

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY
FEBRUARY 4, 2024
PROGRAM NOTES
ORCHESTRA BON BONS FROM FAVORITE OPERAS

Jacques Offenbach: *Orpheus in the Underworld*

German-born Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) was accepted as a cello student to the Paris Conservatoire when he was only 14, but school didn't agree with him much; after only a year he left and took up a position playing in the orchestra of the Opera-Comique. He soon established himself as a first-rate cellist acquiring the nickname "Paganini of the Cello" appearing in Europe's musical capitals alongside musicians such as Franz Liszt and Felix Mendelssohn.

Offenbach's first opera, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, was written in 1858. It is a lampoon of the ancient story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Offenbach didn't write the well-known overture, that was done by the Austrian Carl Binder in 1860 for use in the first Viennese performances of the opera.

Amilcare Ponchielli: *Dance of the Hours*

Amilcare Ponchielli (1834-1886) wrote the gloomy and very successful opera *La Gioconda* in 1876. *Dance of the Hours* appears at the end of the third act, in which the character Alvise, who heads the Inquisition, receives his guests in a large and elegant ballroom adjoining the death chamber. It depicts the hours of the day through solo and ensemble dances. Performed on its own, the *Dance of the Hours* was at one time one of the best known and most frequently performed ballets. It became even more widely known after it was used in the 1940 Disney animated film *Fantasia* where it is depicted as a comic ballet with dancing hippos, ostriches, alligators and elephants. Older listeners might recall Spike Jones's irreverent version or Allan Sherman's song *Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh*, describing a miserable time at summer camp.

Georges Bizet: *Carmen Suite No. 2*

Georges Bizet (1838-1875) wrote his opera *Carmen* in 1874, which was first performed at the Opéra-Comique on March 3, 1875. The scandal which ensued is well-known, but this was due more to the subject matter than the music. But success came quickly and made *Carmen* the most performed French opera in the world. Bizet didn't get to enjoy this success: he died on June 3, 1875, the day of the 33rd performance. The two suites derived from the score are not by Bizet, but were arranged by Bizet's friend and fellow composer Ernest Guiraud (1837-1892), who was originally from New Orleans. Guiraud later became a highly respected teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, naming Satie and Dukas among his students. Purists may cavil at the "Carmen's Greatest Hits" nature of these suites, but given the marvelous tunes, colorful orchestration, and exotic nature of the music, their popularity is undimmed.

Ruggero Leoncavallo: *Intermezzo from I Pagliacci*

The short, two-act opera, *Pagliacci*, was written by Ruggero Leoncavallo (1858-1919) and first produced in 1892, and conducted by Arturo Toscanini. It is the only opera by Leoncavallo that is still regularly performed. The morbid story was apparently based on a real-life incident from Leoncavallo's youth. Canio (Pagliaccio in the theater) kills his wife Nedda (Columbine on stage) in a fit of jealous rage during a performance.

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Pietro Mascagni: *Intermezzo from Cavalleria Rusticana*

In June, 1888 the Milan-based music publisher Edoardo Sonzogno announced a competition for young composers looking for operas his firm could publish. Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945) qualified: he was 25 years old and Italian. He had recently completed his studies at the Milan Conservatory where his teachers included Ponchielli and he shared a room with Puccini. For a libretto he chose the play *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry), a prime example of verismo written in 1884 by Sicilian author Giovanni Verga. Mascagni realized he had written something special and sent the score to Puccini for comments. In turn, Puccini forwarded it to his own publisher, the eminent firm of Giulio Ricordi who found no interest in it and rejected it. Sonzogno felt differently, awarding the opera first prize in his competition and scheduled a performance in the spring of 1890 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome. It was an immediate and immense success. By the end of 1891 it was produced in no fewer than 24 musical capitals. Mascagni's dozen further operas never duplicated the magic of *Cavalleria rusticana*. Its success ignited world-wide enthusiasm for verismo, which would dominate opera for a few decades.

In writing *Cavalleria rusticana*, Mascagni re-used music from previous works, including his Gloria Mass. The famous Intermezzo was originally written as a solo piano piece several months before the opera.

Giacomo Puccini: *Intermezzo from Manon Lescaut*

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) wrote the four-act opera *Manon Lescaut* between 1889 and 1892, and premiered it in Turin in February, 1893. The libretto was based on the 1731 novel *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux, et de Manon Lescaut* by the Abbé Prévost.

At the end of Act II, Manon has been banished, along with women of loose morals, to the French colony of Louisiana. The *Intermezzo* represents the journey to Havre for embarkation.

Giuseppe Verdi: *Triumphal March and Ballet from Aida*

Verdi's (1830-1901) four-act opera *Aida* was commissioned for the Italian Theater in Cairo which had opened in 1869. Verdi was paid \$20,000, an enormous amount at the time. The premiere was on Christmas Eve 1871 and created a sensation. The *Triumphal March* comes from Act II, Scene 2. It is one of the grandest conceptions of musical art in all opera.

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Gioachino Rossini: *William Tell Overture*

Of the 39 operas written by Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), only a few – *The Barber of Seville*, *Cinderella*, and *William Tell* – appear with any frequency on stages these days. But that can't be said of the overtures; many of them are quite popular and appear on concerts regularly. It's not hard to hear why: they are marvels of composition with fine tunes, brilliant orchestration, and infectious rhythmic vitality.

At its first performance, in Paris on August 3, 1829, *William Tell* was received well by critics and musicians, but the public found the nearly four hour opera too long and boring. Large cuts were soon made in performances. But the overture was retained and immediately took its place in the repertoire. It is practically a miniature four-movement symphony. None of its music is drawn from the opera itself. The first section is a slow movement featuring five solo cellos with basses. The writing is remarkable for the variety of color the composer obtained from this instrumental combination. The second movement is popularly known as "The Storm", although the score is simply marked "Allegro". As storm music though, it is highly descriptive as anyone who watches Warner Bros. cartoons will be aware. The storm blows over giving way to the third movement, which sounds like the calm after the storm, featuring one of the most famous English horn solos in all orchestral music. It has been suggested that Rossini was trying to portray an Alpine shepherd calling to his scattered flock. The fourth movement, the March of the Swiss Guards, is famous beyond any need to describe. Hi Yo, Silver! (Hi Yo, Silver! is often misheard as Hi Ho, Silver!)

~Marty Haub