on January 28, 1936, with the Pravda article “Muddle instead of Music,” to which Shostakovich ultimately responded with his powerful Fifth Symphony.) He and a number of Soviet composers, including Prokofiev, were now accused of “anti-democratic tendencies in music,” “formalistic perversion,” and a fondness for “confused, neurotic combinations which transform music into cacophony.” Shostakovich was at work on his first violin concerto when he read this latest criticism. He finished the score as if nothing had happened—he could point to the exact spot where his work was interrupted by this
news, but, as a friend recalled, "The violin played semiquavers [sixteenth notes] before and after it. There was no change evident in the music." But Shostakovich didn’t know how to proceed, and, at first, he even considered suicide. Although each of the composers attacked confessed complicity with the “cult of atonality, dissonance, and discord,” it was difficult to figure out how to write music of atonement that was, at the same time, honest work. For a while, Shostakovich turned to writing mass-audience works such as patriotic choral pieces and film scores in a popular style—the puzzling products of a private, deeply introspective artist who suddenly set his sights on the marketplace and the Cineplex. (The film work at least put money in his pocket. After the February announcement, he was dismissed from his teaching position at the Moscow Conservatory.) At the same time, he chose to withhold his song cycle From Jewish Folk Poetry, the Fourth String Quartet, and the First Violin Concerto, which he labeled op. 77—the first because the late Stalin years were fiercely anti-Semitic, and the latter because its dark and dissonant idiom was precisely what the authorities didn’t want to hear. Stalin died on March 5, 1953. (Prokofiev died an hour before him; the April issue of the official Soviet music journal carried Stalin’s obituary on page 1 and Prokofiev’s on page 117.) With Stalin’s death, the road ahead appeared more welcoming to an artist of Shostakovich’s sensibilities. In due time, he released the works he had relegated to the shelf and wrote a new, magnificent, and fearless symphony—his tenth. Shostakovich also made some apparently minor changes in the Violin Concerto and gave it a new, up-to-date opus number: 99. His friend David Oistrakh played it with the Leningrad Philharmonic in October 1955, accepted the composer’s dedication, took the work on tour (he gave the American premiere in December in New York City), and made the first recording. Shostakovich eventually chose to revert to the concerto’s original opus number both as a way of pointing out that it was an earlier work and as a silent reminder of the reasons he had chosen to hide it for seven years. Ultimately, op. 99 was reassigned to music for the film The First Echelon, which was written in 1955–56. The Violin Concerto, however, is still sometimes known by the later number—its confused identity a lasting mark of its composer’s double life.

The concerto that Shostakovich dared not release is, as its composer obviously knew at the time, a troubled and troublesome work.... Eventually, the solo violin takes wing, launching an enormous cadenza—a brilliant high-wire act Shostakovich might well have set apart as a movement of its own—that plays freely with material from the previous movements and sails off at last directly into the finale. Above this boisterous, headlong music, Shostakovich writes the word “burlesque,” setting his Allegro con brio apart from other finales in the way that Mahler often cast an unsettling, satirical light over familiar dance music. Oistrakh, in his discussion, mentions “merriment” and the sense of a “joyful folk holiday,” but that, as in much of Shostakovich’s most outgoing music, barely masks a deeper sorrow and anger.

— Phillip Huscher

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Piano Concerto in A minor, op. 54

Robert Schumann was born in Zwickau, Saxony, on June 8, 1810, and died in an asylum at Endenich, near Bonn, on July 29, 1856. Between May 4 and 20 of 1841, he composed a “Concert Fantasy” in A minor for piano and orchestra, and on August 8 that year, Clara Schumann played it through twice at a closed rehearsal of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra with Felix Mendelssohn conducting. Four years later, beginning in late May 1845, he reworked the Fantasy into the first movement of his Piano Concerto, completing the second movement on July 16 and
the finale on July 31 that same year. Clara Schumann was soloist for the first performance of the concerto on December 4, 1845, in Dresden, with Ferdinand Hiller, to whom the work is dedicated, conducting.

In addition to the solo piano, the score of Schumann’s Piano Concerto calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Clara Schumann, née Wieck, was a celebrated keyboard artist from her youth, and she was renowned through her long life (1819-96) for her musical intelligence, taste, sensibility, warm communicativeness, and truly uncommon ear for pianistic euphony. She was a gifted and skilled composer, and Brahms, who was profoundly attached to her when he was in his early twenties and she in her middle thirties—and indeed all his life, though eventually at a less dangerous temperature—never ceased to value her musical judgment. Robert and Clara’s marriage, though in most ways extraordinarily happy, was difficult, what with his psychic fragility and her demanding and conflicting roles as an artist, an artist’s wife, and a mother who bore eight children in fourteen years. They met when Clara was nine and Robert—then an unwilling and easily distracted, moody, piano-playing law student at the University of Leipzig—came to her father, the celebrated piano pedagogue Friedrich Wieck, for lessons. It was in 1840, after various familial, legal, psychological, and financial obstacles, that they married. Most of Schumann’s greatest piano works come from the difficult time preceding their marriage. 1840 became his great year of song.

Clara Schumann was ambitious for her thirty-year-old husband and urged him to conquer the world of orchestral music as well. He had actually ventured into that territory a few times, making starts on four piano concertos and writing a rather jejune symphony in G minor, but he had not yet met with success. He now went ahead and produced a superb Concert Fantasy with Orchestra for Clara, as well as writing two symphonies: the Spring, and the first version of the D minor (now known almost exclusively in its revised form of 1851 and listed as No. 4). He could interest neither publishers nor orchestras in the one-movement Concert Fantasy, and so he expanded it into a full-length three-movement concerto. In doing so he revised the original Fantasy, making choices, as almost always he was apt to do whenever he had second thoughts, in the direction of safety and conventionality. (One can only guess whether the revisions reflect Schumann’s own musical convictions or responses to the urgings of the more conservative Clara.) The full-dress, three-movement concerto was introduced by Clara in Dresden in December 1845.*

In 1839, Robert had written to Clara: “Concerning concertos, I’ve already said to you they are hybrids of symphony, concerto, and big sonata. I see that I can’t write a concerto for virtuosi and have to think of something else.” He did. Now, in June 1845, while the metamorphosis of the Concert Fantasy was in progress, Clara Schumann noted in her diary how delighted she was at last to be getting “a big bravura piece” out of Robert (she meant one with orchestra), and to us, even if it is not dazzling by Liszt-Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninoff standards, the Schumann concerto is a satisfying occasion for pianistic display, while of course being also very much more than that. (On the other hand, compared to the concertos by Thalberg, Pixis, and Herz that Clara had played as a young prodigy, Schumann’s concerto, considered strictly as bravura stuff, is tame by comparison.)

Schumann’s “something else” was noticed. Most of the chroniclers of the first public performances, along with noticing how effective an advocate Clara was for the concerto, were
also attuned to the idea that something new—and very pleasing—was happening in this work. Many of them noted as well that the concerto needs an exceptionally attentive and sensitive conductor. F.W.M., who reviewed the first performance in Leipzig on New Year’s Day 1846 for the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, wrote that the many interchanges between solo and orchestra made the first movement harder to grasp at first hearing than the other two. One thing that strikes us about this first movement—but perhaps only in a very good performance—is how mercurial it is, how frequent, rapid, and sometimes radical its mood-swings are. Or, to put it another way, how Schumannesque it is.

The opening is as dramatic as can be. The orchestra fires the starting gun, a single eighth-note E, and the piano moves out of the blocks with a powerful cascade of fully voiced chords. Not only is the cascade itself dramatic, so is the contrast between it and the wistful oboe tune it introduces, and which the piano immediately repeats. Schumann, like many composers before him and quite a few since (as, for example, Alban Berg in his Violin Concerto), was fond of encoding names in musical notation. Bearing in mind that what we call B-natural, the Germans call H, you can see that the first four notes of oboe theme could be taken to spell "Chiara," or "CHiArA," using those letters that have musical counterparts (C/B-natural/A/A) in this Italian version of Clara’s name, a version that occurs in Schumann’s fanciful prose writings and, in its affectionate diminutive of “Chiarina,” in his great solo piano work Carnaval of 1834-35. Whether or not Schumann intended it as “Chiara," this oboe theme dominates the entire movement, and reappears also to effect the transition into the finale.

Clara Schumann noted in her diary the delicacy of the way the piano and orchestra are interwoven, and among the pianist’s tasks is sometimes to be an accompanist—the lyric clarinet solo in the first movement is the most prominent example. And to be a good accompanist means to be a superlative musician: intuitive, alert, ever listening. The pianist gets a grand, wonderfully sonorous cadenza at the end of the first movement, but above all the Schumann concerto is a work of conversation both intimate and playful—whether in the almost whimsically varied first movement, the confidences exchanged in the brief middle movement, or in the splendidly energized finale.

— Michael Steinberg

Georges Bizet (1838- 1875)
Carmen Suite No. 2 “Danse Bohême”

Bizet’s opera of passion, jealousy and murder – was a failure at its first performance in Paris in March 1875. The audience seemed outraged at the idea of a loose woman and murder onstage at the Opéra Comique. Bizet died three months later at age 37, never knowing that he had written what would become one of the most popular operas ever composed. After Bizet’s death, his publisher Choudens felt that the music of the opera was too good to lose, so he commissioned the French composer Ernest Guiraud to arrange excerpts from Carmen into two orchestral suites of six movements each. From today’s vantage point, it is difficult to imagine this music being seen as anything but successful. The Suite No. 2 from Carmen contains some of the most famous music from the opera, and it also offers some wonderful writing for solo woodwinds. The final movement is Act 2’s "Danse bohème," an energetic gypsy dance that
begins softly and builds a terraced crescendo verse by verse, ending in a crash of cymbals and tangle of triangles.

—Abigail Soloway

**Dmitri Shostakovich**  
*Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, op. 47*

Upon its premiere in 1934, Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was the subject of both critical acclaim and widespread public popularity. After its debut in Leningrad, the opera was produced in Paris, London, and Moscow, and Shostakovich, then 27, had become one of the most public figures of the Soviet cultural scene. This changed, however, when Stalin attended a production of the opera in Moscow in January 1936. After leaving the opera at the end of the third act, Stalin approved the publication of - and, according to rumors at the time, even wrote - a denunciation of the opera in *Pravda*, the official state-sponsored publication of the Soviet Communist Party. Titled “Muddle Instead of Music,” the review denounced Shostakovich’s opera as “vulgar,” “formalist,” and “bourgeois;” in the course of a few days, all productions of the opera in the Soviet Union had closed as a result. The incident is recognized as one of the major examples of Soviet censorship, and had a dramatic effect on the trajectory of Shostakovich’s artistic life. This, after all, was the time of the Great Purge, in which Soviet officials sent both artistic and political enemies alike to labor camps or killed them outright; Shostakovich, fearful for his life, began sleeping outside his apartment so that his family would not have to witness if he was captured by the secret police.

Following the publication of this article, Shostakovich withdrew plans for the premiere of his Fourth Symphony, which he feared would only add to the onslaught of official criticism. Instead, Shostakovich began devising his response: the Fifth Symphony. Prior to its premiere in Leningrad in 1937 by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, Shostakovich published an article in a Moscow newspaper describing the piece as “an artist’s response to just criticism,” suggesting that the work would conform to the critiques of his earlier opera. Indeed, the work was both a popular and critical success, with even official critics lauding the work as a correction of Shostakovich’s earlier errors. And yet, while its critical success cast it as emblematic of Soviet art, interpretation of the piece is divided, for where some see the piece as indicative of Soviet Realism, others read in the symphony the suffering of the masses. In this reading, Shostakovich’s response to “just criticism” was to convey suffering within the very terms of Soviet aesthetics.

The symphony begins with a first movement in standard sonata form. Written in D Minor, a key historically associated with the dramatic and turbulent *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) style of German classicism, the work begins with a string figure in canon, reminiscent of, but more biting than, the opening on Beethoven’s Ninth. At the end of the opening canon, however, the strings reach a moment of pause, playing three short consecutive notes, before moving onto the next section, a lyric first theme played in the violins which develops into an austere introduction. These three notes, we will see, return throughout the piece, acting as a fate theme, as well as throughout the remainder of Shostakovich’s ouvre, where many have taken them to symbolize Shostakovich’s fear of a knock on the door in the dead of night from the police. Shortly after this introduction, the brass enter with an ominous melody that gives way to a military-style march. After reintroducing the opening fugue under brass fanfares, these two themes - the military and
the lyric - are juxtaposed, as the strings and winds play a searing melody with interjections from the brass and percussion. Here, the music explodes into a cacophony of sound before the motif of the three short notes re-appears, now pronounced ominously by the low trumpets. The movement ends with a lyrical canon that moves first between the flute and horn and then two the violin and piccolo, before trumpets bring back the subtle march theme under a rising line in the celeste that slowly fades away.

The second movement is a minuet with a twist, a sinister dance with military undertones. The third movement, in contrast, is a slow, solemn song, which reportedly brought the audience to tears at the premiere - indeed, it does seem to capture the pain, suffering, and isolation of those facing political oppression and act as a eulogy for those lost to the purge. The final movement begins with a powerful march before a gradual accelerando builds to a flourish of sound led by the brass. After a return of the third movement’s austere lyricism, the symphony ends with a slow funeral march that builds into a grand brass chorale, which ends with one final repetition of that original ominous, fatal theme of three consecutive notes. Is the ending triumphant or ironic? Though Stalin may have thought it symbolized the victory of good over evil, Shostakovich, in *Testimony*, a collection of his memoirs published by Russian musicologist Solomon Volkov, describes this ending as a “forced rejoicing.”

Indeed, it is this ambiguity, the possibility of a reading of the symphony as an ironic critique of Soviet censorship despite being Shostakovich’s response to such “just criticism,” that has led to scholarly and interpretive debate for years. To Shostakovich, however, its meaning as a work of criticism, remembrance, and opposition to oppression seems clear - as he wrote in *Testimony*, “all my symphonies are tombstones.”

—Leonard Bopp