

Program 7

Mysterious Mountain (Symphony No. 2), Op. 132

Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000)

Composed in 1955.

Premiered on October 21, 1955 in Houston, conducted by Leopold Stokowski.

Alan Hovhaness, one of the most intriguing and prolific figures in American music, was born Alan Vaness Chakmakjian in Somerville, Massachusetts on March 8, 1911; his father was an Armenian chemistry professor and his mother was Scottish. He began improvising and composing at an early age, and studied at the New England Conservatory in the 1930s with Frederick Converse. In 1940, Hovhaness was appointed organist in an Armenian church near Boston, from which post he investigated the music of his father's native land. Two years later, he attended the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood on scholarship. However, the criticism there of his music by Copland and Foss, his intensive study of Oriental music, philosophy and religion, and his increasingly mystical attitude toward his art left him dissatisfied with his earlier work, so he summarily destroyed most of what he had written before 1940, which was said to have consisted of several hundred compositions, including seven symphonies, five string quartets and a number of operas.

The influence of Armenian and Oriental music on Hovhaness' work became pervasive after 1945. In style, his works are primarily melodic, often melismatic and incantatory, with a harmonic vocabulary dependent on various modal formulas. There are frequent excursions into polyphony, testimony to his long interest in the music of the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. During the 1950s, he traveled widely, notably to India, Japan and Korea, where his music was well received and where he discovered new stylistic elements that soon appeared in his compositions. Like Olivier Messiaen of France, Hovhaness sought to reconcile mystical and mundane, Occidental and Oriental, ancient and modern in music of distinctive personality. He died in Seattle on June 21, 2000.

Hovhaness' musical output is diverse in content and vast in quantity, probably exceeded in the 20th century only by that of Darius Milhaud. There are nearly 400 separate pieces, including nine operas, two ballets, more than sixty symphonies (!), several dozen independent works for orchestra and band, a hundred chamber pieces, an almost equal number for voices, and many compositions for solo piano. Most of his works have evocative titles. Among the symphonies, for example, are ones called *Mysterious Mountain*, *Nanga Parvat* (one of the world's most remote mountains, in Kashmir), *Silver Pilgrimage* (after a novel by the Indian writer M. Anantanarayan), *Fra Angelico* (the 15th-century Florentine painter), *St. Vartan* (an Armenian folk hero martyred in 451 A.D.), *Ararat*, *Odysseus* and *Mount St. Helens*. One of his symphonies was written for string orchestra and Korean percussion instruments. The composer spoke his music in almost metaphysical terms: "To me, atonality is against nature. There is a center to everything that exists. The planets have the sun, the moon, the earth. The reason I like Oriental music is that everything has a firm center. All music with a center is tonal. Music without a center is fine for a minute or two, but it soon sounds all the same.... Things which are very complicated tend to disappear and get lost. Simplicity is difficult, not easy. Beauty is simple. All unnecessary elements are removed — only essence remains."

Hovhaness wrote the *Symphony No. 2, Mysterious Mountain*, in 1955 for Leopold Stokowski's first concert as music director of the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Of its title, he noted, "Mountains are symbols, like pyramids, of man's attempt to know God. Mountains are symbolic meeting places between the mundane and the spiritual worlds. To some, the 'Mysterious Mountain' may be the phantom peak, unmeasured, thought to be higher than Everest, as seen from great distances by fliers in Tibet. To some, it may be the solitary mountain, the tower of strength over a countryside — Fujiyama, Ararat, Monadnock, Shasta or Grand Teton." The composer went on to explain about the musical structure of the work: "The first and last movements are hymn-like and lyrical, using irregular metrical forms. The first subject of the second movement, a double fugue, is developed in a slow vocal style. The rapid second subject is played by the strings, with its own counter-subject and with strict four-voice canonic episodes and triple counterpoint episodes.... In the last movement, a chant in 7/4 is played softly by muted horns and trombones. A giant wave in a thirteen-beat meter rises to a climax and recedes.... A middle melody is sung by the oboes and clarinets in a quintuple beat. Muted violins return with the earlier chant, which is gradually given to the full orchestra."

Following the premiere of *Mysterious Mountain*, Hubert Rousset, critic of the *Houston Post*, wrote, "Hovhaness produces a texture of the utmost beauty, gentleness, distinction and expressive potential. The real mystery of *Mysterious Mountain* is that it should be so simply, sweetly, innocently lovely in an age that has tried so terribly hard to avoid those impressions in music."

Viola Concerto

John Williams (born in 1932)

Composed in 2007.

Premiered on May 26, 2009 in Boston, conducted by the composer with Cathy Basrak as soloist.

John Williams is one of America's most widely known composers. Born in New York in 1932, he moved with his family when he was sixteen to Los Angeles, where his father was active as a studio musician. After serving in the Air Force, Williams returned to New York in 1954, working there as a jazz pianist in clubs and on recordings while attending the Juilliard School. He subsequently moved back to Los Angeles to enroll at UCLA and study privately with Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. By the early 1960s, he was composing music for feature films and television, as well as working as a pianist, arranger and conductor for Columbia Records. His music began to receive wide recognition during the 1960s, when he won Emmys for his scores for the television movies *Heidi* and *Jane Eyre*.

Williams has since composed music and served as music director for more than 300 movies and television shows, including all of the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* films, *Jaws*, *E.T. (The Extra-Terrestrial)*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Superman*, *Home Alone*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*. His recent projects include the *Harry Potter* movies, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Munich*, *War of the Worlds*, *Minority Report* and *Catch Me If You Can*. Williams has received 45 Academy Award nominations (the most of any living person) and won five Oscars, 21 Grammys, four Golden Globes and four Emmys, as well as numerous gold and platinum records. The original soundtrack album from *Star Wars* has sold nearly five million copies, more than any non-pop album in recording history.

In addition to his film music, Williams has written many concert pieces, including two symphonies as well as concertos for violin, cello, flute, clarinet, bassoon, tuba, horn, trumpet and viola. For the 350th anniversary of the city of Boston, he composed the *Jubilee 350 Fanfare*; for the Boston Pops, he wrote the *Esplanade Overture* and *Pops on the March*. In 1986, he wrote the *Statue of Liberty March* for the celebrations marking the centenary of that national monument. He was among the 21 composers who contributed fanfares to the Houston Symphony Orchestra's celebration of the Texas Sesquicentennial in 1986. His additional concert works include the *Essay for Strings*, the official themes of the 1996 Summer Olympics (*Summon the Heroes*) and the 2002 Winter Olympics (*Call of the Champions*), and numerous chamber pieces. Williams composed *Air and Simple Gifts* for Clarinet, Cello and Piano for the inauguration ceremony of Barack Obama as President of the United States on January 20, 2009.

From 1980 to 1993, Williams served as conductor of the Boston Pops. In addition to leading that orchestra in Boston, on tours across the country and abroad, and in many recordings, he has also appeared as guest conductor with major orchestras in London, Cleveland, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Houston, Toronto, Los Angeles and elsewhere. Williams holds twenty honorary degrees, including those from the Juilliard School, Boston College, Northeastern University, Tufts University, Boston University, New England Conservatory, University of Massachusetts, Eastman School and Oberlin College. On June 23, 2000, he was the first person inducted into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame. On New Year's Day 2004, he served as the Grand Marshal of the Rose Parade in Pasadena, and the following December he was awarded a Kennedy Center Honor, America's highest award for artistic achievement. In June 2006, Williams received the prestigious Golden Baton Award for Lifetime Achievement from the American Symphony Orchestra League.

On a return visit to the conduct the Boston Pops in 2003, Williams led a performance of Alan Shulman's Theme and Variations for Viola and Orchestra with the ensemble's Principal Violist, Cathy Basrak, as soloist. Williams was so impressed with Ms. Basrak's artistry that during the following years he planned a full-scale concerto for her instrument, but only gave her vague hints of the work's gestation. At Tanglewood in the summer of 2007, she recalled, "He sent me a message asking me to stop by. I thought he was ready to begin discussing the piece in detail. Instead, I got there and there it was, already completed. As a professional musician, to be acknowledged this way by someone of his stature is phenomenal. To have been singled out and have the gift of this piece was just mind-blowing." Williams even worked two personal allusions into the music: the second movement, humorously titled *The Family Argument*, includes heated exchanges between the soloist and the timpani, played at the premiere, on May 26, 2009 in Boston, by Ms. Basrak's husband, Timothy Genis, Principal Timpanist of both the Pops and the Boston Symphony Orchestra; the lullaby-like finale, with a prominent part for harp, refers to the couple's two young daughters.

The Concerto's opening movement is a meditation for the soloist. Twice the orchestra tries to break the violist's thoughtful mood with animated, fully scored episodes, but the long solo cadenza at the center reasserts the music's introspective nature, which then obtains until the close. The second movement (*The Family Argument*), with its virtuosic display for the soloist, brilliant instrumental sonorities and contention between viola and timpani, is the Concerto's scherzo. The finale, framed at beginning and end by ethereal duets for viola and harp, returns to the meditative character of the first movement, though with a gentle wistfulness rather than with the earlier melancholy.

Scheherazade, Symphonic Suite, Op. 35

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Composed in 1888.

Premiered on December 15, 1888 in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer.

"In the middle of the winter [of 1888], engrossed as I was in my work on *Prince Igor* and other things, I conceived the idea of writing an orchestral composition on the subject of certain episodes from *Scheherazade*." Thus did Nikolai

Rimsky-Korsakov give the curt explanation of the genesis of his most famous work in his autobiography, *My Musical Life*. His friend Alexander Borodin had died the year before, leaving his *magnum opus*, the opera *Prince Igor*, in a state of unfinished disarray. Rimsky-Korsakov had taken it upon himself to complete the piece, and may well have been inspired by its exotic setting among the Tartar tribes in 12th-century central Asia to undertake his own embodiment of musical Orientalism. The stories on which he based his work were taken from the *Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of millennium-old fantasy tales from Egypt, Persia and India which had been gathered together, translated into French and published in many installments by Antoine Galland beginning in 1704. They were in large part responsible for exciting a fierce passion for *turquerie* and *chinoiserie* among the fashionable classes of Europe later in the century, a movement which left its mark on music in the form of numerous tintinnabulous “Turkish marches” by Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and a horde of lesser now-faded lights, and in Mozart’s rollicking opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. The taste for exoticism was never completely abandoned by musicians (witness Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* or Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* or *Turandot* or even *The Girl of the Golden West*; Ravel prided himself on his collection of Oriental artifacts), and proved the perfect subject for Rimsky-Korsakov’s talent as an orchestral colorist. Preliminary sketches were made for the piece in St. Petersburg during the early months of 1888, the score was largely written in June at the composer’s country place on Lake Cheryemenyetskoye, near Luga, and the orchestration completed by early August. *Scheherazade* was a success at its premiere in St. Petersburg in December, and has remained one of the most popular of all symphonic works.

To refresh the listener’s memory of the ancient legends, Rimsky-Korsakov prefaced the score with these words: “The sultan Shakriar, convinced of the falsehood and inconstancy of all women, had sworn an oath to put to death each of his wives after the first night. However, the sultana Scheherazade saved her life by arousing his interest in the tales which she told him during 1,001 nights. Driven by curiosity, the sultan postponed her execution from day to day, and at last abandoned his sanguinary design. Scheherazade told many miraculous stories to the sultan. For her tales she borrowed verses from the poets and words from folk-songs combining fairy-tales with adventures.” To each of the four movements of his “symphonic suite” Rimsky gave a title: *The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship*, *The Story of the Kalandar Prince*, *The Young Prince and the Young Princess* and *Festival at Baghdad — The Sea — Shipwreck*. At first glance, these titles seem definite enough to lead the listener to specific nightly chapters of Scheherazade’s soap opera. On closer examination, however, they prove too vague to be of much help. The *Kalandar Prince*, for instance, could be any one of three noblemen who dress as members of the Kalandars, a sect of wandering dervishes, and tell three different tales. “I meant these hints,” advised the composer, “to direct but slightly the hearer’s fancy on the path which my own fancy had traveled, and leave more minute and particular conceptions to the will and mood of each listener. All I had desired was that the hearer, if he liked my piece as *symphonic music*, should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairy-tale wonders.”

Of the musical construction of *Scheherazade*, Rimsky-Korsakov noted, “A characteristic theme, the theme of Scheherazade herself, appears in all four movements. This theme is a florid melody in triplets, and it generally ends in a free *cadenza*. It is played, for the most part, by the solo violin.” There is another recurring theme, given in ponderous tones in the work’s opening measures, which seems at first to depict the sultan. However, the composer explained, “In vain do people seek in my suite leading motives linked always with the same poetic ideas and conceptions. On the contrary, in the majority of cases, all these seeming leitmotives are nothing but purely musical material, or the given motives for symphonic development. These given motives thread and spread over all the movements of the suite, alternating and intertwining each with the other. Appearing as they do each time under different moods, the self-same motives and themes correspond each time to different images, actions and pictures.” Well, then, if there is here no programmatic plot and if the movements tumble forth in some sort of free musical fantasy, how is the attentive listener to find his way through Rimsky-Korsakov’s story of *Scheherazade*? Perhaps the advice of Donald N. Ferguson about this veritable orgy of blazing orchestral color and atmospheric sensuality is profitably heard: “Ecstasies of imaginatively fulfilled desire: visions of celestial luxury engendered in the hashish-fevered mind of some squalid dreamer in the market place of Baghdad or Teheran — such are the tales of Scheherazade and the Arabian nights.”

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