

# Classical Music Appreciation—Introductory

## Session 1 notes

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### Tonight's agenda

Administrivia

*Barber, Adagio for Strings*<sup>1</sup>

Introductions

*Grieg, Peer Gynt Suite No. 1*

Theme-and-Variations Form

*Britten, Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*

*Rodrigo, Concierto (for guitar) de Aranjuez*

### Samuel Barber (1910-1981) (born West Chester, PA; died New York, NY) Adagio for strings



Barber studied at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia from 1924 (aged 14!) to 1932. The Adagio is an arrangement for string orchestra that Barber made from a movement from his String Quartet No. 1. This piece was composed in response to a request by a quartet of his Curtis friends, who wanted a new piece to play on an upcoming European tour. Although he struggled to turn out the work, Barber himself was stunned by the beauty of the slow movement even before he had heard it played, describing it to a friend as a “knockout.”

The 9½ minute Adagio is built on a single thematic idea, which is developed on “sequences,” in which a group of notes is repeated slightly higher or lower. (This technique is a simple form of *variation*, which we’ll talk about later tonight.) The music builds to a huge climax and then abruptly subsides, reprising the opening theme in all its simplicity.

If this piece sounds eerily familiar, it might be because it was played in the films

- Platoon
- The Elephant Man
- Amelie
- Lorenzo’s Oil
- S1m0ne

It was also played at JFK’s funeral. The work was voted “saddest classical work ever” by BBC listeners in a 2004 poll.

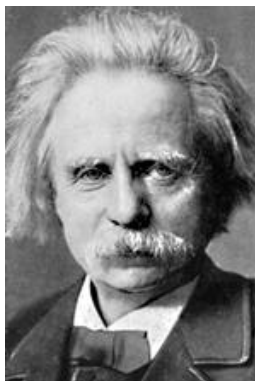
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<sup>1</sup> Italics indicate music we’ll listen to.

Barber himself later arranged the work for chorus. Thus Barber developed the piece in three separate settings: string quartet (in the context of additional movements), string orchestra, and chorus. Such reuse of material by composers is a recurring technique that spans the entire history of music. Some other examples are:

- Berlioz: Harold in Italy; Rob Roy overture
- Holst: St Paul's Suite (strings), Suite in F (wind band)
- Copland: Fanfare for the Common Man; Symphony No. 3
- Handel: The Triumph of Time and Truth (1757) consists mostly of reused material

### **Edvard Grieg (1843-1907): Peer Gynt Suites**



Grieg was a younger contemporary of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), the great Norwegian playwright and poet. Ibsen wrote the dramatic poem Peer Gynt, never intending it to be performed. One of Grieg's major missions in life was to bring Norwegian folk tunes to prominence through classical music. Ibsen's epic poem makes use of Norwegian folk tales, and Grieg collaborated with Ibsen to illustrate episodes of the poem with music. Grieg completed 23 pieces in all for Peer Gynt. He later collected nine of those pieces into the two suites, Peer Gynt Nos. 1 and 2.

#### **Suite No. 1**

The poem tells of the adventures of Peer Gynt, a regular-guy farm hand. (The story is actually an allegory of the human life experience). After a drunken night of indiscretion, he runs away on a journey of debauchery. At one point he sleeps with a troll's daughter, and later discovers that a large dowry is available for marrying her. He approaches her father on the subject, and it is this episode that's illustrated in the **fourth movement**: In the Hall of a Mountain King. The Troll king warns Peer that trolls and men are different, and when Peer discovers that in becoming a troll he will forfeit his humanness, he changes his mind about the marriage. The king is enraged, and sets the troll children on Peer, a violent scene well illustrated by the music.

Peer decides to leave the country (Norway) to leave his dissolute past behind him, but before he does he stops to see his mother, Aase, to say goodbye. He finds her sick and dying. It is this scene that is illustrated by the **second movement**.

Having fled to Morocco, his fortunes continue to be volatile, and he manages to assemble a harem of dancing girls, the lead dancer being one Anitra. Anitra's dance is the **third movement** of Suite 1.

After Anitra robs Peer and runs off with his horse and riches, Peer wakes up in the desert and ponders his lot. It is this scene that is illustrated in the **first movement**, Morning.

*This is a very abbreviated synopsis of Ibsen's Peer Gynt poem, intended only to put the music into the context of the story. You can find very good extended summaries of Ibsen's Peer Gynt story on the Web. One of the best is at <http://www.awerty.com/peergt2.html>*

### **The Theme and Variations form**

*Theme and variations* is perhaps one of the most easily recognizable musical forms. A theme (i.e. a tune) is stated, usually at the beginning of the work, and the remainder of the work consists of *variations* on that theme. Variations may be based on many devices, such as:

- harmonic — the theme may be worked through different keys, e.g. major to minor, or accompanied by altered harmonies
- melodic — the theme may be elaborated with more energetic note sequences
- contrapuntal — where two or more themes are played simultaneously, or one theme is played against itself with time delay (fugue).
- rhythmic — the rhythm may be altered, keeping the pitch sequence relatively constant
- timbre, instrumentation — the theme is passed around the instruments of the orchestra

Of course, some or all of these devices may be in play simultaneously, taking the music quite far away from its thematic origins.

## Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) (England) Variations And Fugue On A Theme Of Purcell (Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra)



0. The work begins with the full orchestra quoting the (rather simple) theme.
- Variations:
1. Woodwinds. The me with little or no variation
  2. Brass: some variation beginning to creep in
  3. Strings: more variation now.
  4. Percussion: limited pitch available!
  5. Full orchestra: theme restated.
  6. Flutes and piccolos. An energetic variation showing off the flute's agility.  
Prominent harp accompaniment
  7. Oboes: Slowing things down.
  8. Clarinets. Note prominent tuba accompaniment.
  9. Bassoons: a jocular mood, almost poking fun at the bassoon's sound.
  10. Violins: mazurka rhythm
  11. Violas: slow and thoughtful
  12. Cellos: continuing the slow and thoughtful mood, showing off their range.
  13. Double basses: staccato intro to an almost lyrical passage leading to a humorous ending.
  14. Harp
  15. French horns: almost a purely transitional interlude. See how far we've come from the original theme. It's still a variation, though quite radical by now.
  16. Trumpets, showing off their skill and nifty articulation..
  17. Trombones, followed closely by tuba, who then engages the trombones in a very brief canon.
  18. Tympani (kettle drum) and percussion. Percussion is largely pitch challenged, although the three notes played by the tympani are enough to remind us of the theme. The xylophone provides some tuneful variation.
  19. Fugue. A fugue consists of a theme, or series of themes played against itself with a time delay. Thus, fugue is a particular form of counterpoint. Here, the fugue is introduced by the piccolo. After 3½ bars the flute joins in, and the other woodwinds join in sequence, in descending order of pitch. The first theme of the fugue is recognizable as a variation of the original theme of the work. When the bassoons join in, the piccolo moves onto a new theme, again a variation of the work's original theme. Strings join in, again in descending order of pitch. The harp provides a brief interlude without interference from the rest of the orchestra (otherwise its light sound would be drowned out), and finally brass and

percussion add their considerable weight. Eventually, against the still furiously progressing fugue, the original theme returns in majestic style to bring the piece to a satisfying conclusion.

Here's a simplified map of the entries in the fugue section:

- woodwind
  - piccolo
  - flutes
  - oboes
  - clarinets
  - bassoons
- strings
  - violins
  - violas
  - cellos
  - double basses
- harp
- brass
  - horns
  - trumpets
  - trombones
- percussion

### **Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999) (Spain) Concierto de Aranjuez**

*Guitar concerto with symphony orchestra (Modern Period)*



Blind from the age of three after a bout with diphtheria, Joaquín Rodrigo was a very significant creative, critical and pedagogical force in contemporary Spanish music. Ironically perhaps, he identified his blindness as a major factor in leading him to a career in music.

After early training in his home town Valencia, Rodrigo went to Paris, as did so many Spanish musicians and artists, where from 1927 he studied with Paul Dukas. It was in Paris that Rodrigo met and married Victoria Kamhi, a young and promising Turkish pianist. By 1936 Paul Dukas had died and the Spanish civil war had broken out. These

events prompted the Rodrigos to move to Germany to wait out the war in the Black Forest, where they lived very simply off their earnings from teaching private lessons. After the war ended in 1939, they returned to Spain and settled in Madrid, where Joaquín divided his time among composing, writing music critiques, and serving as Professor of the History of Music at the University of Madrid.

It was on a visit to Paris in 1938 that Rodrigo met the guitarist Regino Sainz de la Maza. Rodrigo was so inspired by this encounter that he resolved to write a guitar concerto (an instrument he did not himself play). The result of this resolution was of course the *Concierto de Aranjuez* for guitar and orchestra, and Rodrigo fittingly dedicated it to Sainz de la Maza. Introduced in 1940, it propelled him into the front ranks of Spanish composers. Over the years, it has become one of the most widely performed concertos, although often it has been played in transcriptions for instruments other than the guitar.

Regino Sainz de la Maza was, appropriately, the soloist at the concerto's premiere in Barcelona on November 9, 1940. The work is lightly and transparently scored, so that the soloist can be easily heard, but the orchestra is nevertheless sizable: piccolo and two flutes, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets and strings.

The concerto takes its name from a famous royal residence, a palace on the banks of the Tagus River to the south of Madrid. The castle has been called the most beautiful and most cheerful of all the Spanish royal residences. The composer has said, in the notes to the concerto, that one "may fancy seeing the ghost of Goya, held in thrall by melancholia. . . . [I]n its themes there linger the fragrance of magnolias, the singing of birds and the gushing of fountains. [It] is meant to sound like the hidden breeze that stirs the tree tops in its parks; it should be only as strong as a butterfly, and as dainty as a *verónica*."

The music evokes the era of sixteenth-century kings, Charles X and Philip II. In it, Rodrigo's compositional style embodies the rhythms and melodic inflections of Spanish folk music of the particular region surrounding Aranjuez and joins them with his own melodic invention and colorful orchestration. Rodrigo employs the structure of a Baroque concerto: three movements in a fast-slow-fast arrangement, with distinct alternation between solo and orchestral passages in the outer movements.

### **First Movement**

Delicacy is combined with rhythmic energy in the concerto's dancing first movement. In Rodrigo's own words, "the *Allegro con spirito* is animated by a rhythmic spirit and vigor without either of the two themes contained within it interrupting its relentless pace."

Listening to this movement, you may fancy you hear a large number of themes, never mind just two. In fact, listening with a theme-and-variations mindset, you can link back almost all the material in the movement to one or other of the two themes that Rodrigo acknowledges.

## **Second Movement**

The middle movement, a romantic *Adagio* of reflective character, has an improvisational quality<sup>2</sup> and delivers a feeling of melancholy passion and romance that suggests a Moorish influence. Of this movement, Rodrigo observed “the *Adagio* represents a dialogue between guitar and solo instruments (English horn, bassoon, oboe, horn, etc). There is a constant and persistent beat supporting the entire sound structure of this movement.” Towards the end of the movement an extended guitar cadenza leads to a lush orchestral climax.

## **Third Movement**

The final movement, *Allegro gentile*, is a rondo whose folk-like principal theme recalls a courtly dance. The combination of duple and triple time maintains a taut tempo right to the closing bar. Notice how, at the opening, the guitar cleverly manages to play the theme in canon at the octave.

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<sup>2</sup> Yet interestingly, all the twiddly bits that sound so improvised are fully written out in Rodrigo’s score.

