

A Dozen Obscure Favorites **by Andrew Hartman**

The reservoir of worthy classical works that deserve a wider audience is deep and wide. Those following my series of articles intended to shine a light on the more obscure corners of the repertory know that heretofore each essay has dealt comprehensively with a single composer. While this approach is suitable for many neglected composers, it leaves out innumerable classical pieces of merit written by composers who, for various reasons, may not lend themselves to this treatment. In some cases, a composer wrote too few works to warrant an article or only a small portion of their oeuvre is still extant. In others, a composer's productivity was so prolific that even a cursory examination of their works requires a book, not an article. Alternately, a composer may have been a "one hit wonder" and only one of their works is worthy of revival. In any case, the single composer format can miss many deserving works. Accordingly I thought it would be worthwhile to occasionally contribute an essay that deals with individual works, rather than focusing on one composer. My criteria for choosing these works is simple. They need to be pieces of high merit that once heard will not likely be forgotten. They need to be works largely unknown by the general public, even if their composers' names are fairly familiar. The dozen works I have chosen here run the gamut from pieces by composers known only to the most devoted classical music fan, to less familiar pieces written by composers known by the casual aficionado. The only *sine qua non* for selection is that in my wholly subjective opinion, the quality of the music is such that if these works were heard by more listeners they would enter the mainstream repertory.

Zdenek Fibich – "Spring"

Zdenek Fibich (1850-1900) was a Czech composer and a contemporary of Dvorak and Smetana. His father was Czech and his mother was German. Fibich studied in Germany, was an admirer of Wagner, and was less invested in the nationalistic movement in Czech music in the latter part of the nineteenth century than his two more famous contemporaries. This helps explain his relative lack of notoriety in his homeland. Fibich is one of my favorite composers, and I can still vividly recollect when I first encountered his music. It was 1982 and I was browsing in the much lamented Tower Records shop across from Lincoln Center in New York prior to a show. I saw an LP with an arresting cover that caught my eye. While I did not know the name of the composer, his era and nationality were of interest so I took a chance and purchased it. The Supraphon disk contained four pieces, "Spring", "The Romance of Spring", "At Twilight" and the overture to "A Night at Karlstein"; The conductor was Frantisek Vajnar with the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra. I was amazed at the quality of the music and the LP (CD version 1110 3405 G) has remained a favorite to this day. While all the pieces are excellent, it is the symphonic poem "Spring" that will concern us here.

Many composers have taken nature as an inspiration for their work, and the four seasons has been a particularly popular theme. Not surprisingly, the beauties of spring have inspired more pieces than the other three seasons combined, and Fibich's is one of the best. "Spring" begins with a gorgeous melody tenderly played by the winds and horn. This is the "spring motif" and will form the core of the fourteen minute work. A second beautiful theme follows, again growing in power, as if spring is hesitantly groping forward as it slowly banishes winter and reaches full maturity. Forceful statements from the full orchestra announce spring's conquest and Fibich masterfully plays one theme against the other. The lower strings then underpin yet another attractive melody. Fibich is lavish in his themes, showering us with more beautiful melodies in fourteen minutes than most composers would present in an hour long symphony. Throughout the piece the mood is gentle and congenial. There are no rough edges, no harsh moments, nothing to constrain the pure joy of spring's arrival. After the statement of the first three themes, a lively rhythmic tune played by full orchestra begins, reminiscent of a peasant dance. Fibich uses the percussion section here to highlight the unbridled joy of the people. The initial spring motif is

then played in counterpoint with the peasant dance and is followed by restatements of the second and third themes. A lively skipping theme follows as if all of creation is dancing for joy. Suddenly the spring motif interrupts in a *forte* grand statement for full orchestra as if the goddess of spring herself has appeared. The motif then dies away to its tender opening and the piece ends peacefully.

This is a fabulous piece of music that should be much better known. I return to it often and have played it on the first day of spring for many years. Fibich is a great composer with many fine works to his credit, but this may well be my favorite.

Tor Aulin – Fyra Akvareller (Four Watercolors) for violin and piano

Tor Aulin (1866-1914) was a Swedish violinist and composer. In his lifetime he was better known as a violin virtuoso, and most of his relatively few works are focused on his own instrument. Aulin's best-known work is his series of four miniatures for violin and piano which he called "Watercolors". The pieces are titled *Idyll*, *Humoresque*, *Lullaby* and *Polska*. All four pieces are approximately four minutes long and are dominated by the violin. They are unpretentious, charming works that are easy to love and hard to forget. **Idyll** opens with a gently striding melody in the violin, supported by the piano. After soaring to an ecstatic climax the violin gives way briefly to the solo piano which restates the main theme. This acts as a bridge back to the beginning of the movement as the violin takes the lead again. The movement dies away gently. **Humoresque** opens with a sprightly high-stepping theme from the violin. Humor and good spirits are very much in evidence. A "B" section follows with a more serious theme that is traded between the soloists, before a return to the opening material. The piece ends with a puckish pizzicato. **Lullaby** offers a beautiful and gentle melody which flows over a softly rocking piano line. The repetitive, hypnotic effect achieved by Aulin would be perfect for rocking a real infant to sleep, something not true of all pieces purported to be lullabies! The movement drifts off to sleep with a sustained high note on the violin. **Polska** begins with a brief solo run by the piano, unusual for Aulin's violin-centric compositions. The violin soon joins in then takes the lead with an enchanting tune played over a drone bass. It would be a stoic listener indeed who did not break into a smile during this movement. One can imagine delighted dancers whirling around the dance floor as the fiddler plays. A slower, hypnotic section follows before a subdued version of the dance returns to end the movement and the entire work.

Throughout the history of classical music there have been virtuosos who have composed primarily for their own instrument. The works of these virtuoso composers is sometimes given short shrift as merely puff pieces written to showcase the soloist's performing ability. Yet many of these works are of undeniably high quality and showcase the technical possibilities of the instrument in ways that only someone who knows it intimately could do. Aulin's music falls into this category, as does the music of another violin virtuoso we will get to later in this article. My recording of the Fyra Akvareller is on an EMI LP (Swedish EMI 4E 061 35157) and features Arve Tellefsen (violin) and Goran Nilson (piano).

Luigi Boccherini – "La Musica Notturna della Strade di Madrid" – Quintettino in C op. 30 # 6

The name of Luigi Boccherini (1743–1805) is known to most classical music lovers but the vast majority of his oeuvre is not. In fact, most listeners know Boccherini from only two pieces. The minuet from one of his string quintets, and a cello concerto arrangement by Friedrich Grützmacher using themes from several of Boccherini's actual cello concertos. This is unfortunate because Boccherini was one of the greatest composers of the classical era. He was, along with Haydn, a pioneer of the string quartet format, which has dominated chamber music for well over two hundred years. He wrote a dozen fine cello concertos, numerous symphonies, and well over two hundred chamber pieces for strings, primarily quartets and quintets featuring two cellos. There are two famous quotes that have stuck to Boccherini as descriptions of his music. The violinist Giuseppe Puppò called Boccherini "the wife of Haydn", implying

his music was basically “Haydn light”. Having listened to virtually all the music both men composed I believe nothing could be further from the truth. Each composer had his own individual style. Another more positive contemporary quote describes Boccherini’s music as “a poem, a fragrance, and a dream”. This apt description captures the unique sound world of the composer’s chamber music with its ethereal, soft, dream-like qualities that can transport the listener.

The idea of “program music” has proved a popular one with composers for many years. Illustrating a detailed scenario with instrumental means has challenged and inspired many composers. Franz Liszt is generally credited with inventing the symphonic poem format in the mid-nineteenth century, yet even earlier, compositions such as Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony and Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” endeavored to convey a story. Boccherini’s string quintet “La Musica Notturna della Strade di Madrid” is unusual in that it is a chamber composition that illustrates vividly a series of programmatic vignettes. Limiting himself to five string instruments presented Boccherini with a greater challenge than he would have faced with the resources of the full orchestra. That he succeeded brilliantly is to his credit. There is nothing quite like it in the classical repertory. I was privileged to hear Jordi Savall and his group perform it live at the summer music festival in Quebec City in 2009. It is the only one of the dozen pieces discussed in this article that I have ever heard performed live. Boccherini himself realized how unique his piece was and wrote to his publisher Pleyel that it must be published with the descriptions of what was being portrayed or else it would be “unintelligible” to listeners and performers alike.

The quintet begins with the tolling of a church bell, depicted with a repeated two note plucked phrase. After several repetitions, an obsessively repeated note on the cello illustrates the players tuning up for a dance. This launches us into the “Minuet of the Beggars”, a lively but stately dance with a memorable melody. The next vignette portrays “The Rosary”. With this solemn and devout theme, Boccherini evokes the hush of prayer and the holiness of the scene. He instructs the performers to play it freely, ignoring the bar line. Two plucked notes interrupt the prayer and introduce a brief livelier section, as if the worshippers were greeting friends who had come to worship. This sequence is repeated twice more before the rosary section fades away. Next, a group of street singers comes along and a lively dance ensues. Here Boccherini uses a lively pizzicato Spanish rhythm which evokes guitars, to underpin a wonderful melody for the cello. A drone effect over triplets ends the movement. The composer then brilliantly depicts a drum-roll with a rapid two-note motif repeated numerous times, and the night watch begin their retreat to their barracks. With a gorgeous melody, once heard never forgotten, Boccherini accompanies the soldiers as they march by the onlookers and disappear into their quarters as the melody fades in the distance.

My recording of this masterpiece is by the fabulous Boccherini Quintet on a Discos Ensayo LP which was also licensed to the Musical Heritage Society. No ensemble ever played Boccherini’s string quintets better than this group. I would recommend seeking out their series of recordings done for the Angel label in the 1950s of many of the composer’s quintets, and subsequently issued on CD on the Testament label. They are well worth investigating.

Francisco Valls – Missa Scala Aretina

The Spanish composer Francisco Valls (1671-1747) spent much of his career in Barcelona and primarily focused on sacred music. The two genres for which he was best known were masses and oratorios. He is reputed to have composed up to thirty masses, and many times that number of oratorios. Despite an oeuvre estimated at nearly four hundred scores only one of his works, the Missa Scala Aretina, has been recorded and performed with any frequency. The Missa Scala Aretina was a bit of a *cause célèbre* when it was written due to an unprepared dissonance used by the composer in the Gloria section. This led to a pamphlet war among the academics which seems rather quaint today in light of all the dissonance

classical music lovers have been subjected to in the past one hundred years! In any event, after nearly four years and nearly five dozen “experts” weighing in, opinion was evenly divided. Valls defended himself vigorously and never backed down on the subject of a composer’s creative independence.

The Scala Aretina is scored for orchestra, chorus, and six soloists (two sopranos, tenor, baritone and two altos which could be sung by mezzo-sopranos or counter-tenors). It follows the traditional words of the Mass although it lacks the Benedictus section. After a brief slow and solemn introduction, the Kyrie launches into a lively melody led by the two sopranos accompanied by the chorus. The two counter-tenors take over in the Christie section leading a downward spiraling motif which seems to wind its way down the scale in an endless round. The return of the Kyrie brings trumpet fanfares as the chorus joyously intones the prayer for mercy which now seems assured of being granted by the Lord. Valls then concludes the Kyrie Eleison section of the mass with a return to the slow fervent prayer of the opening.

The Gloria begins with thrilling alternating runs by the soloists between interjections by the chorus. The Gratias brings us a gently rocking prayer of thanks from the chorus. The two sopranos then alternate phrases in the Domine section over a hypnotic scale in the bass strings which ascends and descends repeatedly. The chorus then joins in to conclude this section. A humble prayer from the chorus begs for the Lord’s mercy in taking away the sins of the world in the Qui Tollis, followed by a joyous Quoniam extolling the holiness of the Lord. On the words Jesu Christe the music slows to a reverent tempo, but the full chorus returns with trumpet flourishes to bring a joyous conclusion to the Gloria.

The Credo opens with a confident striding theme underpinned by roulades in the winds. As he does throughout the mass, Valls matches his melody, tempo and forces to carefully match the words of the text. The theme here clearly demonstrates the assurance of faith that a true believer would have. As the intensity grows, the soloists join in with alternating phrases and the orchestral forces increase, ending with trumpet flourishes. The Et Incarnatus is solemnly intoned by the high male voices showing Valls’ reverence for the Virgin Mary. The Crucifixus is a gently sorrowful melody, neither overtly tragic nor fiery as in many other masses. As one would expect, the Et Resurrexit is a joyful theme with the chorus and trumpets both expressing their joy at the resurrection. The soloists sing over the chorus exuberantly trading phrases in pairs as the momentum grows to a final climax on the Amen.

Skipping the Benedictus, Valls launches into the Sanctus section with the chorus and trumpets repeatedly intoning the word Sanctus. At the Hosanna, the soloists launch into coloratura runs that bring the section to a triumphant close. The Agnus Dei opens with an adagio theme, almost hesitant in tone, as if the humble penitent is not yet certain of divine mercy and peaceful rest. The chorus swells gradually with the trumpets softly adding color as the Dona Nobis Pacem brings us to a reverent close.

Valls’ Missa Scala Aretina is one of the most beautiful, finely crafted masses of its era. Written in 1702 it is a fine example of the splendor and reverence that the greatest Baroque composers brought to their sacred works. Perhaps the nearest comparison one can make is to the masses by Biber. My recording features John Hoban conducting the London Oratory Choir and the Thames Chamber Orchestra. The recording has been issued by [CRD](#) on both LP and CD.

Mikhail Glinka – Jota Aragonesa

Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857) is generally considered the first great Russian composer and the inspiration for the generation of nationalist composers who followed. His two operas “A Life for the Tsar” and “Ruslan and Lyudmila” dealt with Russian themes, and the latter used folk motifs. Unlike many of his successors however, Glinka was a cosmopolitan who lived in Italy, France, Germany and Austria along with substantial visits to Spain and other countries. He absorbed a wide-ranging musical culture and was

friendly with Liszt, Mendelssohn and Berlioz. In addition to his operas, including the overture to *Ruslan and Lyudmila* which is a popular encore item, Glinka wrote songs, piano pieces and several orchestral works, many influenced by the musical exposure he received on his travels through Europe. One of his most delightful works is his Spanish-influenced *Jota Aragonesa* (also known as *Spanish Overture # 1*) which he composed during his visit to Spain in 1845. This work was one of the earliest of the musical cultural postcards that became popular in the second half of the 19th century, including Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien*.

The *Jota Aragonesa* begins with pompous flourishes in the brass and a portentous introduction that leads the listener to expect a serious, profound work. After the lower strings alternate with horn calls, the most airy dance imaginable takes off with an unforgettable Spanish flavored melody. Soon, castanets join in the dance and one can picture a slew of dark-eyed gypsy precursors of *Carmen* whirling around. As the castanets continue to sound, Glinka briefly relaxes the intensity before bringing back the dance. The somber strings and horns of the opening clash with the dance but are soon vanquished. Glinka builds suspense with pounding timpani, resounding chords and brass fanfares as the dance theme gathers speed and strength as if stealthily sneaking up on the listener. Then the dance breaks forth joyously in the full orchestra with the percussion section adding excitement. Glinka dials down the intensity for a brief section for winds and strings before power chords herald the return of the dance theme which whirls to a grand conclusion.

The *Jota Aragonesa* is an utterly delightful work. While it makes no pretensions to profundity, it fully achieves its aim of infusing a Spanish atmosphere into an immensely entertaining piece. This is a work guaranteed to “bring down the house” at any classical concert. My recording is on the Decca label and features Ernest Ansermet and L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and they appear to be having a marvelous time ([review](#)).

Adolph Wiklund – Piano Concerto # 1 in E Minor

The Swedish composer Adolph Wiklund (1879-1950) does not boast a large work-list but most of his oeuvre is of high quality. His Piano concerto # 1, written in his twenties and premiered in 1907, is one of his most impressive works. One can certainly hear influences of contemporary composers yet the impression is of an individual voice. The work is a grand, late-romantic piece lasting thirty-five minutes. Rachmaninoff is an obvious point of reference but so is Grieg and Wiklund's friend Wilhelm Stenhammar, whose first piano concerto (another fine piece) was admired by the composer.

The concerto opens with soloist and orchestra in unison declaiming a powerful and dramatic theme which, like most themes in the work, is a progression of chords. A simpler second theme follows which is almost like a chorale. Wiklund then restates both themes in several guises, varying the orchestration and balance between soloist and orchestra. After a stormy passage for solo piano, a quiet coda which brings back both themes gradually dies away. By ending his grand opening movement in an unexpectedly quiet way, Wiklund manages a seamless transition to the slow movement which opens with a lengthy orchestral statement. The dreamy theme almost reminds me of one of Puccini's luscious melodies. After this extended introduction the soloist enters with a theme of descending chords which dominates most of the movement. The orchestra joins with the piano, swelling to a climax complete with prominent brass. As Wiklund boldly states his theme with crashing piano chords and powerful tutti outbursts Rachmaninoff, whose famous second piano concerto had just premiered a few years before, seems not far away. Eventually the movement draws to a quiet conclusion. The energetic allegro finale opens with a dramatic and sharply rhythmic chordal theme in the piano which is quickly picked up by the full orchestra. A more lyrical theme emerges providing a welcome contrast. Wiklund then brings back the opening theme from the first movement and the main theme from the second movement, providing a

feeling of unity for the piece. After this brief retrospective look, the lyrical theme from the finale reappears. With this parade of melodies the composer launches into a frenetic coda bringing back the opening melody of the finale and racing to the finish with a dramatic flourish.

I would imagine that any listener who finds the second piano concerto of Rachmaninoff pleasing would find much to enjoy here. My recording of this fine concerto is on a Musica Sveciae LP (reissued on Caprice CD CAP21363) with Ingemar Edgren as the excellent soloist and Jorma Panula conducting the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. There is also a recording of the work on Hyperion, which is part of their invaluable "Romantic Piano Concerto" series. This is a work that I'm certain would make a powerful impact in the concert hall ([review](#)).

Alexi Machavariani – Violin Concerto in D Minor

The Georgian composer Alexi Machavariani (1913-1995) is one of the finest of the numerous talented Soviet era composers too little known in the West. Like his contemporary Otar Taktakishvili (whose music I have discussed in a previous article) his career spanned the entire history of the Soviet Union, which by definition imposed certain restraints on his compositional style. Unlike his countryman however, Machavariani made every effort to push the envelope and his musical style became increasingly modern as the Soviet regime liberalized its policies. While some of the composer's works from the 1970s and onwards reveal a more thorny musical style, his works from the 1940s and 1950s would be accessible to any lover of the Romantic era. One of Machavariani's greatest works is his Violin Concerto in D Minor from 1949.

The three movement thirty minute work begins with an arresting theme in the orchestra whose jazzy contours immediately grab the listener's attention. The soloist quickly picks up the theme and expounds on it with great virtuosity. A slow and tender theme follows, underpinned by gentle strings and the flute. The violin soars to ecstatic heights in a lyrically effusive passage then a brief section for soloist alone leads back to the aggressive main theme. The orchestra and soloist trade brilliant passages in quick tempo as the excitement builds. The violin launches into some scintillating runs that brings us to a climax for full orchestra. A lengthy cadenza ensues with the soloist working through fragments of the movement's preceding themes. Eventually the solo violin works back to a statement of the original racy theme followed by the tender second subject played dreamily over the subdued orchestra. Finally the jazzy theme returns and takes this superb movement so full of incident to a dramatic conclusion.

The slow movement is the emotional heart of the work and perfectly contrasts with the fireworks of the outer movements. A chorale-like theme in the strings opens the movement then the violin enters with its statement of the somber yearning melody. A passionate climax is reached yet the theme continues to spin out in a continuous song without words, growing more beautiful and powerful. The orchestra breaks in with a brief tragic outburst but the violin quickly regains its dominance of the musical argument. The soloist soars to the highest register as it sings over a harp accompaniment as the movement concludes. While the outer movements have a distinctively jazzy, western feel, the concerto's slow movement is pure tragic Russian in its effect.

The finale begins with a hard charging statement complete with crashing chords then the soloist takes off in a fiery rendition of a jazzy theme that has one almost thinking of Gershwin. Machavariani pulls out all the stops as he puts the violin through its paces utilizing every technical challenge imaginable. The headlong assault includes plucked strings and a *perpetuum mobile* series of ascending scales, then the entire frenetic sequence is repeated. A second theme is then introduced which with its offbeat rhythms and jazzy contours again invokes Gershwin. A bridge passage leads us back to the first theme played if

possible with even more frenetic energy than before. The violin hurtles forward with dizzying speed then the orchestra and soloist trade wild phrases and crash to a resounding conclusion.

The Machavariani Violin Concerto is certainly one of the greatest violin concertos of the twentieth century and should be every bit as famous as Tchaikovsky's. Like that warhorse it does require a superb soloist to do it justice. The violin is rarely silent during the entire piece and the writing for the instrument is extremely virtuosic. The soloist on my recording is the fantastic Liana Isakadze and I can't imagine the work played any better ([review](#)). She is joined by the Symphony Orchestra of Radio and TV of the USSR conducted by the composer's son, Vakhthang Machavariani. I had the pleasure of corresponding with Maestro Machavariani who is a true gentleman as well as an excellent conductor and promoter of his father's music. I have no hesitation in calling this concerto a masterpiece and music-lovers unfamiliar with it should run, not walk, to hear it.

Jan Kalivoda – Symphony # 1 in F Minor

Jan Kalivoda (1801-1866) was a Bohemian composer who was born in Prague and spent most of his career serving the Princes of Fürstenberg in Donaueschingen, a German town in the Black Forest near the borders of Switzerland and France. He was a highly respected composer, esteemed by such luminaries as Robert Schumann. Kalivoda worked in nearly all genres and boasted a work-list of over four hundred compositions. The heart of his production includes seven symphonies. The Symphony # 1 is from 1826 and represents an impressive debut in this genre for a young composer. One can easily trace the influence of Beethoven and Mozart in this symphony; not surprising considering its date of composition and the imposing reputation Mozart's late symphonies and Beethoven's symphonic works had at that time.

Kalivoda opens with a Largo introduction consisting of a brooding, searching theme that emerges from the lower strings. The full orchestra dramatically picks up the theme then it dies away. The Allegro proper begins with a two part theme consisting of a stepping motif which evolves into a tragic downward thrusting melody. The secondary theme is of decidedly brighter character and it plays out over a striding bass line. The sound world of Beethoven is not far away. After a repetition of both themes, a finely crafted development section leads us to a dramatic conclusion. This Sturm und Drang movement is quite arresting in its impact.

The centerpiece of the symphony, and by far the longest movement, is the Adagio. The beautiful melody that dominates the movement reminds one almost of the slow movement from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in its ethereal effect and magisterial calm. Kalivoda examines the theme from every angle. First the strings and winds play with the melody over a walking bass line. Then the composer varies the rhythmic structure of the theme and its orchestration. After a pause the theme re-emerges in a minor key and the slow movement of Mozart's "Jupiter" symphony is referenced as the tragic melody sings over mincing downward strings. We return to the ethereal beginning as the theme achieves the major as it is played over pizzicato strings that ascend and descend as it sings over them. Kalivoda continues the magic by varying the bass underpinning of the melody from walking to pulsing lower strings. The listener is carried away as the composer concludes the movement with a beautiful dialogue between bassoon and flute over the pulsing bass accompanied by gentle flourishes of the violins. It is a magical moment.

An old fashioned Menuet follows in the classic A-B-A format but once again the composer has some surprises for the listener. The theme is tripartite with a pompous, contrapuntal ascending line evolving into a scurrying phrase that finishes up as a swaying lighter motif. The swaying rhythm continues in the Trio section with strings and winds trading happy phrases, until the return to the A section rounds out the movement.

A dramatic outburst from the full orchestra opens the finale, then the Allegro breaks forth with a classical 'question and answer' theme. A gentle string theme follows, flowing smoothly into an accelerando underpinned by rushing lower strings. A bridge passage leads back to the opening theme before Kalivoda delivers his last surprise. In a gesture reminiscent of the famous finale of the "Jupiter" symphony, a coda begins with a four note motif played by the brass and developed contrapuntally before exploding into a unified phrase. The lyrical second theme recurs then we return once more to the first theme stated majestically by the full orchestra. Kalivoda then storms to a dramatic conclusion. My recording of this memorable work is on a Vox/Candide LP (31073, 1973) with Jindrich Rohan conducting the Prague Symphony Orchestra. The performance brings out the many beauties of the symphony. Although the young Kalivoda references his idols Mozart and Beethoven in his first symphony, the composer speaks with an individual voice. This is a terrific work.

Wilhelm Peterson-Berger – Symphony # 2 – "Sunnanfard"

Wilhelm Peterson-Berger (1867-1942) was a Swedish composer best known for his three piano cycles entitled "Frösöblomster" (Flowers of Frösö). He also composed five symphonies, five operas, many songs and choruses and other works. In addition to his compositions he was a feared music critic who made many enemies with his caustic wit and personally insulting comments.

Peterson-Berger's second symphony was the first piece of the composer that I became familiar with and it is still my favorite of his works. It is an ambitious symphony lasting over forty minutes and features a programmatic title (Journey to the South) and descriptive movement titles to help the listener follow the music. The opening movement is in two parts and is titled "Stiltje-Seglats" or freely translated, "calm sea - prosperous voyage". The symphony opens with a hesitantly searching motif in the winds over a walking-bass line, as if a sailor is searching in hope for a breeze. At the two minute mark his hopes are realized as a beautiful melody flutters in on the woodwinds. It is gentle at first and comes and goes, teasing the listener. The composer gives a beautiful phrase to the clarinet as the soft breeze strengthens. A joyful secondary theme follows composed of a descending scale and rhythmic chords as we are happily underway. Some stormy seas briefly ensue as the lower strings and brass grow ominous but the skies clear and the ship sails boldly on as the orchestra swells nobly and cheerily. The descending motif returns as does the clarinet with the opening theme as the movement dies away.

The tripartite second movement "Rosenstaden" (City of Roses) includes "The Procession of Dionysus", "In the Temple of Eros" and "Symposium". The Dionysian procession opens with a brilliantly orchestrated theme with an irregular beat and colorful touches from the percussion and brass. A memorable string theme is heard next then the music comes to a hushed pause. An Adagio section follows with the winds taking turns singing a plaintive lament as we have entered the temple of Eros. The composer spins out this lovely slow movement and has the orchestra swell to full power on three occasions but the gentle beginning always returns. Eventually the worshippers leave the temple and the initial lively procession theme returns but only briefly. After another pause the "Symposium" section begins, with Peterson-Berger obviously using the word in its original meaning of a convivial gathering with music and good conversation. Indeed the instruments converse garrulously with one another as the composer, once again, brilliantly exploits the orchestral colors to achieve beautiful effects. One can imagine a party of friends delightfully chatting as music plays in the background. A livelier section follows as a dance begins and the couples whirl around in dizzying fashion till the movement closes.

The finale is titled "Hemlangtan – For Sunnanvind", or "Homesickness for the Southerly Winds". After a hesitant motif recalling the opening movement a yearning, memorable melody breaks out capturing the longing for home. A more dramatic section follows with a portentous theme which fades away to a gentle solo for the harp, then the gentle stirrings of the breezes in the woodwinds return that will take

the composer home. The beautiful yearning melody returns as do reminiscences of themes from the preceding movements before the symphony quietly fades away, as if it was all a dream.

The elements that make this symphony so memorable for me are the unusual structure, brilliant orchestration, effective scene painting, and beautiful melodies. It stands out as a work of genius in Peterson-Berger's oeuvre and a distinctive musical statement. My recording is an EMI LP with Stig Westerberg conducting the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra (originally HMV (Sweden) 061-35455, 1977, then reissued on CD PHONO-SUECIA PSCD95 (1996)).

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari – Sinfonia da Camera op. 8

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari (1876-1948) is one of the most fascinating composers of the early twentieth century. The son of German painter August Wolf and the Venetian Emilia Ferrari he grew up in Venice in an artistic milieu and at first considered painting as a career. However, studies in Munich with the great pedagogue and composer Josef Rheinberger changed his mind and he decided to devote himself to musical composition. Straddling two very different cultural worlds, Wolf-Ferrari's music combines Italian lyricism and operatic traditions with Germanic musical rigor, giving it a rare flavor. In his mid-twenties he had a huge success with his cantata *La Vita Nuova* and between 1902 and the Great War he became one of the most popular opera composers in Europe with a string of successes including "*Le Donne Curiose*", "*I Quattro Rusteghi*", "*Il segreto di Susanna*", and "*I Gioielli della Madonna*". The first three were charming comedies in a vein going back to the early part of the prior century, while the last was a verismo opera in the style of the times. While he is mostly known for his vocal works, Wolf-Ferrari did write a fair amount of instrumental music including a violin concerto, several orchestral scores, and most significantly several fine chamber pieces. My personal favorite of these works is the composer's *Sinfonia da Camera* written in 1901, the year of his teacher Rheinberger's death. It is written for the rare combination of piano, two violins, viola, cello, bass, horn, flute, clarinet, bassoon and oboe. Its instrumentation, straddling the worlds of chamber music and orchestral music surely has militated against live performance, as chamber groups would find it hard to assemble eleven players, and an orchestra would find such a "chamber symphony" to be short-changing an audience expecting to hear a full ensemble. It is a hugely ambitious work for a young composer, containing four movements and lasting nearly forty minutes. Musically it stretches the boundaries of chamber music to their limit and is indeed more "symphonic" than intimate in its breadth.

The work opens with a hypnotic melody for the piano quickly joined by the clarinet. The strings soon join in, building in power to a full statement of the theme. The bassoon introduces a bouncy second theme which the horn picks up. The piano returns with a passionate, bold statement then things quiet down as the winds discuss fragments of the piano's theme among themselves. Throughout the movement the writing is symphonic in its scope. After a pause, the various instruments pick up bits of the piano's theme then come together in a thrilling tutti that introduces a memorable, powerful final phrase in the piano.

The Adagio begins with a ruminating piano bass line as the bassoon plays a somber motif consisting of an ascending and descending scale. Other instruments enter one by one then a gorgeous melody breaks out with the full ensemble. The music dies down and the clarinet muses over a secondary theme picked up by the strings underpinned by the piano. The bassoon returns and revisits the beautiful melody but in a melancholy vein. Wolf-Ferrari brilliantly uses the timbres and characteristics of his large arsenal of instruments to exploit every emotional nuance of his themes. Each of the instruments gets a chance to play with the main theme, exchanging fragments of the melody in ingenious ways during a lengthy development. The composer even demonstrates an affinity between the second movement's main theme and the first movement's main theme. Over a string tremolo the theme is wistfully restated by the winds and horn before peacefully fading away.

The scherzo begins with a playful exchange between the piano and winds then develops into a charming, light-hearted theme first played by the flute. The piano supports the flute, then the strings pick up the tune. A very brief melancholy interlude functions as a trio section before the charming tune returns. The composer demonstrates a statelier version of the light-hearted melody but its original mood returns to conclude the movement.

The finale opens with a brief dramatic prelude then the piano rushes off with a powerful and ominous series of scales and chords. The other instruments join in before the horn sings a solo over the piano introducing a secondary theme. The strings pick up the melody but the dramatic prelude returns and leads us back to the opening piano solo. Fragments of the first theme are tossed with abandon among the instruments then a repetitive two note phrase is hammered home. Finally a gentler mood begins to surface as the strings lead the way back to a recapitulation of two themes heard in earlier movements. Then the piano leads the way back to a glorious restatement of the gorgeous melody from the adagio played in counterpoint with the other themes. After a pause all the instruments join together for a resounding, symphonic conclusion.

The Sinfonia da Camera is a very special piece in many ways. It enjoys the transparent textures of chamber music yet is totally symphonic in its language. It boasts a bouquet of beautiful melodies that are unforgettable. It is a bold statement from the composer that he has fully arrived as an artist. His breakthrough work, "La Vita Nuova" was to come in the following year. One feels that it is a synthesis of all that his great teacher Rheinberger taught him. One wonders if Wolf-Ferrari had the opportunity to show the work to him just before Rheinberger's passing. This is one of those hidden gems that should be much better known. My recording is on a Thorofon CD that is shared with the Sextett by Rheinberger op. 191B, his last composition. Horst Gobel is the pianist performing with the Ensemble Wolf-Ferrari and they do full justice to this difficult music.

Ole Bull – Et Saeterbesog

Ole Bull (1810-1880) was one of the greatest violin virtuosos of the nineteenth century. Schumann considered him the equal of Paganini. He toured widely through Europe and North America, became enormously wealthy, and died a legend in his own country of Norway. He worked for Norwegian political and cultural independence, founded a colony in Pennsylvania, had a house in Maine, and built a castle on an island in Norway. Bull was universally loved and admired by his peers. One biographer wrote that when Bull entered a room he filled it with sunshine. While he was primarily a performer, Bull did write some seventy works featuring his own instrument. Many of these were never written down or if they were, the printed versions did not include the virtuosic improvisations Bull would add when he played them in concert. His most famous work is his song Saeterjentens Sondag (The Herdgirl's Sunday).

The work Et Saeterbesog (The Mountain Vision) is a potpourri of Norwegian folk melodies strung together with the melody from The Herdgirl's Sunday and other original material. It is a programmatic work of about nine minutes which encapsulates Bull's artistry in all its glory. The work opens with distant horn-calls floating over a bass drone, with the oboe adding its own melody. Then the violin begins to sing an unaccompanied song reminiscent of the Hardanger fiddle tunes of Norway. The musicians of the dance are tuning up. This progresses to the first folk tune, "I See You Outside The Window", a two part song with a melancholy first part and a sprightly second section. The sad Herdgirl sees the dancers enjoying themselves but fears she will miss the dance due to her shepherding duties. The solo violin bridges to the next folk melody, "The Backwards Song", a melancholy tune capturing her disappointment. Then the horn-calls of the opening are repeated and the famous melody of The Herdgirl's Sunday is heard. This mystical, magical theme is one that haunts the listener forever. Once heard it will never be forgotten. Bull then launches into his third folk tune "And Then Mother Is

Humming With Her Spinning Wheel”, a lively peasant dance that dispels the yearning of the Herdgirl, who has obviously managed to get away from her shepherding duties to enjoy the village dance after all.

My recording of Et Saeterbesog is on a CD issued by the Norwegian Cultural Foundation (NKF) which issued dozens of wonderful recordings of Norwegian music in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The disk includes five other Bull works and is played by legendary Norwegian violinist Arve Tellefsen.

Hugo Alfvén – Swedish Rhapsody # 1 (Midsommarvaka)

Hugo Alfvén (1872-1960) was, along with Stenhammar, the most popular composer in Sweden at the turn of the century. He is known primarily for his symphonies and rhapsodies, and his choral music. The “Midsommarvaka” (“The Midsummer Vigil”) tells the story of the Swedish Midsummer Night where young people take to the forest on midsummer’s eve for dancing, drinking, and love. The music begins with a brilliant, jolly theme representing the young people on their way to the dance. After a soft statement of the theme in the winds the full orchestra takes it up. A drunken young man takes up a lusty drinking song and after a false start or two gets it almost right. Soon the inebriated young folks are quarrelling and the music mocks them in burlesque fashion. Meanwhile a young couple steal off into the forest for a night of love. In an adagio section, Alfvén captures the magic of the nights of midsummer in Scandinavia. A tender melody with harp and horn expresses the lover’s feelings. As the sun rises back up from the horizon nature awakes in all its glory and Alfvén portrays it majestically but mysteriously. Then a sprightly tune begins as the lovers realize they must be getting back to the midsummer vigil. They skip off together and with growing excitement return to join their comrades. They arrive back at the dance and Alfvén treats us to a lumbering folk-dance complete with drone bass, blaring horns and pounding drums. The tipsy young people are wilder than ever, and with five crashing chords, the composer emphatically ends the dance.

Midsommarvaka is a fun piece, but as Alfvén commented it is composed with as much craftsmanship as his symphonies. The craft is just hidden under the light tone and musical high-jinks. My recording features Neeme Järvi conducting the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra on a [BIS](#) disk that also features Alfvén’s second symphony ([review](#)).

So there we have our dozen favorites. There are literally hundreds of marvelous pieces stretching over the entire history of classical music whose quality and memorable aspects would make them candidates for inclusion in this article. I hope that in the future we will revisit this theme of individual unjustly obscure works again. One hopes that readers will find at least a few new pieces here to search out and treasure. One can’t go wrong with any of them.

Andrew Hartman

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