

PROGRAM NOTES

by Daniel Maki

Vlatava (The Moldau) from *Ma Vlast*
by Bedřich Smetana (1824- 1884)

Duration: Approximately 12 minutes

First Performance: April 4, 1875 in Prague

Last ESO Performance: January, 2009; Andrew Grams, conductor (in his ESO debut)

During its declining years the Hapsburg Empire was a remarkably uneasy and amazingly diverse mixture of ancient states, ethnic groups, languages, and , inevitably, hatreds and jealousies, some of which have tragically contributed to political turbulence in Eastern Europe even in recent times. The great nineteenth century move toward ethnic nationalism which gradually began to pull the empire apart had not only profound political and social effects but cultural and artistic effects as well.

A striking musical example is that of the Czech people, who have not only a proud political heritage but one of the oldest musical traditions in Europe. Famed already in the Middle Ages for their wandering musicians, the Czechs had by the 18th century created a musical culture that would give Mozart some of his greatest triumphs. Having written his *Prague Symphony* and the opera *Don Giovanni* for the skilled musicians and enthusiastic audiences of Prague, Mozart said that the Czechs understood him as no one else could.

As the movement toward greater political independence from Austria and a stronger sense of cultural identity grew in the 1840's and 50's, what Czech music needed was a composer who would not, as so many Czech musicians had done, leave and be absorbed by other musical traditions, but would write music that would help establish a distinct national identity . The right musician at the right time was Bedřich Smetana, who through such works as his operas on folk and patriotic subjects and his series of six tone poems entitled *Ma Vlast (My Fatherland)*, laid claim to the title, Father of modern Czech music.

The Moldau, the second and the best known part of *Ma Vlast*, was first performed in 1874, by which time, incidentally, the composer had become completely deaf. Named after the Vlatava River (called the Moldau by western Europeans), which flows majestically through the heart of the beautiful city of Prague , this tone poem is both a deeply felt tribute to his homeland as well as a remarkably skillful example of 19th century descriptive music.

The synopsis that follows is based on the composer's own detailed commentary.

The opening flute and clarinet figures produce a rippling effect indicating the two tributaries of the river. Then a broadly flowing folk melody in a minor key represents the river itself. The next three sections depict a hunting scene with horn calls, a peasant wedding with rustic dance music, and a remarkably atmospheric night episode entitled "Moonlight –Nymph's revels." The original river theme then returns, speeding up as the river passes through the Rapids of St. John. Finally, as the river reaches Prague and passes the majestic fortress known as the Vyšehrad, the river theme is heard in a major key, and the winds play a triumphant chorale. The river then sweeps on past the city and quietly "vanishes beyond the poet's gaze."

A footnote: Although many commentators have called the "river theme" a Czech folk song, and many a Czech eye has become moist upon hearing it as a symbol of their Slavic nationhood, the tune is actually a Swedish folk melody which Smetana heard while living in Sweden for several years as a young man. So much for ethnic purity. A further variation on the theme is that it bears a striking resemblance to the Zionist hymn, *Hatikvah*.

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Concerto for Guitar and Small Orchestra, A 501
by Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887 -1959)

Duration: Approximately 22 minutes

First Performance: February 6, 1956 in Houston, Texas

These are the first ESO performances of the work

Andrés Segovia (1893-1987) was the leading twentieth century champion of the guitar, not only because he played it at the highest level, but because his influence brought about a renaissance of interest in the instrument, resulting in a large body of new music. Many leading composers wrote pieces for Segovia, including not just solo works, but also concertos, a genre which had fallen into neglect. As the symphony orchestra grew larger and louder during the nineteenth century, most composers shied away from the difficulties of balancing the delicate sound of the guitar with the sound of a full orchestra. (Segovia, incidentally, loathed the idea of amplifying his instrument.)

Once it was discovered that a modest sized orchestra could enhance the sound of the guitar without overwhelming it, a number of twentieth century composers made their contributions to the genre. Both guitar works on today's program feature small, so-called chamber orchestras.

When looking for a composer who might write a concerto, it was inevitable that Segovia would commission Brazil's most prominent composer, Heitor Villa-Lobos. In recent times, most guitar concertos have been written by non-guitarists, but Villa-Lobos was himself an accomplished if somewhat unorthodox player of the instrument. At the time that he began as a young man to play the guitar, in Brazil it was considered a low-class street instrument, something that was no deterrent to Villa-Lobos, however, who eagerly sought out the popular and folk music of his day. He did this while he was also studying composers as diverse as the French Impressionists Debussy and Ravel, modernists like Stravinsky, and perhaps the greatest influence of all, J. S. Bach. In works such as this concerto, both sides of the composer's musical personality can be heard: great sophistication and knowledge of advanced European techniques combined with a deep feeling for the music of his native Brazil.

The concerto began with the working title of *Fantasia concertante*, implying a work in rather free form. Although the work eventually ended up in the time-honored fast-slow-fast three movement layout typical of concertos, it retains some of its original free form character. The work was completed in 1951 but didn't receive its premiere until 1956 in Houston, Segovia playing the solo part with the Houston Symphony conducted by the composer.

The concerto features two types of themes, which suggest elements of two important types of Brazilian popular music. The first is strongly rhythmic with jazzy syncopations, possibly related to the *lundu*, a supposedly lascivious dance. The other is slower in a lyrical sentimental style, reminiscent of the *modinha*, a type of sentimental love song originating in Portugal. The opening movement begins with a theme of the rhythmic type, but soon slows down into one of the lyric type, and then in a longer middle section a melody even more sensuous and nostalgic. In his own notes, the composer mentions that these melodies come from popular songs of the northeast part of Brazil. The movement ends with a return of the opening fast material.

The slow movement is in three part ABA form, presenting dreamily romantic melodic writing with rich harmonies. The movement leads directly into an elaborate and difficult cadenza, which feels almost like a separate movement and has, indeed, been played by itself on solo guitar programs. The cadenza was apparently an afterthought, not originally in the composer's plan but insisted on by Segovia. It is, as one commentator put it, a smorgasbord of guitar techniques, allowing the soloist the opportunity to daydream on themes already heard while demonstrating the full range of the instrument's technical and expressive possibilities.

The finale is again strongly rhythmic, suggesting various dances, including a waltz-like passage at one point. The movement drives to a surprisingly abrupt ending.

Although Villa-Lobos had a master's control of his art, his training was not of the usual typical conservatory sort. When he was once asked who his teachers were, he replied: "My teacher?..... Brazil."

Troubadours (Variations for Guitar and Chamber Orchestra)
by John Corigliano (1938 -)

Duration: Approximately 20 minutes

First Performance: October 10, 1993 in St. Paul, Minnesota

These are the first ESO performances of the work

In his long and distinguished career, John Corigliano has become one of the most widely performed American composers of his generation. His output includes more than one hundred works in many genres, ranging from symphonies, concertos, solo and chamber music, through vocal music, opera, and film. The wide expressive range of his music can be illustrated by the fact that his score for the film *The Red Violin* (1998) won him an Oscar, a highly unusual achievement these days for a composer who has also won a Pulitzer Prize and the prestigious Grawemeyer Award, prizes generally given for music of a more recondite nature.

The impetus for a work for guitar and orchestra came from the distinguished guitarist Sharon Isbin, who, incidentally, is a co-faculty member with Corigliano at the Juilliard School. The composer has said frankly that for various reasons Ms. Isbin's initial request for a guitar concerto didn't interest him. She persisted, however, presenting him with various ideas and, finally, more than a decade later, the project began to take shape. The premiere took place in 1993 in St. Paul, with Sharon Isbin as soloist with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Hugh Wolff.

Among the ideas that Sharon Isbin offered was her interest in the troubadours, the poet-musicians who flourished in southern France and parts of Spain and Italy from the 11th through the 14th centuries. Writing in the Romance language known as Provençal or Occitan (related to old French as well as Catalan), these artists wrote songs about chivalry and courtly love which were the first body of music in the vernacular in the Western world. Corigliano's concept is a series of free variations on a troubadour –like melody whose last phrase is an actual quote of a song by the trobairitz (female troubadour) La Comtessa de Dia, who lived in the late twelfth century.

The work is in three sections, the outer two slow and the middle fast, with a cadenza connecting the second and third parts. The opening portion is atmospheric, setting the stage for what is to come. We hear what the composer calls “cloudy chords” which surround fragments of the troubadour theme.

The middle fast section presents for the first time a recognizable tune. The composer's detailed notes describe the effect.

The second section is announced by an offstage percussionist. (One of the two onstage players has gone backstage to join an oboe and two bassoons.) This trio of double-reeds and drums acts as a raucous shawm band. [Shawms were ancestors of oboes and bassoons- much reedier and coarser than today's refined instruments.] The band interrupts the onstage soloist and orchestra in a series of multiple conversations, and as they reach a peak two offstage French horns add to the interplay. This cacophonous climax is followed by an extended solo cadenza in which the guitarist changes the mood from boisterous to intimate.

At the end of the cadenza the guitarist introduces a slow, ornamented version of the troubadour theme which, when it is joined by the orchestra, gradually morphs back into the "cloud-chords" of the more abstract opening section. As the composer has put it, "*Troubadours* ends as it began, in clouds of memory."

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Francesca da Rimini, opus 32, TH 46
by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840- 1893)

Duration: Approximately 22 minutes
First Performance: March 9, 1877 in Moscow
These are the first ESO performances of the work

As a monument of world literature, Dante's *Divine Comedy* has stimulated and inspired innumerable artists, including not only writers but visual artists and musicians as well. Musical renditions inspired by Dante have ranged from composers such as Franz Liszt and Sergei Rachmaninoff up to the present time, when exploration of the Inferno seems to have become a favorite topic for many metal bands. Among the best known of all such Infernal works however, is Tchaikovsky's symphonic poem *Francesca da Rimini*, written in 1876 when the composer was 36 years old. The subject is a love affair turned tragic, a subject with considerable personal significance for the composer and one which he treated in several other works, including the concert overture *Romeo and Juliet* and his opera *Eugene Onegin*. Connections between an artist's work and life can be risky to make, but it is probably not a coincidence that 1876 was also the year that Tchaikovsky made the disastrous decision to marry one of his students, a marriage which lasted only a few months and led him to a nervous breakdown and a suicide attempt.

The tale of Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo was based on actual happenings well known in Dante's day. The beautiful Francesca is forced into a planned marriage with Giovanni Malatesta of Rimini, a man of noble birth and some distinction but a cripple and much older than his bride. Francesca, however, falls in love with Paolo, Malatesta's handsome younger brother, and when Malatesta apprehends the couple *in flagrante delicto*, he stabs them both to death. They are buried together in the same grave.

Dante tells the tale in Canto V of the *Inferno*, the opening portion of the *Divine Comedy*. For those unacquainted with the geography of Hell, Dante has divided it into nine circles, each with its own designated sin (gluttony, greed, anger, etc.), accompanied by the appropriate punishment for its inhabitants. Francesca's tale is set in circle 2, the home of lust, where Dante introduces us to some of history's famous adulterers including such figures as Cleopatra and Achilles, not to mention several fun couples such as Helen of Troy and Paris, and Tristan and Isolde. (Given our current social situation, the mind boggles at the thought of future overcrowding in circle 2.) The punishment for such offenders is that they are doomed to be buffeted by an eternal infernal tempest, just as they had succumbed to the stormy winds of passion in life.

Led by his guide, the Roman poet Virgil, Dante meets Francesca, who tells her sad tale, recounting how it was that when she and Paolo were innocently reading together the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere, their eyes met as they fell hopelessly in love and gave in to their passion. Dante is so deeply moved by the pathos of her tale that he faints away.

Tchaikovsky's original plan was to write an opera on the tale, but after artistic disagreements with his librettist, he decided instead to opt for the new genre of the symphonic poem, a one movement work that demands great skill in narrating an extra-musical story or idea using only orchestral means. Tchaikovsky, incidentally, was inspired by the drawings of Gustave Doré, one of many artists who have illustrated the *Divine Comedy*.

The somber introduction illustrates the famous saying written over the portal of Hell: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." This is followed by a remarkably vivid description in fast tempo of the swirling winds that torment the sad couple. The heart of the work is the central portion, which begins with a solo clarinet singing one of Tchaikovsky's famous, long-lined melodies, one which might be called "Francesca's Theme" and which has been turned into a pop song. This extended section is essentially a set of variations on that melody and brings to mind Francesca's famous line, which Tchaikovsky wrote into the score: "There is no greater pain than happiness remembered in time of misery." Finally, the winds renew their fury, leaving the storm tossed lovers in eternal damnation as the music thunders its way to a close.

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