



Composers & Musical Pieces

Extended/Teachers' Edition

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Russian composer & conductor

(1844 - 1908)

Rimsky-Korsakov was born into an aristocratic family and had a conventional musical education; however, he also had ambition to be a sailor. He entered the Corps of Naval Cadets in 1856 in St. Petersburg, where he had piano lessons and attended opera and concerts. In 1871, while still a naval lieutenant and still unlearned in harmony and counterpoint, he was appointed professor of practical composition and instrumentation at St. Petersburg Conservatory. He taught himself harmony and counterpoint in secret. He became the Inspector of Naval Bands from 1873–84. When the Russian composer Alexander Borodin died in 1887, the completion and orchestration of *Prince Igor* was undertaken by Rimsky-Korsakov and his pupil Glazunov. Rimsky interrupted this to write two of his most colorful works, the *Capriccio Espagnol* and *Scheherazade*. He was influenced by the first Russian performance in 1888–9 of Richard Wagner's *Ring* and then devoted himself to opera.

For a time, neurasthenic illness (fatigue, depression, irritability and headaches) robbed him of the will to work, but he resumed creative work in the 1890s. In 1905, having shown sympathy with revolutionary students, he was temporarily removed from his professorship at St. Petersburg Conservatory and a two-month ban was imposed on performance of his works. This clash with authority is reflected in his last and satirical opera, *The Golden Cockerel*, which was banned by the government and not produced until after his death.

Scheherazade (The Sea and Sinbad's Ship)

The One Thousand and One Nights (or, more colloquially, *The Arabian Nights*) has a history as storied as the tales themselves. Indian, Persian and Arabic sources have been suggested for individual tales, and the first references to collections of "One Thousand Nights" are found in documents from the 10th century. The earliest surviving manuscript comes from the 14th century in Syria, which Antoine Galland freely adapted to create a French version, introducing the *Nights* to Europe for the first time in the early 18th century. It was likely a translation of Galland's version that inspired Rimsky-Korsakov.

***Scheherazade* is an example of Rimsky-Korsakov's frequent use of fairy-tale and folk subjects.** Throughout, the music of *Scheherazade* showcases his mastery as an orchestrator; in terms of the pure, sensory pleasure of sound, he is unsurpassed. The music of the waves alternates

with delicate passages for solo instruments, and each time the “waves” return, the orchestration becomes richer and grander, climaxing in a shimmering fortissimo.

Sir Henry Wood

English conductor

(1869-1944)

Wood was best known for his association with London's annual series of promenade concerts, known as the Proms. He conducted them for nearly half a century, introducing hundreds of new works to British audiences.

Wood declined the chief conductorships of the New York Philharmonic and Boston Symphony Orchestras, believing it his duty to serve music in the United Kingdom. In addition to the Proms, he conducted concerts and festivals throughout the country and also trained the student orchestra at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He had an enormous influence on the musical life of Britain over his long career and greatly improved access to classical music. Wood raised the standard of orchestral playing and nurtured the taste of the public.

Fantasia on British Sea Songs (Rule, Britannia!; sea shanties)

Fantasia on British Sea Songs is a medley of British sea songs arranged by Sir Henry Wood in 1905 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar. Wood's work follows the course of the battle from the point of view of a British sailor starting with the call to arms, progressing through the death of a comrade, thoughts of home, and ending with a victorious return and the assertion that Britain will continue to 'rule the waves'. For many years it has been a regular selection at the BBC's annual *Last Night of the Proms* concert.

Ludwig van Beethoven

German composer

(1770-1827)

Beethoven was the predominant musical figure in the transitional period between the Classical and Romantic eras. Rooted in the Classical traditions of the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn and Mozart, his art reaches out to encompass the new spirit of humanism and nationalism expressed in the literary works of Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller. When one thinks of Beethoven, the word passion is paramount in everything he did, personally as well as how he translated feeling in his music.

Beethoven's father wanted him to be a child prodigy like Mozart and his life began as an intense quest for perfection in his music. This intolerance for anything less, led to Beethoven's violent temper, his lack of social graces, his disregard for hygiene and cleanliness, and his intensity of personality and obsession regarding his music. His growing deafness at a relatively early age only led more to Beethoven's isolation and obsession in his craft.

The stories of Beethoven's work and life are numerous. His life is one for respect, admiration, and pity. His talent and work ethic are almost beyond comparison. Beethoven began losing his hearing at 26 years of age; however, he went on composing and performing for 30 more years. His tenacity, productivity, artistry and yes, passion are beyond compare.

Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage

Originally a cantata for chorus and orchestra based on a pair of poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Beethoven and Goethe met in 1812; Beethoven admired him and the work is dedicated to Goethe. In the days before steamships, a totally calm sea was cause for alarm; it is only when the wind at last rises that the ship can continue on its journey. The first section depicts a ship becalmed, the second its success in resuming its voyage.

Felix Mendelssohn

German composer

(1809-1847)

German composer Felix Mendelssohn made his public debut in Berlin at just 9 years old. In 1819, at age 10, he joined the Singakademie, a music society founded in Berlin in 1791, and began composing nonstop. At Singakademie, he also became a conductor, but continued to compose prolifically.

Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory of Music in 1843. Although he was only 38 when he died, Mendelssohn managed to distinguish himself as one of the first significant Romantic composers of the 1800s. A quote by Mendelssohn summed up his attitude towards his craft: "Ever since I began to compose, I have remained true to my starting principle: Not to write a page because no matter what the public, or what a pretty girl wanted it to be thus or thus; but to write solely as I myself thought best, and it gave me pleasure."

The Hebrides (overture)

This piece was inspired by one of Mendelssohn's trips to the British Isles, specifically an 1829 excursion to the Scottish island of Staffa, with its basalt sea cave known as Fingal's Cave. It was reported that the composer immediately jotted down the opening theme for his composition after seeing the island. He at first called the work *To the Lonely Island*, but then settled on the present title. However, in 1834, the year after the first publication, Breitkopf & Härtel, the world's oldest music publishing house, issued an edition with the name *Fingalshöhle (Fingal's Cave)* and this title stuck, causing some confusion.

As an indication of the esteem in which it is held by musicians, the composer Johannes Brahms once said, "I would gladly give all I have written, to have composed something like *The Hebrides*."

Claude Debussy

French composer

(1862-1918)

Debussy was among the most influential composers of the late 19th and early 20th century, despite not growing up in a musical family (unlike the Mozarts, Beethovens, and Mendolssohns, who are all examples of legendary and multigenerational, classical music dynasties). He showed enough talent to be admitted at the age of ten to France's leading music college, the Conservatoire de Paris. He originally studied the piano, but found his vocation in innovative composition, despite the disapproval of the Conservatoire's conservative professors. He took many years to develop his mature style, and was nearly 40 when he achieved international fame in 1902 with the only opera he completed, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. He is sometimes seen as the first Impressionist composer, although he vigorously rejected the term.

His music was to a considerable extent a reaction against Richard Wagner, another composer of the era, and the German musical tradition. He regarded the classical symphony as obsolete and sought an alternative in his "symphonic sketches."

With early influences including Russian and Far Eastern music, Debussy developed his own style of harmony and orchestral coloring, derided – and unsuccessfully resisted – by much of the musical establishment of the day. His works have strongly influenced a wide range of composers including Béla Bartók, Olivier Messiaen, George Benjamin, and the jazz pianist and composer Bill Evans.

In a letter to Jacques Durand on September 3, 1907, Debussy wrote, "I am more and more convinced that music, by its very nature, is something that cannot be cast into a traditional and fixed form. It is made up of colors and rhythms."

La mer

La mer was the second of Debussy's three orchestral works in three sections, the other being *Nocturnes* (1892–1899) and *Images pour orchestre* (1905–1912). Debussy retained fond childhood memories of the beauties of the sea, but when composing *La mer* he rarely visited it, spending most of his time far away from large bodies of water. He drew inspiration from art, "preferring the seascapes available in painting and literature" to the physical sea. Debussy called *La mer* "three symphonic sketches", deliberately avoiding the term symphony. Caroline Potter, in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, comments that Debussy's depiction of the sea "avoids monotony by using a multitude of water figurations" which portray the swaying movement of waves and the resulting falling droplets of the spray.

Maurice Ravel

French composer, pianist, & conductor

(1875-1937)

Ravel is often associated with Impressionism along with his elder contemporary Claude Debussy, although both composers rejected the term. In the 1920s and 1930s Ravel was internationally regarded as France's greatest living composer.

In the first years of the 20th century, Ravel made five efforts to win the Prix de Rome, a French scholarship for arts students. His elimination in the first round of the 1905 competition caused a furor, when the chosen finalists all turned out to be students of one professor, who was on the jury. But by that time, Ravel did not really need such acknowledgment of conventional success. At the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel was not well regarded by the conservative establishment, whose biased treatment of him caused a scandal. After leaving the conservatory, Ravel found his own way as a composer, developing a style of great clarity and incorporating elements of modernism, baroque, neoclassicism and, in his later works, jazz. He liked to experiment with musical form.

Renowned for his abilities in orchestration, Ravel made some orchestral arrangements of other composers' piano music, of which his 1922 version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is the best known. Many of his works exist in two versions: first, a piano score and then later, an orchestration.

Ravel was among the first composers to recognize the potential of recording to bring their music to a wider public. From the 1920s, despite limited technique as a pianist or conductor, he took part in recordings of several of his works; others were made under his supervision.

Miroirs- Une barque sur l'océan

After four failed attempts to win a coveted Prix de Rome from the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel was comforted by an invitation in 1905. His friends, Alfred Edwards, journalist, and his Russian wife and pianist, Misia, invited him to join them on their yacht, Aimée, for a seven-week canal cruise.

It is quite likely that he was influenced in his writing by his observations and feelings generated by the cruise. Ravel wrote; "What music there is in all of this! I mean to make good use of it..." His vision of water was also fed by a little automatic toy, which sat on his piano. Within a glass bell was a little boat on cardboard waves, which would toss the boat about when turning a hand crank.

Une barque sur l'océan was dedicated to Ravel's friend, the painter Paul Sordes. Water is continually and immediately evidenced by constantly flowing *arpeggios*, later including *tremolos* and *glissandi*, blended by sustained pedals. Adding to the swaying effect is Ravel's direction for a flexible rhythm for the theme and the accompaniment. The boat survives the storm in a slower paced section, set within a lower register of the piano. A soft recollection of the opening brings *Une barque sur l'océan* to a peaceful closing. One year after the piano version, Ravel orchestrated his piece. The only time the orchestral version was performed in the composer's lifetime, the critic Gaston Carruad of *La Liberté* noted; "It was like a succession of colors imposed on a drawing barely sketched... the view changes every moment. It is a confusing kaleidoscope and we cannot even tell what kind of weather prevails on the ocean." This vagueness is exactly what Ravel intended.

Edvard Grieg Norwegian composer & pianist (1843-1907)

Grieg is widely considered one of the main Romantic era composers, and his music is part of the standard classical repertoire worldwide. His use and development of Norwegian folk music in his own compositions brought the music of Norway to international consciousness, as well as helping to develop a national identity.

Peer Gynt (Stormy Evening on the Sea and Shipwreck)

The work Grieg did for playwright Henrik Ibsen met great reception from the time of its release. Originally composing 90 minutes of orchestral music for the play, he later went back and extracted certain sections for the suites. *Peer Gynt's* travels around the world and distant lands are represented by the instruments Grieg chooses to use.

The complete score of the incidental music includes several songs and choral pieces. The complete score was believed to be lost until the 1980s and has been performed in its entirety only since then.

Benjamin Britten
English composer, conductor, & pianist
(1913-1976)

Britten was a central figure of 20th century British music, with a range of works including opera, other vocal music, orchestral and chamber pieces. His best-known works include the opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), the *War Requiem* (1962) and the orchestral showpiece *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945).

Britten moved to the United States in 1939 out of discontent with the beginnings of World War II in Europe, and came up with the idea for *Peter Grimes* while living in California after reading a poem of the same name about a fisherman living on the coast of England from George Crabbe's *The Borough*. The poem reminded Britten of his childhood home in Suffolk on England's east coast, where Crabbe was also from.

"For most of my life I have lived closely in touch with the sea. My parent's [sic] house in Lowestoft directly faced the sea, and my life as a child was coloured by the fierce storms that sometimes drove ships on to our coast and ate away whole stretches of the neighbouring cliffs. In writing *Peter Grimes*, I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea – difficult though it is to treat such a universal subject in theatrical form." -*Benjamin Britten*

Four Sea Interludes (Storm)

These orchestral pieces from Benjamin Britten's first successful opera, *Peter Grimes*, are scene changes by a master of the scene change. They not only take the listener from one physical location to another (at times seeming to go out to sea and back), but also explore the turmoil in the characters' minds as coastal villagers hound the loner fisherman Grimes to self-destruction after the mysterious, but accidental, deaths of two of his apprentices. Because each interlude in the opera leads into the following scene without pause, Britten rewrote their endings to make them self-contained concert pieces.

Storm, from Act I, begins with Grimes outdoors as a storm approaches and ends in a pub where townspeople wait out the same storm. The consoling theme heard when the storm music subsides is the melody to which Grimes has just sung "What harbor shelters peace, away from tidal waves, away from storms?" It will also be the last thing Grimes sings before he goes down with his sinking boat.

Ralph Vaughan Williams
English composer
(1872-1958)

Vaughan Williams' works include operas, ballets, chamber music, secular and religious vocal pieces and orchestral compositions including nine symphonies, written over sixty years. Strongly influenced by Tudor music and English folk-song, his output marked a decisive break in British music from its German-dominated style of the 19th century.

Vaughan Williams was born to a well-to-do family with strong moral views and a progressive social life. Throughout his life he sought to be of service to his fellow citizens, and believed in making music as available as possible to everybody. He wrote many works for amateur and

student performance. He was musically a late developer, not finding his true voice until his late thirties- his studies in 1907–1908 with the French composer Maurice Ravel helped him develop his own compositional style.

Sinfonia Antartica

Sinfonia antartica ("Antarctic Symphony") is the Italian title given by Ralph Vaughan Williams to his seventh symphony, first performed in 1953. It drew from music the composer had written for the 1948 British adventure film *Scott of the Antarctic*.

Vaughan Williams undertook a substantial film score to accompany *Scott of the Antarctic*. He became deeply interested in and moved by the story of the disastrous polar expedition of Robert Falcon Scott and his companions. The story inspired his mind to see, hear and feel ice and wind, penguins and whales. Before even seeing the film script he had composed most of the score. While writing the film music, Vaughan Williams had begun to feel that it might later form the basis of a symphony, which eventually became *Sinfonia antartica*.

Sir Edward William Elgar

English composer

(1857-1934)

Many of Elgar's works have entered the British and international classical concert repertoire. Among his best-known compositions are orchestral works including the *Enigma Variations* and the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches*.

Although Elgar is often regarded as a typical English composer, most of his musical influences were not from England but from continental Europe. He felt himself to be an outsider, not only musically, but socially. In musical circles dominated by academics, he was a self-taught composer; in Protestant Britain, his Roman Catholicism was regarded with suspicion in some quarters; and in the class-conscious society of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, he was acutely sensitive about his humble origins even after he achieved recognition. He nevertheless married the daughter of a senior British Army officer. She inspired him both musically and socially, but he struggled to achieve success until his forties.

Elgar has been described as the first composer to take the gramophone seriously. Between 1914 and 1925, he conducted a series of acoustic recordings of his works. The introduction of the moving-coil microphone in 1923 made far more accurate sound reproduction possible, and Elgar made new recordings of most of his major orchestral works.

Sea Pictures (In Haven)

Sea Pictures is a song cycle by Sir Edward Elgar consisting of five songs written by various poets. It was set for contralto and orchestra. *In Haven (Capri)* is the second song in the cycle, and is based on a poem of the same name by Elgar's wife, Caroline Alice Elgar, which begins:

"Closely let me hold thy hand,
Storms are sweeping sea and land;
Love alone will stand."
-*In Haven (Capri)*, Caroline Alice Elgar