

## SVS Fall concert 2012 “My Sun, My Stars”

### ***Variations on a Theme By Haydn*** Op 56a (1873) by Johannes Brahms

To this day, the theme on which this magnificent work was based remains something of a mystery. Brahms gave credit to the illustrious composer, Joseph Haydn, but it seems he was misled. Publishers, in those days, were wont to misattribute works to better known composers in order to boost sales and, furthermore, modern scholars do not believe the theme matches Haydn's style. Instead, it's thought Haydn's pupil, Ignaz Pleyel may have been responsible though it is not certain. What we do know is that the theme, written for a wind ensemble, carried the title “Chorale Saint Antoni” and for this reason Brahms' composition is also sometimes known as the “St Anthony Variations”.

Brahms started writing his variations for two pianos, but then decided to create an orchestral version in parallel. He had yet to write his first symphony and felt intimidated by the symphonic legacy left by Ludwig van Beethoven. The unusual idea of creating a full blown orchestral work out of a set of variations may, therefore, have had a certain appeal as a way of testing the waters but also as a logical extension of ideas he and other composers had played with previously. In the apotheosis of all variation works, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* for piano, for example, had shown that it was possible to take a rather banal little waltz and transmogrify it into a spellbinding magnum opus. Right from variation one, Beethoven deconstructed the tune and reinvented it as if born unto a world operating under different physical laws.

Brahms achieves almost the same effect here. The Baroque formality of the opening theme, pretty though it is, suddenly unfolds in the first variation into an all color spectacle in which Brahms's Romantic lyricism comes to the fore. The other variations exhibit no less skill and imagination in exploring a wide variety of moods, from the infectiously lively to the soberly contemplative, while still somehow hewing to a semblance of the original theme. Everything comes together in the glorious finale which itself was written as a *passacaglia*, a kind of theme and variations built on recurring motif in the basses. After the motif has moved upward through the strings, we enter the darkening clouds of the minor mode, but then suddenly emerge into the radiant sunshine of the original “Haydn” theme triumphantly proclaimed by the strings and decorated by fusillades of scales in the winds. It's a thrilling moment that launches this music not just into greatness but into transcendence.

### ***A Marechiare*** (1886) by Francesco Paolo Tosti

Tosti, an Italian composer best known for his songs that come from the salon rather than the opera house, was reputedly at one time so poor, he subsisted on a diet of oranges and stale bread. Nevertheless, he eventually enjoyed better times becoming a British citizen and a friend of King Edward VII. In this popular song set in Marechiare, a district of Naples, Tosti provided music for a poem in which a young man serenades his girl outside her window, likening the power of her eyes to the shining stars.

### ***La donna è mobile*** (1851) from *Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi

This surprisingly jolly crowd pleaser whose provocative title means “Woman is fickle” is doubly ironic in that it’s both part of an operatic tragedy and its words are sung by the most duplicitous of men, the Duke of Mantua, who like some Don Juan spends his time constantly chasing women. The melody of the song is so striking that before the first performance of *Rigoletto*, Verdi insisted on maximum secrecy by requiring the tenor, who was playing the role of the Duke, not to sing or whistle the tune outside rehearsals, lest it somehow prematurely leak and be plagiarized.

***Funiculì Funiculà*** (1880) by Luigi Denza

A perennial Italian favorite, *Funiculì Funiculà* was written to celebrate the opening of the first funicular railway on Mount Vesuvius. Its catchy tune was one the German composer, Richard Strauss, mistakenly took to be a Neapolitan folk song, using it in his tone poem, *Aus Italien*, only to find himself the subject of a lawsuit. *The Grateful Dead* often used the song in live concerts while warming up, and it made a brief appearance in an episode of *Seinfeld*, where Elaine sings it with her latest flame, the conductor of the “Policeman’s Benevolent Association Orchestra”, a man, who causes much bemusement and irritation by insisting on being called “Maestro” at all times even by his closest acquaintances.

***O Sole Mio*** (1898) by Eduardo di Capua

Perhaps the most famous of all Neapolitan songs, *O Sole Mio* has been covered by a gaggle of singers from Enrico Caruso to Luciano Pavarotti, and from Bryan Adams to Elvis Presley (*It’s Now or Never*). For more than a decade in the UK, an ice-cream manufacturer exploited the tune in its TV advertising to the words “One more Cornetto, give it to me ...” The title *O Sole Mio* literally means “my sun” and the lyrics are a paean to the wonder of the star powered celestial orb that rises and sinks each day bringing alternately happiness and sadness into our lives.

***Pavane*** (1887) by Gabriel Fauré

Though the French composer, Gabriel Fauré, may not have had made the same splash on the musical world as his two protégés, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, he did bestow on us some truly beautiful melodies, among them this stunning *Pavane*. The work was originally written for small orchestra but after deciding to dedicate it to his patron, a rich countess, he felt obliged to turn it into a grander affair by adding a chorus. The pavane was originally a 16th century court dance from Padua, and performances of this work are sometimes staged as a ballet. The lyrics written for it are timeless enough though, speaking, as they do, of the romantic helplessness of man.

***Le Tombeau de Couperin*** (1914-17) by Maurice Ravel

Ravel originally wrote *Le Tombeau de Couperin* as a six movement suite for piano of which he subsequently chose to orchestrate four movements. Perhaps intended as a memorial to the Baroque composer Francois Couperin aka Couperin “The Great”, Ravel also dedicated each movement to the memory of friends who had died fighting in World War I. Though it started life as a piano work, like Brahms’ “Haydn” variations the suite shows little evidence of its provenance, a testament to the superb orchestral skills of the composer. And while the piece was also intended to pay homage to the French keyboard suites of the 18th century, Ravel’s

20th century sensibilities shine through in the form of spicy harmonies and angular rhythms evident particularly in the *Forlane*, a kind of Italian folk dance. When criticised for composing a light-hearted work rather than a sombre one for such a lugubrious topic, Ravel is said to have replied: "The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence."

***Capriccio Espagnol* (1887) by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov**

As an officer in the Imperial Russian Navy, and one with little formal musical training, Rimsky-Korsakov would surely not have seemed like a promising candidate to become a distinguished composer. Somehow, though, he realized early enough he had a musical calling and after joining forces with other notable self-trained musical amateurs (Balakirev, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Borodin - forming a group that famously became known as "The Five"), he eventually seized the composer's mantle with gusto. By the time he was 27, he had secured a position as a professor at the St Petersburg's Conservatory, staying one step ahead of his students by disciplined self-study of harmony and counterpoint.

Not that his time in the navy was entirely wasted. He worked with military bands where he obtained an intimate understanding of how many wind instruments should be played. He also got to travel across the globe which no doubt broadened his cultural enthusiasms, evident in his two most famous compositions: *Scheherazade*, evoking the mysteries of the Orient with tales from *A Thousand and One Nights*, and *Capriccio Espagnol*, reveling in the brio and panache of folk tunes from Spain.

The composer had originally intended *Capriccio* to be a virtuoso work for violin and orchestra perhaps influenced by Lalo's famous *Symphonie Espagnole*. However, after creating an initial sketch, Rimsky Korsakov instead decided to make virtuoso demands on the whole orchestra. The composition, which is in five short interconnected movements, starts with the *Alborada*, a festive dance that celebrates the rising sun, and which reappears in different guises later in the work. *Scene and Gypsy Song*, features five solo cadenzas, first for horns and trumpets, then solo violin, flute, clarinet, and harp. This leads into the *Fandango of the Asturias*, which embraces themes from the whole work culminating in a frenzied finale. The dazzling nature of the writing for each instrument so impressed the players during its first rehearsals that they applauded the composer after every movement, and after its first performance the audience demanded an instant reprise of the entire work. One suspects that instead of the usual bravos, they may have even cried "¡Olé!".