

Midsummer in Midwinter

February 4 & 5, 2012

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809 – 1847)

Music from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

- I. Intermezzo
- II. Nocturne
- III. Scherzo

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840 – 1893)

Variations on a Rococo Theme, op. 33

Barbara Thiem, cello

INTERMISSION

Antonín Dvořák
(1841 – 1904)

Notturmo in B Major, op. 40, for strings

Camille Saint-Saëns
(1835 – 1921)

Symphony No. 2 in A Minor, op. 55

- I. Allegro marcato; Allegro appassionato
- II. Adagio
- III. Scherzo: Presto
- IV. Prestissimo

Overview: Felix Mendelssohn

Born: February 3, 1809, in Hamburg

Died: November 4, 1847, in Leipzig

Work Composed: Overture (opus 21) in 1826, incidental music (opus 61) in 1842

Why It Matters: The Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, composed when Mendelssohn was only seventeen, rocketed him to international fame. Sixteen years later, he composed additional incidental music that built upon the Overture and is probably the most famous incidental music.



To the Noble Artist, who, surrounded by the Baal-like worship of debased art, has been able, by his genius and science, to preserve faithfully, like another Elijah, the worship of true art, and once more accustom our ear, amid the whirl of empty, frivolous sounds, to the pure tones of sympathetic feeling and legitimate harmony: to the Great Master, who makes us conscious of the unity of his conception, through the whole maze of his creation, from the soft whispering to the mighty raging of the elements. —Inscribed in grateful remembrance of Mendelssohn by Prince Albert at Buckingham Palace on April 24, 1847.

For **Felix Mendelssohn**, whose music continued in the traditions of refinement and grace that Mozart left to the world at the end of the Classical Era, the flowing eloquence of Shakespeare was the perfect inspiration for his music. A stunningly gifted prodigy, Mendelssohn composed the overture for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1826, while only seventeen years old. It was an instant sensation. Musicologist George Grove declared it “the greatest marvel of early maturity that the world has ever seen in music.” Mendelssohn intended the overture as a concert work, not for a performance of the play, but a commission from King Frederick William IV of Prussia would lead him to return to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1842 to add incidental music, turning the play and music into a surprisingly seamless experience. The overture premiered on February 20, 1827, in Szczecin, Poland, which was then part of Prussia. Mendelssohn had just turned eighteen, and had to travel eighty miles in a terrible snowstorm to get to the concert, which was his first public appearance and included his Concerto in A-flat Major for Two Pianos and Orchestra and Weber's *Konzertstück in F Minor* (both with Mendelssohn at the piano) and a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for which Mendelssohn joined the first violin section. The incidental music was premiered with the play on October 14, 1843, in Potsdam. Despite the sixteen-year gap from beginning to end of the project, Mendelssohn retained key aspects of the Overture to give the incidental music an amazing cohesiveness, and Schumann noted that the incidental music still had the “bloom of youth.”

About Felix Mendelssohn: Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was shockingly gifted as a child. He painted with skill, wrote flowing poetry, succeeded in sports, spoke several languages, played several instruments, and completed one of the great chamber works of the nineteenth century—his *Octet for Strings*—at the age of only sixteen. He was born into a wealthy Jewish-German family, and his talents were encouraged by his parents and, most of all, by his sister, with whom Felix would maintain the closest of friendships throughout his life. He made his concert debut in 1818, met and befriended Goethe when he was only 12, and in 1826 (a year after the *Octet*) composed his overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which established his reputation internationally. Despite all that success, it was *after* three years of study at Berlin University that he finally decided upon a career in music!

At the age of 20, Mendelssohn became a champion of the music of Bach, which had passed into obscurity throughout Europe. He led the first performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* since

the composer's death in 1750. Near the end of the year, he made his first visit to England, where he was widely lauded as both pianist and composer. After touring in Scotland, he returned to the European mainland to spend two years touring Germany, Austria and Italy. He visited England again in 1832 and 1833 and became a popular guest with what would become the London Philharmonic. In 1835, he took the conducting post with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. In 1843, he established a music conservatory in Leipzig, assisted by Robert Schumann. In 1847, he made his tenth and final visit to England, where he befriended Queen Victoria and taught piano to Prince Albert. In May of that year, his beloved sister Fanny died and the shock of this loss, together with the pressure of severe overwork, led to his own death six months later.

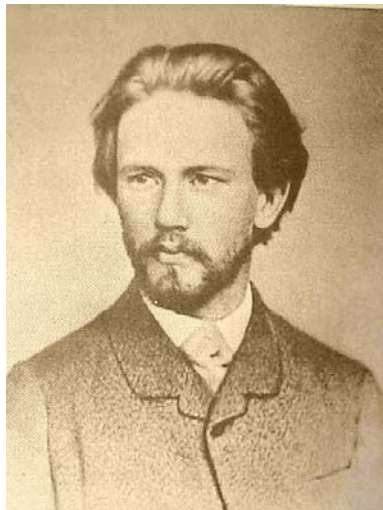
Overview: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840, in Votkinsk, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893, in St. Petersburg, Russia

Work Composed: 1876 – 1877

Why It Matters: Though seen as a quintessential Romantic composer, Tchaikovsky escaped from the intensity of his Romantic creative process (which often involved painful exploration of his tumultuous personal life) by delving into Classical forms. *Variations on a Rococo Theme* is one of his best neo-Classical compositions.



Because of its opportunities for soul expansion, music has ever attracted the strong, free sons of the earth. The most profound truths, the most blasphemous things, the most terrible ideas, may be incorporated within the walls of a symphony, and the police be none the wiser. Supposing that some Russian professional supervisor of artistic anarchy really knew what arrant doctrines Tchaikovsky preached! It is its freedom from the meddling hand of the censor that makes of music a playground for great brave souls. —James Gibbons Huneker.

The tumultuous peaks and valleys of **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's** private life are often reflected in his music. In three short weeks in the Autumn of 1876 while studying Wagner at Bayreuth, Tchaikovsky composed his epic tone poem *Francesca da Rimini*, about a woman who fell hopelessly in love with her husband's brother only to be murdered along with him by her husband and condemned to an eternity caught in a whirlwind in hell. For Tchaikovsky, who was considering a loveless marriage to hide his sexuality, the story of Francesca must have been deeply compelling. It was typical of Tchaikovsky to strike at the iron and retreat; he would write a deeply personal work and then turn away from his troubles by immersing himself in the "pure music" of Classical forms.

So it is not surprising that his next complete work was *Variations on a Rococo Theme, op. 33*, a theme and variations that would be his closest effort to a complete cello concerto. The theme is actually Tchaikovsky's own, though vaguely in Rococo style. Always humble and pragmatic when writing for instruments less familiar to him, Tchaikovsky sought the help of cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen in writing the piece. Fitzenhagen would advise Tchaikovsky in writing an idiomatic solo cello part and give the premiere of the piece in its original form in Moscow on November 30, 1877. Fitzenhagen would then discard the final variation and change the order of the rest of Tchaikovsky's variations, much to Tchaikovsky's dismay, and it is this version that is generally performed today. Eventually, Tchaikovsky reluctantly signed off on the revisions.

About Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: If any one composer can be said to encapsulate the essence of Russianness, it is Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), and yet he was the one major composer of nineteenth-century Russia who cannot be bound to the Russian nationalist school. Tchaikovsky paid heavily for his determination to be true to himself above all else; few major artists have ever suffered the sort of critical savaging that was meted out to him, which seems in striking contrast to his welcome role in today's concert halls.

Tchaikovsky was born in the provincial town of Votkinsk, where his father was a mining engineer. His music studies began at home, and included piano and music theory lessons. In 1848, the family moved to St. Petersburg, and in 1850 Pyotr was sent to a boarding school in the city. After extensive law studies, he found employment at the Ministry of Justice. At 22, he left law and entered the city music conservatory to study with Anton Rubinstein, a composer and stupendous pianist. In 1866, he went to Moscow, where Rubinstein's brother Nikolai appointed Tchaikovsky professor of harmony at the conservatory. He was temporarily swept up in the wave of nationalism, particularly after meeting Rimsky-Korsakov, but soon returned to his cosmopolitan instincts.

1877 was the most crucial year in Tchaikovsky's life. He met Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy widow who, impressed by some of his early music, commissioned him to produce violin and piano arrangements of his more recent works. The relationship would last fourteen years and bring many commissions, though they never met again. Tchaikovsky also met Antonina Milyukova, who, in May 1877, started sending Tchaikovsky infatuated love letters in which she threatened to take her life unless he responded. Initially cautious, Tchaikovsky eventually saw his unstable admirer as a solution to his private homosexuality. Within seven weeks of meeting her, and unbeknownst to most of his family, the two were married. The marriage was (not surprisingly) a disaster, with the couple separating in a few weeks and Tchaikovsky sinking into an overwhelming depression.

By the 1880s, Tchaikovsky's music was being played as far away as the United States. After a period of isolation and prolific composition, Tchaikovsky moved to Moscow to take up a second successful career as a conductor. (On an incredibly successful visit to the United States in 1891, Tchaikovsky conducted the opening night at what was to become Carnegie Hall.)

The circumstances of Tchaikovsky's death remain controversial to this day. The official version was that he had died from cholera after drinking unboiled water, but in the 1970s a Russian scholar produced a new account of Tchaikovsky's last days that established suicide as the cause of death. Shortly before his death, Tchaikovsky had been caught *in flagrante* with a nephew of a high-ranking official. Tchaikovsky's law-school colleagues, determined to avert a scandal that would reflect badly on them, summoned Tchaikovsky before a "court of honor" on October 31 and ordered him to commit suicide. Two days later, he took arsenic.

Overview: Antonín Dvořák

Born: September 8, 1841, in Nelahozeves, a Bohemian village near Prague

Died: May 1, 1904, in Prague

Work Composed: 1882 – 1882

Why It Matters: Dvořák's middle period works are overshadowed by his *Symphony from the New World* and other later pieces that are performed more. These middle period works are mature Dvořák and a key insight into his later successes.



The music of the people is like a rare and lovely flower growing amidst encroaching weeds. Thousands pass it, while others trample it under foot, and thus the chances are that it will perish before it is seen by the one discriminating spirit who will prize it above all else. The fact that no one has as yet arisen to make the most of it does not prove that nothing is there.—Antonín Dvořák, in a *Harper's Magazine* interview, 1895.

For a piece that Dvořák valued as much as his **Notturmo (Nocturne) in B Major, op. 40**, the work certainly has a confusing genesis. The basic ideas were formulated around 1870 and intended as a slow movement for the String Quartet in E Minor, op. 9, which Dvořák opted not to publish. He then reassigned the movement to another string quartet, also unpublished, and then rewrote it for the String Quintet in G Major, op. 18. By the time his publisher, Simrock, published the Quintet, Dvořák had already removed the movement again, expanded it for full strings, and dubbed it Nocturne, op. 40. But there was still another rub: Simrock had published Dvořák's Symphonic Variations as op. 40, so they would have to reassign the Variations to op. 78. This all may seem like a complicated mess, but it was sadly typical of the treatment of Dvořák's early and middle works. Not only did Dvořák reassign opus numbers, but Simrock often published works with higher opus numbers to pass them off as newer music. It was not until Dvořák was an international success that Simrock seemed to give his compositions the serious and methodical care they deserved.

Dvořák was proud of the Notturmo. He conducted the premiere in Prague, recommended it other conductors, conducted the first performance in London in March of 1884, and continued conducting it at concerts at home and abroad throughout his career.

About Antonín Dvořák: Born in Bohemia, **Antonín Dvořák** (1841-1904) spent his uneventful younger days assisting his family and studying music whenever possible. A public scholarship enabled him to get a good education and made him a lifelong supporter of state arts funding and grants. Deeply influenced by the music of Wagner, Dvořák had the opportunity to play in a concert of Wagner excerpts led by the composer. Dvořák not only considered the experience life-changing, but even followed Wagner in the streets, completely fascinated with him. Dvořák played viola in the Prague National Theatre Orchestra from 1864-1873. Bedrich Smetana became principal conductor in 1866, also having a powerful impact. Dvořák left the orchestra in 1873 to devote his life to composition, and his Third Symphony was premiered soon after, winning him the Austrian national prize and the attention of Johannes Brahms, who was on the jury. Two years later, Dvořák won the same prize with his *Moravian Duets*, but his *Slavonic Dances* would soon establish him as the most significant and most popular Czech composer. His fame and fortune on the rise, Dvořák found himself in a difficult position: Leading composers of the day were expected to live in Vienna, but he knew his folksy style would only bring ridicule among the polished Viennese. Under intense pressure from his publisher to move to Vienna, Dvořák luckily won a position as Professor

of Composition at the Prague Conservatory, but quickly gave it up when he was offered a shockingly lucrative directorship of the National Conservatory of Music in New York in 1891.

Once in the United States, Dvořák turned his attention primarily to Native American and African American music, which eventually culminated in his *New World Symphony*. In 1895, he returned to teach at the Prague Conservatory and became its director in 1901, and his sixtieth birthday was celebrated as a national holiday. His final years were spent working on tone poems and operas, though, sadly, only one of his operas—*Rusalka*—ever gained any popularity. He died of heart failure in 1904.

Overview: Camille Saint-Saëns

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers

Work Composed: 1859

Why It Matters: Saint-Saëns' Symphony No. 3—the *Organ Symphony*—overshadows his other symphonic works, which are brilliant.



He knows everything, but lacks inexperience.—Hector Berlioz, regarding Camille Saint-Saëns.

Camille Saint-Saëns found symphonic composition so easy that he discarded his first symphony, written as an assignment at the Paris Conservatory, and never paid attention to it again. It was discovered in the library of the Paris Conservatory (along with Bizet's Symphony in C) and not played until the twentieth century. (The Chamber Orchestra of the Springs gave the local premiere of during the 2010 – 2011 season.) Saint-Saëns' Symphony in F Major, "Urbs Roma," would win him the top prize in a composition competition by the Société Sainte-Cécile of Bordeaux, would be performed in Paris and Bordeaux (the second performance conducted by Saint-Saëns), and yet would be suppressed by him. It wasn't until his Symphony No. 1 in E-flat Major, which astonished critics and even follow composers like Hector Berlioz at its premier in 1853, that Saint-Saëns would officially number one of his symphonies. Surprisingly, his **Symphony No. 2 in A Minor, op. 55** would be more conservative and for smaller forces, following Classical form more closely and even featuring a fugue as its main theme for the first movement. Each succeeding movement takes on a very different character, from the Beethovenian pastoral mood of the second, the frenetic pace of the third (which clearly foreshadows the scherzo of the *Organ Symphony*), and the Italian fourth movement that owes no small debt to the finale of Mendelssohn's Fourth Symphony "Italian." It is precisely because symphonic composition was so easy for Saint-Saëns that we know so little about this piece; his astonishing skills actually got in the way of originality or innovation. Considering that 1859 also saw the premieres of Brahms' Second Serenade, Liszt's *Totentanz*, and Guonod's *Faust*, a neo-Classical work like Saint-Saëns Second Symphony would hardly have been noticed, despite its compelling melodies and superb craftsmanship.

About Camille Saint-Saëns: Many composers began as freakish children, but by any standards Saint-Saëns was an extreme case. As a two-year-old he could read and write, and was

picking out melodies on the piano. Shortly after his third birthday he began composing, and by the age of five had given his first piano recital. At seven he was reading Latin, studying botany and developing what was to become an eighty-year interest in lepidoptery, (the study of butterflies and moths). As an encore after his formal debut as a concert pianist, the 10-year-old Camille offered to play any of Beethoven's 32 sonatas from memory. In short, his childhood suggested Mozartian potential that was never realized. Saint-Saëns once remarked that he lived "in music like a fish in water" and that composing was as natural as "an apple tree producing apples." And there lay the problem. As with Mendelssohn, the technique came so easily to him that it virtually extinguished the spark of originality.

That said, for years he was considered by many to be France's greatest musical revolutionary, though his reputation grew more from his outspoken support for other composers' music—especially Wagner's—than from any work of his own. As well as promoting contemporary music, Saint-Saëns threw his energies into researching the work of his forerunners. Along with Mendelssohn, he was one of the first to reestablish the music of Bach (converting the skeptical Berlioz in the process) and he did much to restore Mozart to his rightful place, being the first to play a complete cycle of the piano concerti. Handel was another unfashionable composer to engage Saint-Saëns' attention, and (as with Berlioz) Gluck held a fascination that lasted most of his life. By the time Saint-Saëns reached his mid-fifties, the past had won the upper hand over the present. Embittered, ill-tempered and restless, he became the arch-traditionalist, opposing the progressive music of Debussy and Ravel, bellowing outrage at the first performance of *The Rite of Spring*, and yet, for all his reactionary pomposity, he was one of the first neo-classicists, embodying many of the finest traditional qualities of French music—neatness, clarity, elegance and dignity. His best epitaph is the rueful one he wrote for himself: "I ran after the chimera of purity of style and perfection of form."