

~Program Notes~
Berkshire Symphony Orchestra
Student Soloist Gala
April 25, 2025

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Egmont, Overture for Orchestra, op. 84 (1809-10)

Many of today's most prominent composers are best known for their film scores. Hans Zimmer, Joe Hisaishi, and John Williams are three names that quickly come to mind of artists who have made their films come alive with emotion and suspense through music. Today, we rarely expect to find an orchestra on hand when we see a play, but in the 19th century, music held as important of a place in staged drama as it does today in film. Indeed, many composers of this period wrote some of their finest work in the form of "incidental" music, including Mendelssohn (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Bizet (*L'Arlésienne*), Grieg (*Peer Gynt*), and Sibelius (*Pelleas and Melisande*).

In 1809, Beethoven was commissioned to compose the incidental music for a revival of Goethe's play *Egmont* (1775-87) in Vienna. It is a dramatic narrative of the life and heroism of Lamoral, Count of Egmont, who championed the fight against the Spanish occupation of Flanders and the ruthless oppression of its people by the Duke of Alba. Count Egmont is eventually imprisoned and condemned to death, his fate sealed after a rescue attempt by his lover, Klärchen, fails. At the end of the play, Count Egmont is led to the block calling on his countrymen to fight for liberty, which they achieve after his death. Although he was vanquished and killed by the Duke of Alba, the moral victory is his.

The themes of struggle against oppression, personal sacrifice, and liberation from tyranny resonate throughout this play, and are consonant with Beethoven's own personal beliefs about justice and freedom. There are obvious links between this work and the plot of Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, the first version of which, *Leonore*, was completed a few years earlier in 1805. One is also reminded of Beethoven's famous outrage over Napoleon Bonaparte's decision to crown himself Emperor of France in 1804, scratching his name out of the dedication of his "Eroica" Symphony No. 3. Indeed, *Egmont* was composed near the apex of the Napoleonic Wars, in which the First French Empire extended its domination over vast swathes of Europe.

Beethoven was a great admirer of Goethe, so much so that he uncharacteristically refused to accept payment for the score, in spite of his financial situation. In a letter to their mutual friend, the writer Bettina von Brentano, he asked her to tell Goethe of “my inmost reverence ... I am just on the point of writing to him about Egmont, to which I have written the music purely out of love for his poems, which cause me much happiness. Who can be sufficiently thankful for a great poet, the richest jewel of a nation?” Although emphasizing and interpreting the action on stage is customary for incidental music, not all such compositions were as closely integrated with their literary counterparts as Beethoven’s *Egmont*. When Goethe first attended a performance four years later, he expressed his enthusiastic approval, writing, “Beethoven has followed my intentions with admirable genius.”

The powerful overture summarizes the course of the play, from the ominous, slow introduction, suggesting the tread of Spanish forces with the rhythm of the sarabande; the struggles of Count Egmont in the middle section; and the manic transformation of tragedy into triumph in the brilliant coda.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) ***Première Rhapsodie*, L. 116, CD. 124 (1909-10, orch. 1911)**

After fellow composer Gabriel Fauré, Director of the Conservatoire de Paris, appointed him to the institution’s Conseil Supérieur in early 1909, one of Claude Debussy’s first duties was to supply two new works for the upcoming clarinet examinations. The first, *Petite Pièce*, less than two minutes in length, is a monothematic, rather bland composition, written purely as a sight-reading exercise. The second, *Première Rhapsodie*, what Debussy called one of his “most amiable” works, would be the main jury repertoire, challenging the performer to demonstrate their musicality and technical skill by engaging with a variety of different colors and affections. In the calmer, slower sections, for example, the clarinet basks in sweet, lyrical melodies over the peaceful, wave-like sways of the piano accompaniment. The central scherzando passage, in contrast, brings out the clarinet’s humorous side, with staccato articulations and slurred chromatic runs.

Debussy was also given a seat on the jury, sitting in first on female voice trials, then woodwind and piano. It seems that he would have rather spent his time elsewhere, however. After the clarinet examinations in July 1910, he wrote, “one of the participants, Vandercruyssen,

played [the rhapsody] by heart and like a great musician. The others were tidy and mediocre.” The piece is dedicated to Prosper Mimart, a clarinet professor at the school, who premiered the orchestrated version in 1911. Eight years earlier, in 1903, Debussy received a commission for a new work for alto saxophone and orchestra, but he never finished the draft during his lifetime. What eventually became known as his “Second Rhapsody” was completed and orchestrated by Jean Roger-Ducasse in 1919.

“I was inspired to play this piece after seeing my teacher Michael Dee's performance of the piece with Doris Stevenson at a Williams Chamber Players concert. Throughout my time at Williams, Mike's mentorship and advice have been crucial to my growth as a musician, especially as I prepared for the Berkshire Soloist Competition. I first started learning the piece during my semester in Vienna last spring, so I am always reminded of the experience of living there, going to see the Vienna Philharmonic, and eating street food outside the building where our classes were held. While I was abroad, lessons with clarinetist Stefan Neubauer helped me achieve fluidity and confidence as I began to learn the piece.”

“I love playing the flowing, melodic, and beautiful primary theme, in its various harmonic guises, and feeling the music float out and away from me. I also love how the piece is funny in a witty and (mostly) subtle way; finding different ways to bring this character out in performance has been really fun. I love how weird the ending is. The piece is a rhapsody, so there are many examples of really beautiful color changes accomplished via sudden shifts in dynamics on the part of the soloist and changes in the timbres present in the orchestral accompaniment. For me, these moments have a quality of "the bottom dropping out," as if the music suddenly finds itself suspended in midair.”

- Locke Meyer, ‘25

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Romanian Folk Dances, Sz. 68 (1915, orch. 1917)

From the onset of the 20th Century until the beginning of the First World War, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály collected immense quantities of traditional music from Hungary and its neighboring countries. They saw the documentation of this music as an expression of Hungarian nationalism. What is now the country of Hungary was in the 19th Century part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the ruling class spoke German. By collecting folk music, Bartók

and Kodály worked to define their national identity around the indigenous music of the Hungarian people. Bartók also believed that these songs were disappearing, and so felt moved by the need to preserve vanishing traditions. He was mistaken, however, since these traditions weren't disappearing – in reality, they were always changing – and so Bartók was rather attempting to save an imagined past, frozen in time.

These musicological expeditions had a profound impact not only on the enrichment of the region's cultural heritage, but also Bartók's own compositional style. Indeed, one would be pressed to find a work by Bartók written after this period that is left untouched by one or more elements of central European folk music: irregular rhythms, modes, exotic scale combinations, severely simple melodies, and a driving, passionate temperament.

In 1915, Bartók published a sequence of six Romanian dances as piano pieces, adapting them in 1917 for a small chamber orchestra with strings, flutes, clarinets, bassoons, and horns. All are based on fiddle or shepherd's flute tunes that Bartók heard firsthand during his travels.

I. *Bot tánc / Jocul cu bâță* (Stick Dance) - A vigorous dance by young men with sticks.

II. *Brâul* (Sash Dance) - A rather coy dance, in which women hold onto the men's sashes or waist belts.

III. *Topogó / Pe loc* (In One Spot) - A slow version of a stamping dance, with a wistful violin solo meant to imitate the sound of a Middle Eastern flute.

IV. *Bucsumí tánc / Buciumeana* (Dance from Bucsum) - A contemplative mood, first with solo violin, and then full strings with flutes and clarinets.

V. *Román polka / Poarga Românească* (Romanian Polka) - A fast children's dance with a 3-3-2 stamping rhythm.

VI. *Aprózó / Mărunțel* (Fast Dance) - A pair of fast dances with very small steps and quick movements. In the first, immobile women appear completely indifferent to the men's energetic movements, which involve a jump on every fourth beat. The second dance is much quicker, urged forward by vigorous flute flourishes.

George Enescu (1881-1955)

Concertstück (1906)

Before also extending an invitation to Debussy, Gabriel Fauré invited George Enescu to serve on the competition jury at the Conservatoire de Paris. Just like Debussy, Enescu was tasked with writing new pieces for the instrumental examinations, in this instance for flute, harp, trumpet, and viola. Out of the four compositions, his *Concertstück* for Viola and Piano, composed in 1906 and used for the viola jury in 1908, is the most commonly performed today.

As a competition piece, *Concertstück* was designed to provide violists with the opportunity to showcase their virtuosity, combining challenging runs, demanding double-stops, and passionate lyricism. The piece mixes French impressionism with elements of Romanian folk music to create an expansive, single-movement rhapsody. Originally dedicated to Théophile Laforge, the first viola professor at the Paris Conservatory, today *Concertstück* holds a strong, established place in the viola repertoire.

“I first learned this piece in my senior year of high school for my final music jury. I then put it away for a few years, and upon relearning it and working on it throughout my senior year at Williams College, it has been a lot of fun discovering new aspects of the piece that have resulted in different interpretations of the work. When I play this piece, I think of everything that has happened in the last four years, and I try to channel these experiences and emotions into each phrase.”

“Part of why I love this piece is because of the floating French style that consists of dramatic leaps and shifts contrasted with the intensely rhythmic darker sections. The viola part is in a very vocal style, meaning I look for places to breathe in longer melodic passages and to soar on higher notes. The main melody recurs in different octaves throughout the piece, and I try to renew the excitement of the quirky jumps and orchestral responses every time this theme returns. The fast sections exploit the full range of the viola, and I enjoy getting to dig into double stops on the resonant low strings as well as on the upper range of the higher strings. The challenges of this piece arise from trying to make it sound free and flowing with an almost improvised quality while also being technically exact and rhythmically precise, fitting into the dense orchestral part.”

“My professor, Ah Ling Neu, has pushed me to think critically about how I play every single note and how each passage relates to the broader scope of the piece. I hope you can hear some of these aspects in my interpretation of this piece and that the triumphant resolution leaves you with the sense of joy that I feel while playing it.”

- Jessie Burdette, ‘25

Jacob Fanto, ‘25 (b. 2003)
Sungrazer

Sungrazers are a class of comets that venture perilously close to the Sun at their nearest orbital point, known as perihelion. In many ways, their arcs mirror the story of Icarus, the figure from Greek mythology who flew too close to the Sun and met a tragic end. As the comets plunge into the Sun’s fiery atmosphere, intense heat and solar wind vaporize their frozen surfaces, forming brilliant tails of dust and ionized gas which make them some of the brightest and most dramatic comets observed. While some larger sungrazers survive their passage, most are overwhelmed by the Sun’s extreme heat, gravitational stress, and radiation, ultimately disintegrating or exploding. When Earth passes through a trail of cometary debris, we are presented with a beautiful meteor shower, often referred to as “falling” or “shooting stars.”

The opening of *Sungrazer* represents the emptiness and vastness of space, with violins sustaining harmonics over an array of distant, blinking stars. The emergence of the sungrazer comet is heralded by low strings and brass and the orchestra propels into a whirling, shimmering texture of angular canons in the violins and woodwinds. The French horn introduces a melody which rises step by step only to fall below its starting point, a recurring theme which suggests the ambitious, but often doomed, journey of sungrazers. As the comet approaches the Sun, its growing brilliance is reflected in radiant, sweeping passages, which is contrasted with the unyielding percussiveness of its violent struggle against immense tidal forces. Faced with inevitable destruction, the sungrazer hurdles through the Sun’s inferno towards its fate – the music surges to a blazing climax, erupting in a final cataclysm of light and fire as the comet is torn apart. The orchestra itself disintegrates into a recapitulation of the ethereal opening material, once again suspended in empty space. Faint glimmers of shooting stars trail in the sungrazer’s wake, depicted by flickering woodwind bursts, and as a meteor shower fills the sky, the rest of the orchestra builds into a luminous soundscape while the comet’s “fate” theme drifts one final time between the French horn, cello, and flutes.

- Jacob Fanto, ‘25

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)
Violin Concerto, op. 14 (1939-40)
I. Allegro

In 1939, Samuel Barber was commissioned to write a new violin concerto by Samuel Fels, a wealthy industrialist and soap manufacturer who served on the board of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He wanted a new, virtuosic piece by an up-and-coming American composer that would enhance the music career of his adopted son, a twenty-six-year-old violinist from Crimea named Iso Briselli. Briselli was a pupil of the famous pedagogue Carl Flesch and a peer of Barber's in the Curtis Class of 1934.

Barber began work on the concerto in Sils-Maria, Switzerland in the summer of 1939, but the threat of war in Europe soon prompted his retreat to Paris. After Barber sent the first two movements to Briselli, he replied that he was pleased with the "beautiful" work and eager to see the finale. However, Briselli's violin coach, Albert Meiff, had differing opinions, arguing that they had too little opportunity to display the artist's technical powers. To Fels he wrote, "the concerto possesses beautiful romantic moods, many sombre and quite interesting parts ... but it is not a composition gratifying for a violinist to perform." He insisted that the violin part would only survive if it underwent a "surgical operation" by a "specialist" such as himself. It seemed that Meiff saw himself in line with the great violinists throughout time who worked with composers on major concertos, such as Ferdinand David with Mendelssohn, or Joseph Joachim with Brahms. Many prominent musicians at the time, however, knew that Meiff had a tendency to exaggerate his own importance. The composer Vernon Duke once sarcastically wrote to cellist Gregor Piatigorsky,

"As I am writing this, I have before [me] the countenance of Albert Meiff, whose real name, I understand, is Ascha Meifetz. It is not generally known that Jascha Heifetz has spent most of his life imitating my friend, Ascha Meifetz, and upon achieving some success he made it necessary for the poor man to change his name. It is said of Mr. Meifetz that wherever he plays in public, he interrupts the proceedings to exclaim: 'what tone!'"

After finishing the concerto at the Pocono Lake Preserve in Pennsylvania, Barber sent the final movement to Briselli, a short perpetuum mobile. This time, Briselli replied with distaste, asserting that "it is not very violinistic, it does not fit the other two movements musically, and it is inconsequential." One can hear the voice of Meiff through all of this. Barber was subsequently

removed from his contract, and in the intended premiere performances in January of 1940, Briselli substituted Barber's concerto with Dvořák.

The delayed premiere, by Albert Spalding with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy in February, 1941, nevertheless, was enthusiastically received. In a time when atonality and 12-tone compositional techniques were pushing for wider recognition, Barber's neo-romanticism was welcomed with open arms. The piece possesses a craftsmanship that extends to all elements of the music, from the varied and vital rhythms to the natural and expansive melodies (that there were melodies at all was enough cause for rejoicing!). The critic Virgil Thompson wrote that the concerto "cannot fail to charm by its gracious lyrical plentitude and its complete absence of tawdry swank ... the only reason Barber gets away with elementary musical methods is that his heart is pure." Barber rarely responded to experimental trends and often pursued the path of poetic lyricism. "I myself write always as I wish, and without a tremendous desire to find the latest thing possible ... this takes a certain amount of courage."

"When I play the Barber, I am often reminded of my time spent in the Berkshires. The opening, sweeping melody always takes me back to the sunny summer afternoons of my childhood spent on the big, green fields of Tanglewood, walking past crowds of people in lawn chairs enjoying wine and cheese or passing around a frisbee. One looks around and only sees rolling hills blanketed by trees, or perhaps spies the clear, blue Stockbridge Bowl in the distance. In the Berkshires, you are always surrounded by beauty. Even at Williams, one can simply walk outside and hike up Stone Hill whenever they please, or wander past Cole Field to watch the Hoosic River pass calmly by."

"Among the Barber Violin Concerto's best qualities is its straightforwardness and sincerity. It is refreshingly free from arbitrary tricks and technical mannerisms; instead it is songful, simple, and unrestrained. It also doesn't have any sense of competition between soloist and orchestra that one feels, for example, in the Brahms or Tchaikovsky concertos. Instead, Barber opts for a more intimate, chamber music-like setting, aided by his rather light orchestration and the unique addition of a piano to the ensemble. I couldn't think of a more perfect piece to perform in the Student Soloist Gala with the Berkshire Symphony. It is my celebration of being lucky enough to study at Williams College and live in the beautiful Berkshires."

- Richard O'Donnell, '27

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

***Appalachian Spring* (1944)**

VII. Doppio Movimento

VIII. Moderato - Coda

“For a long time I harbored the pleasant notion that I was a child of the twentieth century, having been born on 14 November, 1900. But some authorities claim that the twentieth century began on 1 January, 1901. I calculate, therefore, that I spent my first forty-eight days in the nineteenth century – an alarming thought!”

After the famous American modern dancer Martha Graham choreographed a solo dance to his complex *Piano Variations*, called *Dithyrambic*, Aaron Copland had always hoped of collaborating with her on a new stage work. Ten years later, Graham proposed to Copland a dark ballet based on Ancient Greek story of the vengeance of Medea, but he declined, as he thought the script was “too severe.” (Samuel Barber was later commissioned to compose *Medea*, op. 23, which was premiered by Graham and her dance company in 1946).

In July of 1942, Graham was offered a commission by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, one of the great music patrons of the twentieth century, to fund the creation of three new ballets. In turn, Graham commissioned the composers Paul Hindemith, Darius Milhaud, and Copland. Copland and Graham soon began to work together on a script, under the working title *House of Victory*. Copland also used the title *Ballet for Martha* while composing, a subtitle that the score still holds today. Set in early 19th Century Pennsylvania, the story takes place in a newly-built farmhouse and centers around the newly-married couple who are to live in it. Copland writes, “The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, which their new domestic partnership invites. An old neighbor suggests, now and then, the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house.”

The ballet’s final name, *Appalachian Spring*, was found and chosen by Graham shortly before the premiere, but *after* Copland had completed the music. It was taken from the poem cycle “The Bridge,” by Hart Crane, whose work provided creative inspiration for Graham while she wrote the script. “[The title] really has nothing to do with the ballet,” Graham remarked, “I just liked it.” Copland similarly jested, “I can’t begin to tell you how often people have come up

to me and said, ‘Mr. Copland, when I hear your score I can just *see* the Appalachians and *feel* spring!’ Well, I am willing if they are!”

The ballet premiered on October 30, 1944 in the Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., alongside Hindemith’s *Hérodiade* and Milhaud’s *Jeux de printemps*. Because of limited space in the concert hall, the ballet was written for an ensemble of only thirteen instruments, including strings, flute, clarinet, bassoon, and piano. Six months later, after the ballet had received immense praise and won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize in Music, Copland arranged most of the music from the original ballet into a suite for orchestra, eliminating only a few sections he felt were primarily of choreographic interest. The music was, like its 1938 predecessor *Billy the Kid*, conceived in the composer’s vernacular, deliberately American, “populist” style, suggesting the tradition of American pastoral idealism. The edges are rounder, and the sonorities are more accessible, than many of Copland’s “modernist” works, such as the *Piano Variations* or the *Symphonic Ode*. Suggestions of Shaker melodies abound throughout the score; the theme-and-variations treatment of “Simple Gifts” is often cited as the core of the work’s simplistic ingenuity. Subtly, however, Copland combines this folksy feel with a rhythmic edge influenced by Stravinsky, particularly his ballet-cantata *Les Noces*, which depicts a traditional Russian wedding ceremony.

Copland writes the following about the final two movements of the suite:

7. ‘Calm and flowing. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her farmer-husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme, “Simple Gifts,” sung by a clarinet.’
8. ‘Moderate. Coda. The bride takes her place among her new neighbours. At the end the couple are left “quiet and strong in their new house.”

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