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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)
Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35

For many audience members, the name Erich Wolfgang Korngold is probably not a familiar one. Many, however, will have heard his music before. For Korngold was the composer of several classic film scores – throughout the 1930s and 1940s, he composed the music for swashbuckling adventure films like *Captain Blood* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, and, as a result, his riveting and exciting Neo-Romantic vein has become inseparable from the adventure film genre. Furthermore, Hollywood's most famous contemporary composer John Williams is a great admirer of Korngold's music, and has modeled many aspects of his own compositional language after that of Korngold. It is this same thrilling and beautiful idiom familiar from Korngold's film scores that will be heard in his Violin Concerto – a composition that has recently begun to gain considerable popularity with orchestras worldwide.

Born in 1897, Erich Wolfgang Korngold was the second son of the distinguished Viennese music critic Julius Korngold. Like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Felix Mendelssohn before him, Korngold's musical talent emerged while the composer was still a young boy. In 1906, Korngold performed a composition of his own creation for Gustav Mahler, prompting the influential conductor-composer to declare him a genius and make arrangements for him to study independently with Alexander von Zemlinsky – a formidable composer in his own right who had taught composition to Mahler's wife Alma. By 1910, the legendary conductor Bruno Walter had become a powerful advocate for Korngold's music, not only serving as the pianist for the premiere of his Piano Trio, but also premiering his first two operas. With the premiere of his third and most successful opera *Die tote Stadt* (*The Dead City*), Korngold won international recognition. And, in 1926, a popular poll dubbed him as one of the two greatest composers living in Vienna at that time; ironically, the other was Arnold Schoenberg with whom Korngold's music shares little in common.

In 1934, Korngold traveled to Hollywood where he began writing film scores, including *Captain Blood* (1935) – the first of many such swashbucklers starring Errol Flynn for which Korngold composed scores – , *Anthony Adverse* (1936), and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) – the latter two for which his scores won Academy Awards. The annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany in 1938 prevented Korngold's return home,

and instead he brought his family to live with him in the United States. He continued to pursue his emerging career as a Hollywood film composer and, over the next ten years, he created scores for several other classic films, including *The Sea Hawk* (1940), *Kings Row* (1942), and *Deception* (1946). Although he became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1943, he desired to return to Austria following the end of World War II. This move was part of an attempt to reestablish himself as a serious composer of art music, but his antiquated tonal language prevented critics – most of whom were now obsessed with the avant-garde – from accepting him back into the caste of serious composers. Regardless, this later period of his career saw the creation of the extraordinary Violin Concerto and several other notable works designed for the concert hall, while Korngold comfortably lived out the remainder of his life in California, finally dying there in 1957.

Korngold composed his Violin Concerto in 1945 at the request of his friend the violinist Bronisław Huberman. It was, however, the legendary violinist Jascha Heifetz who gave the premiere in St. Louis on February 15, 1947. Korngold dedicated the work to Mahler's widow Alma, who had again been widowed with the death of her third husband the novelist Franz Werfel.

Although Korngold composed the Violin Concerto as part of his attempt to reestablish himself as a composer of art music, he extracted its most prominent themes from his film scores. In the first movement marked *Moderato nobile*, the first theme derives from his 1937 film *Another Dawn* while the second theme derives from the 1939 film *Juarez*. In the second movement *Romance*, Korngold pulls the theme from *Anthony Adverse*, and, in the third movement *Finale. Allegro assai vivace*, he borrows from his score to *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937). Regardless, Korngold had negotiated his film contract in such a way that he could focus more time and attention on each film score than usually given to film composers. Furthermore, he had always striven to produce film scores engaging enough that they could be appreciated independently from the films for which they were created.

The soloist opens the first movement with a heart-wrenching theme that initially reminds this listener of the main theme from John Williams's score to *Schindler's List* before the violinist ventures into that magical and mysterious realm that Williams creates in his scores for *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Star Wars*, and others. In the second movement, the violin dances freely and romantically above a gentle orchestral accompaniment. The lively finale with its playful yet demanding rhythms provides a rewarding conclusion to this splendid concerto.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes, Op. 33a

In the early 1940s while the world was at war, the young composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was charting the seas, searching to find himself amidst a troubled world. In 1939, before the outbreak of war, he and his partner the tenor Peter Pears had set out for the United States, hoping to free themselves of the petty rivalries and groundless suspicions they faced in their own country. When war began later that year, Britten and Pears chose to remain in America as both men held firmly pacifist views. But, by 1942, Britten's nostalgia for his native country had encouraged him and Pears to return home to England. By June 1945, Britten had completed a new opera in which Pears would sing the title role – this opera was *Peter Grimes* with its many hints of autobiography.

The plot of *Peter Grimes* revolves around a fisherman whose neighbors in the rotten seaside village of the Borough have accused him of murdering his apprentice while he and the young boy were at sea. Peter Grimes has trouble communicating with his fellow villagers, and they refuse to listen to him when he claims that the boy's death was merely accidental. Suspicion and gossip encourage the villagers to form a mob and, as Peter hears them approaching his house, he rushes his new apprentice down the steep seaside cliff, unintentionally causing the boy to slip and fall to his death. Peter Grimes is left to accept punishment for two deaths he did not cause.

It was identification with this protagonist and his lot that caused Britten to desire to set this story as an opera after stumbling upon its source – George Crabbe's poem "The Borough" – while in California in 1941. Britten and Pears are like Peter Grimes the outcast and victim of suspicion. They were in America seeking opportunities closed to them in Great Britain. Furthermore, the nautical theme reminded Britten of home, and encouraged the two men to return to England.

Despite the problems that Britten and Pears faced trying to establish themselves in their native country prior to the war, the premiere of *Peter Grimes* ensured their acceptance as two of the leaders in the contemporary music scene in post-war Britain. It has been remarked that Britten was the greatest British composer since Henry Purcell, who lived some two hundred years earlier. Whether or not one agrees with this statement, no one denies that Britten led an outstanding career and helped to establish English as a legitimate language for opera – a process that had ended abruptly with Purcell's early death and which no one until Britten had managed to resume with any success. *Peter Grimes* was the first

in a line of successful English-language operas by Britten that included *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Death in Venice*.

Four Sea Interludes – the piece featured on today's program – is a suite of orchestral selections extracted from *Peter Grimes*. The first interlude is called *Dawn*. In its original context, *Dawn* linked the opera's Prologue with Act I. In this movement, we hear the cries of seagulls and the rustling of waves as fishermen mend their nets in preparation for a day at sea. The gray skies over a gray sea foreshadow the gloomy existence of the Borough and its inhabitants.

In the second interlude *Sunday Morning*, we hear church bells and the busy movement towards this gathering place for its morning service. Originally, this orchestral selection began Act II, in which the church service of the self-righteous townsfolk is contrasted against the struggle between Peter Grimes, his young apprentice, and the woman who serves as both Peter's love interest and the boy's caretaker Ellen Orford.

The third interlude is called *Moonlight*. This piece – which originally opened Act III – depicts the sea at its most calm and peaceful. On account of Peter and his apprentice's absence for what has now become several days, this interlude is more like the "calm before the storm," however, as confrontation between Peter and the other villagers is imminent.

The final interlude entitled *Storm* depicts the tempest that emerges between the two scenes of Act I. This piece depicts the untamed and dangerous sea as it threatens to wash away the Borough. In this interlude, we hear rain pour down as winds blow fiercely. This panicked music flawlessly depicts the terrified villagers and the ferocious, uncontrolled waves of the sea.

These psychological interludes summarize the opera in its various scenes with their widely varying moods. With this said, *Four Sea Interludes* has found an increasingly common place upon concert programs.

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Peer Gynt Suite No. 1, Op. 46

Undoubtedly, the *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1* contains some of the world's best-known and most-beloved music. Listeners will recognize this music immediately – even from the very opening with its familiar flute solo. And, the suite's conclusion is no less familiar. Ironically, when its creator Edvard Grieg (1843-1907) completed the original incidental music, he had no idea the success

it would be – apparently, he had so little confidence in this music that he refused to attend its premiere. Only gradually did Grieg come to value what he had created, although it immediately won the favor of the musical public so much so that the music-enhanced stage play became viewed by many as the Norwegian national drama.

The original stage play had not been as successful as its creator – the celebrated Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) – might have hoped. Perhaps, in 1867 when the spoken play was completed, it was too bizarre and eclectic for its audience. The literary historian Edvard Beyer has described *Peer Gynt* as “fairytale and picture of folk-life; tragedy and fantastical, satirical, Aristophanic comedy; dream play and morality.” The ludicrous storyline sees its protagonist Peer Gynt crossing continents, seducing and being seduced by numerous women, and encountering all sorts of fantastical creatures – particularly the trolls that live in the Norwegian mountains. Before the play is over, it becomes clear that Ibsen is asking his audience to learn from Peer Gynt’s mistakes – to forego the self-condemning narcissism and materialism of Peer Gynt and, instead, treat other people with respect and patience.

Despite its initial failure, Ibsen refused to give up on *Peer Gynt*, and, in 1874, he personally asked Edvard Grieg – then one of Norway’s most promising young composers – to write incidental music which could be performed alongside future presentations of the play. Although Grieg began this new project in earnest, he soon faced difficulties, remarking that “the text is such that you really have to kill all thoughts of writing true music, and concentrate merely on the external effect.” Despite these concerns – and, perhaps, because of them – Grieg produced an innovative score with much of the same orchestral colors and tonal ambiguities that, if written a generation later, might have seen the work labeled as impressionism, modernism, or primitivism.

Following its successful premiere on February 24, 1876, Grieg gradually came to appreciate the pioneering work that he had composed. In January 1888, Grieg completed his arrangement of what he considered to be *Peer Gynt*’s best and most popular numbers. This new arrangement was the *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1* which contains the four movements *Morning Mood*, *The Death of Åse*, *Anitra’s Dance*, and *In the Hall of the Mountain King*. This new arrangement won immediate success in the concert hall, and has now maintained its place in the regular repertoire for over a hundred years. Grieg published the *Second Peer Gynt Suite* a few years later in 1893, and it has also won considerable acclaim.

The *First Peer Gynt Suite* begins with the familiar *Morning Mood*. In the original incidental music, this

piece appears as the Prelude to Act IV. By this point in the drama, the now middle-aged Peer Gynt lives in North Africa where he has become wealthy, although no less selfish. In the early morning, we hear birdcalls from the winds, before the strings indicate the first light of morning as the rays of the rising sun pierce through the clouds. We hear more birdcalls as the movement continues and as the peaceful landscape unfolds.

The Death of Åse forms the suite’s second movement. Grieg extracted this piece from the scene in Act III when a confused Peer meets his mother Åse for the final time. Peer and his mother have not always gotten along, as already made evident in Act I when Peer strands her on a roof. Now that Åse is on her deathbed, Peer’s mind slips into fantasy as he imagines himself delivering Åse to heaven in a horse-drawn sleigh. The accompanying music is slow and somber, music fitting for an elegy or funeral procession.

The third movement *Anitra’s Dance* is much livelier. Like *Morning Mood*, *Anitra’s Dance* comes from Act IV when Peer is living in North Africa. Wearing the clothes of an emperor, Peer arrives at the home of an Arab chieftain. Peer attempts to seduce his daughter Anitra by spouting-off half-remembered literary quotes, but she counterstrikes with a sensual belly dance, and then steals his horse and rides-off with all his gold. This alluring rhythmic dance possesses a certain Arabian flavor, accentuated by the dings of the triangle.

The suite’s final movement *In the Hall of the Mountain King* derives from Act II. Now bored with the bride he abducted in Act I and fleeing the villagers who are hunting him, he meets another woman who leads him back to her homeland – inside the mountains of Dovre in central Norway. Once inside the hall of the Mountain King, the trolls who live there surround Peer and begin to torment him, until the Mountain King himself demands that they stop. This movement continuously builds in excitement as the music becomes ever more violent. Although this familiar orchestral showpiece has pleased numerous audiences, Grieg himself expressed different feelings for this piece: he once remarked, “I came up with something for the Mountain King’s hall that I literally can’t bear to listen to: it reeks of cow pies, exaggerated Norwegian provincialism, and trollish selfishness!” Perhaps his feelings towards this piece had changed by the time he had compiled the *First Peer Gynt Suite*.

Grieg’s music for *Peer Gynt* has also had an impressive impact on popular culture. *Morning Mood* has become so associated with the image of a refreshing spring morning that it has even been utilized by television commercials advertising allergy medicines. Meanwhile, not a holiday season goes by without hearing *In the Hall*

of the Mountain King played on at least one movie trailer. Music from these suites have also been used within several video games, including a 1983 game called *Mountain King* which prominently employs both the piece referenced by the game's title and *Anitra's Dance*. The world of popular music has also appropriated the music of *Peer Gynt*: while numerous rock bands throughout the world have covered *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, Duke Ellington arranged the entire first suite and part of the second for his 1960 album *Swinging Suites by Edward E. & Edward G.* Clearly, Grieg's music for *Peer Gynt* has been well-loved both within and outside of classical music circles.

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