

Edvard Grieg

Born: June 15, 1843 in Bergen, Norway

Died: September 4, 1907 in Bergen, Norway

Peer Gynt Suite No. 1

Duration: 15 minutes

Composed: 1875

Instrumentation: Piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, harp, and strings

Context: Edvard Grieg's reputation as a composer has always been inseparable from his Norwegian nationality. During Grieg's life, as well as today, Europeans pictured Norway as a faraway land of vast fjords and valleys, but still close enough to be considered a European cultural entity. Continental audiences perceived Grieg's music through the same bifocal lens; it was at once exotic for its folk-like charm, yet grounded in the familiar rules of Western harmony (Grieg studied composition in Leipzig, home to one of the most musically conservative institutions in Europe).

When it came time to compose the incidental music (accompaniment to a spoken play) for playwright Henrik Ibsen's allegory *Peer Gynt* in 1875, Grieg exaggerated the "Norwegianness" of his musical dialect to reflect the play's satire of Norwegian culture. Ibsen, however, was exacting in his demands for the music. For instance, he once requested that Grieg combine five different national anthems to symbolize an alliance of international friends in the play, an awkward musical task that Grieg never got around to doing. Making the commission more difficult, the theatre management dictated precise durations for each musical segment, prompting Grieg's comment: "I was thus compelled to do patchwork . . . hence the brevity of the pieces." Grieg's frustrations with the work for *Peer Gynt* got to the point where he even grew tired of hearing his own music: "I literally can't bear listening to [*In the Hall of the Mountain King*] because it absolutely reeks of cow-dung," he once complained. Exaggerated musical characters . . . bite-size pieces . . . a tune so recognizable that even the composer could not stand hearing it; these are the exact ingredients for a timeless classic. Whether Grieg would like it or not (he would not), his name is forever linked to the incidental music for *Peer Gynt*.

What You Will Hear: *Morning Mood:* The morning sun rises to a peaceful pastorage tune passed around to various wind instruments like shifting rays of light. *The Death of Åse:* Mournful strings proclaim the passing of Peer Gynt's mother. *Anitra's Dance:* a beguiling waltz, spiced with an exotic Arabian character, whose melody leaps gracefully from one bar to the next. *In the Hall of the Mountain King:* Peer dreams that he has entered the cave of the mountain trolls. At first he sneaks around to a quiet march with plucked strings. By the end, he flees the scene accompanied by crashing cymbals and frantic orchestral shouts.

Carl Nielsen

Born: June 9, 1865 in Nørre Lyndelse, Denmark

Died: October 3, 1931 in Copenhagen, Denmark

Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra, opus 57

Duration: 24 minutes

Composed: 1928

Instrumentation: 2 bassoons, 2 horns, snare drum, strings, and solo clarinet

Context: Nielsen's major musical output began where Brahms left off in the 1890s with powerful, large-scale symphonies in the late-romantic vein, but he soon developed a musical language entirely his own. Nielsen lived during the transitional artistic period that straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when artists faced the dilemma of holding fast to romanticism or embracing new modernist trends. In the same way that painting progressed from academic neoclassicism to blurred Impressionism and abstract cubism, composers during this time sought effects that reflected the realities of modern life: noisy cityscapes, mass industrialism, senseless world war, and the new psychological theories of Freud. While Nielsen never fully abandoned the language of tonality, he developed a singularly original late style marked by fragmentation, inner turmoil, and odd juxtapositions of instruments and key areas.

Nielsen's Clarinet Concerto capped off a late-career exploration of wind instruments. After befriending the members of the Copenhagen Wind Quintet, he set out on a series of works inspired by each person in the group. Nielsen's interest in human character, writes biographer Robert Simpson, is reflected in his Wind Quintet for the five musicians, where "each part is cunningly made to suit the individuality of each player." In both the Wind Quintet (1922) and the Clarinet Concerto (1928), Nielsen's clarinet writing depicts what must have been a highly erratic personality, that of clarinetist Aage Oxenvad. Nielsen saw Oxenvad's temperamental nature as compatible with the clarinet itself. According to the composer, the clarinet's ability to be hysterical one moment and idyllic the next allows for an unusually wide expressive scope, a paradox that forms the central drama of the Clarinet Concerto.

What You Will Hear: A review of the concerto's premiere in 1928 proclaimed that Nielsen "has liberated the soul of the clarinet, not only the wild animal aspect but also its special brand of tough lyricism." Another critic merely heard "cackling, crowing, squeaking, bellowing, and grunting" in the solo part. Nielsen wrote of the highly individual treatment that he gave to each instrument. Whereas standard practice dictates a "battle" narrative between orchestra and soloist, this is one of the few concertos where each entity seems to be warring against itself. The form is a continuous movement fragmented by eight cadenzas (a freely played section of solo passagework), an incredible departure from the regular two or three in a typical concerto. Curiously, Nielsen pairs the clarinet with a prominent role for the snare drum, whose stark presence disrupts the texture like an uninvited guest who refuses to leave.

Antonín Dvořák

Born: September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeves, Czechia

Died: May 1, 1904 in Prague, Czechia

Symphony No. 8 in G Major, opus 88

Duration: 36 minutes

Composed: August 26 – November 8, 1889

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings

Context: Dvořák composed his eighth and most cheerful symphony in 1889 at his spacious summer residence in the Bohemian countryside. The charming white and yellow mansion can still be visited today, nestled on a wooded property with a birch-tree bridge that leads to a moss-covered gazebo overlooking the pond. Clearly, this was the perfect setting to inspire a sunny new work. While writing the symphony at such an impressive estate, Dvořák might have wandered the grounds thinking about how much his fortunes had changed since his youth. He had not come from an especially prosperous family and very nearly entered a career as a butcher before being seduced by the musical trade. As a young man, he moved to Prague to become an orchestra pit violinist, where he picked up on all of the latest techniques of instrumentation (including elaborate writing for winds, a Czech specialty). He found himself in the right place at the right time as his early compositions won approval from Eduard Hanslick and Johannes Brahms.

Hanslick and Brahms proved to be the ideal supporters of Dvořák because they represented the “absolute” style of music—music that is an end in itself. This school of thought opposed the futurist styles of Liszt and Wagner, whose programmatic (story-driven) music relied on external sources to give the notes meaning. Hanslick, an influential music critic, disagreed with this approach and sought to promote abstract musical genres that, to him, achieved purer forms of expression. Dvořák would not remain uninfluenced by Wagner’s futurist art, but he certainly excelled in absolute genres enough to make a compelling case for Hanslick’s doctrine. The Eighth Symphony ranks among the finest of such works.

What You Will Hear: Dvořák’s Eighth Symphony is not *about* anything, which makes it a rather dull item to describe in words. An individual listener may interpret bits of Bohemian folk rhythms, bird calls, or country-inflected melodies, but the notes and the ways in which they unfold are all that matter in the end. This is exciting, because it means that nothing that you just read is essential to your understanding of the work you are about to hear. But to describe just one part of this masterpiece in words: the beginning is utter perfection. It sets a landscape before us. It surveys the field. Then it catches fire and takes flight, propelling the next forty minutes of sheer adventure.