

ZOLTÁN KODÁLY

(1882–1967)

***Dances of Galánta* (1933)**
(15mins)

Zoltán Kodály, like his compatriot Béla Bartók, devoted much of his life to celebrating the folk tradition of his native Hungary. Many of his works take inspiration from the material gathered on his famous folksong collecting tours. Few of these, however, held as personal a significance for the composer as his 1933 commission for the 80th anniversary of the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra: the *Dances of Galánta*.

That's because Galánta, a town in Northern Hungary, now part of Slovakia, was where Kodály spent seven years of his childhood, his family having moved there when he was a toddler. It's also where he began his musical education, listening to the town's celebrated gypsy band, as well as the many folksongs sung by his schoolmates and servants. So a lot of the detail in the *Dances of Galánta* came from childhood memory. But the tunes themselves came from some almost forgotten volumes of Hungarian dances compiled around 1800, one of which contained music 'after the Gypsies from Galánta'.

In the preface to his printed score, Kodály wrote, "May this modest composition serve to continue the old tradition." And, true to his intention, the resulting symphonic poem does faithfully reproduce flamboyant gypsy ornamentation and the vigour of the *Verbunkos* – a Hungarian military recruitment dance characterised by the alternation of fast and slow sections. But with its rich, imaginative orchestration, the piece is more than mere reproduction: it's a showcase for Kodály's talent as a musical colourist.

EDVARD GRIEG

(1843–1907)

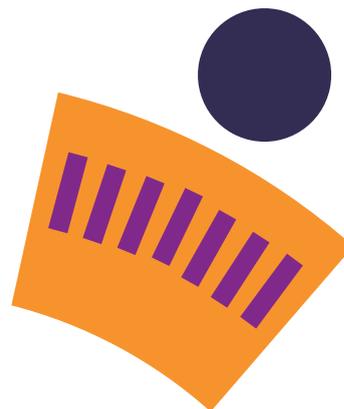
Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16 (1868; rev. 1906-7)
(30mins)

Allegro molto moderato
Adagio
Allegro moderato molto e marcato

Nobody could have expected Grieg to produce anything quite like the Piano Concerto in A minor. For a start, the Norwegian composer was only 24 when he wrote this: his biggest and grandest of musical statements. For another, he appeared to be primarily focused on a performing career, having studied the piano at Leipzig Conservatory, and spent two years in Christiania (now Oslo), as conductor of the Philharmonic Society.

Yet the desire to compose had long burnt in him, stoked by some fortuitous encounters. At conservatoire, his teacher, Ernst Ferdinand Wenzel, introduced him to the music of his friend Robert Schumann, and the teenage Grieg responded with an enthusiasm that was to stay with him for the rest of his life. Later, the impact of Rikard Nordraak, a folk-inspired Norwegian composer, was to prove similarly profound, particularly after Nordraak's untimely death at the age of 23.

So it's no surprise that both influences come to the fore in the Piano Concerto, which Grieg composed in Søllerød, Denmark, during a visit in the summer of 1868 to benefit from the climate. Much has been made of the work's similarity to Schumann's Piano Concerto, which



Grieg had heard in 1858, performed by Schumann's wife, Clara. Both pieces share the same key and architecture, both open with pyrotechnics that blaze their way down the keyboard. Equally, though, many of the work's characteristics are rooted in Norwegian folk music, including the slow lyricism of its second movement, and the vigorous dance rhythms of the finale, which recall a Norwegian folk dance known as the *Halling*. In between, there's plenty of originality, not least in its multitude of attractive themes, some contrasting, others derived from one another.

The result is a work that, with its fiery *fortissimos* (loud passages) and thunderous chords followed by pregnant pauses, ranks amongst the most dramatic of piano concertos. Its 1869 premiere in Copenhagen was a huge success, provoking lavish praise from Grieg's contemporary Franz Liszt, who remarked that young Grieg had the 'stuff' of a great composer. It remains one of his best-loved pieces.

Interval (20 mins)

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

(1841–1904)

Slavonic Dances, Op. 72
(1886–87)
(35mins)

Odzemek: Vivace
Dumka: Allegretto grazioso
Skocná: Allegro
Dumka: Allegretto grazioso
Spacírka: Poco Adagio–Vivace
Polonaise: Moderato, quasi menuetto
Kolo: Allegro vivace
Sousedská: Grazioso e lento, ma non troppo, quasi tempo di Valse

Dvořák took a big financial risk when, in 1871, he left his comfortable spot as principal violist of the Provisional Theatre orchestra in Prague and devoted himself to composition. For a few years, he survived only by taking on supplementary work as a piano teacher and church organist, but in 1874 he achieved his first real success as a composer: the Ministry of Education awarded him the Austrian State Stipendium, a grant to assist young, poor and gifted musicians. It boosted Dvořák's confidence and allowed him to continue composing. Yet he remained impecunious enough to receive the award in each of the four ensuing years.

Luckily the influential music critic Eduard Hanslick took an interest in his music and in 1877, encouraged him to send some scores to Johannes Brahms, who was already somewhat familiar with Dvořák's work having served as one of the judges on the board of the Stipendium. He was so impressed with his young colleague

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that he recommended him to his own publisher Simrock. The result was a commission: a set of Slavonic Dances for piano duet, written along the lines of Brahms's Hungarian Dances, but using the dance forms of his native Bohemia. It was a good choice for Dvořák, who, as the son of a butcher-innkeeper, had grown up in a peasant village, immersed in the Czech folk tradition.

Dvořák had little difficulty in producing the composition; indeed he had to employ a musical shorthand to keep up with the speed of his ideas. What came out was a piece brimming with vitality and characterful rhythms taken from folk dances including the *Furiant* (triple-time dance), *Dumka* (dance with contrasting sections between slow and fast, sad and fiery), *Polka* (duple-time dance), *Sousedská* (triple-time dance in a calm and smooth manner), and *Skočná* (duple-time dance in a rapid tempo). The set, which Dvořák quickly orchestrated after its 1878 publication, proved so popular that, seven years later, Simrock proposed that Dvořák attempt to repeat the success by composing a sequel.

This time, however, Dvořák was slow to agree, and even once he had, expressed reservations. "Excuse me, please," he wrote to Simrock in December 1885, "I am not in the mood for merry music like this. I have to tell you that work on the Slavonic Dances will not go as well as the first time. It is very difficult to do the same thing twice." Nevertheless, he persevered, reporting in June of the following year: "...it is going quickly now...I am enjoying doing the Slavonic Dances immensely and I think they will be altogether different (no joking and no irony)."

He was right: the second group of eight is more reflective than the buoyant first set, and more harmonically sophisticated. It also casts its net wider than the Op. 46, by adding to the *Skočná* and *Sousedská* a further Czech dance (the *Špacírka*), as well as a Slovak *Odzemek*, a Polish *Polonaise*, and a Serbian *Kolo*. As a pair, the collections proved extremely profitable for Simrock, who made millions out of them. But it is what they did for Dvořák's reputation as a master lyricist that gives them their lasting significance.

Feature & programme notes by Hannah Nepil
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Dance music and its enduring influence on 19th-century Central European composers

With their naive charm, the two dance works that bookend tonight's programme don't seem to require much unpacking. Yet, all dance music in 19th-century central Europe is intimately bound up with political history.

In the post-Napoleonic age, the growing influence of the middle classes led to a relaxing of stiff protocol and this was reflected in the rise in popularity of dance styles that borrowed from folk tradition. Composers across central Europe saw this as an opportunity. Too long subservient to Germanic culture, they hoped to use folk dance as a vehicle for national self-determination. In Hungary, this impulse emerged with Franz Liszt, who in 1846 challenged the dominance of German classical style by embarking on his famous Hungarian Rhapsodies, a set of 19 piano pieces incorporating transcriptions of Romani melodies. It wasn't, however, until the very end of the century that his successor Kodály set about creating what he called a distinctively Hungarian musical style, of which the *Dances of Galánta* is a prime example.

Elsewhere, composers were quicker to seize the day. In a partitioned Poland that,

throughout the 19th century, strove unsuccessfully to reclaim its independence, the Polish composer, Fryderyk Chopin, became a national symbol of resistance. His Polish audiences loved his *Polonaises* and *Mazurkas*, as they did his 1828 *Krakowiak* – based on a fast, syncopated dance form from Kraków, the old capital of Poland, that found another advocate in Chopin's lesser-known contemporary Franciszek Mirecki. In the Czechlands, meanwhile, which were going through an industrial boom, the *Polkas*, *Skočnás* and *Furiant*s of Dvořák and Smetana appealed to a new-found sense of national pride, and nowhere more so than in tonight's final work, Dvořák's Op. 72 Slavonic Dances.

Yet, it is significant that even this nationalistic piece reaches beyond quintessential Bohemian folk dances to include those of the Ukrainians, Serbians, Slovaks and Poles. With good reason, for they, like the Czechs, helped to make up the great melting pot that was the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And perhaps this, more than anything else, helps to explain why the composers of central Europe were so drawn to folk dance: theirs was a region that stood out for the sheer richness and diversity of its folk material.



Hungarian peasants dancing:
book illustration from
Hungary and its People, 1893