

PROGRAM NOTES

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DANCES OF GALANTA

ZOLTÁN KODÁLY

Zoltán Kodály, Hungarian composer and academic, was born in 1882 and died in Budapest in 1967. With fellow countryman Béla Bartók, Kodály practically created the field of ethnomusicology, collecting and codifying folk melodies and recording traditional musical practices in central Europe. In fact his 1906 Ph.D. thesis focused on the structure of Hungarian folk songs, and in a felicitous linking of professional and artistic abilities, his studies of folk music informed his own musical composition. An indefatigable lecturer and creator of a dynamic music education program for children (the famous “Kodály method”), he later became known as much for his work as a critic and an educator as for his compositions.

Kodály spent seven of his first nine years of life in the town of Galánta, now a part of Slovakia, and grew up listening to local musicians and learning folk songs and ditties. At this time he also began studying classical music, singing in various choral groups, learning to play the cello, and performing in string quartets in his family home. The “Dances of Galánta,” written in 1933 and commissioned by the Budapest Philharmonic Society, were inspired by Kodály’s catholic musical upbringing in Galánta. In this composition Kodály takes what were military band tunes, imbues them with his characteristic orchestration (lots of Klezmer-like clarinet playing), plenty of syncopation, and intersperses slow and fast movements in this tribute to the music and musicians of his youth.

CONCIERTO DE ARANJUEZ

JOAQUÍN RODRIGO

Joaquín Rodrigo, prominent Spanish composer of the 20th century, lived from 1901 to 1999. Blinded at the age of three, Rodrigo began musical studies at an early age, eventually settling in Paris where, for a time, he studied with Paul Dukas. Later he met Manuel de Falla, the doyen of Spanish composers of the time; the two became close and life-long friends.

Rodrigo waited until 1939—with the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War and the restoration of relative peace in his home country—to return to Spain where de Falla had arranged for Rodrigo to take an academic post teaching music in Madrid. Though a pianist by training, Rodrigo chose to set his first major work for guitar and orchestra. He had already begun working on the concerto while in Paris but, escaping from the rumblings of war in France, he then took musical and artistic inspiration from the gardens at the Palacio Real de Aranjuez on the outskirts of Madrid as he completed the work. The concerto is written in three movements, the first and last in D major, and the very well-known second in the relative minor key of B minor. The work was first performed in Barcelona in 1940 and has become a staple of guitar virtuosos since then.

SYMPHONY NO. 3, "SCOTTISH"
FELIX B. MENDELSSOHN

Felix Mendelssohn, German pianist, composer, conductor, and teacher, was born in 1809 and died in 1847. One of the most well-known figures of the Romantic period, Mendelssohn nonetheless respected (and had mastered) traditions and practices of the Classical period. It was Mendelssohn who, at the ripe age of 20, re-introduced the music of J. S. Bach to an amnesiac world in his performance at the Berlin Sing-Akademie of the monumental St. Matthew Passion. Yet Mendelssohn, a lover of travel and adventure, also introduced romantic elements into his music and into the musical vocabulary of the west. His much-loved violin concerto omits the typical breaks between movements, and, unlike earlier concertos, the soloist begins playing immediately, without orchestral introduction. Though a composer of large-scale symphonies, concertos, and an oratorio, Mendelssohn also favored smaller, personal, "characteristic" musical forms—puckish scherzi, for example, and the small emotional gems for piano, the "Songs Without Words."

Mendelssohn loved Great Britain, and he made his first trip to England in 1829. In the summer of that year, he traveled to Scotland, that misty and craggy land much glorified (and mystified) in Romantic lore, and the musical seeds of what were to become his third symphony were planted. A polyglot, Mendelssohn met and conversed with Sir Walter Scott in Edinburgh, hiked in the highlands and traveled to the rugged Hebrides Islands; his voluminous letters contain poetic accounts that attest to his love of Scotland.

The "Scottish" symphony, Symphony No. 3 in A minor, did not achieve its final form until 1842, by which time Mendelssohn had made many trips to Britain. The symphony consists of four movements, to be played without break; all four develop the thematic material announced in the slow opening of the first movement. The symphony was dedicated to Queen Victoria, who—along with most of the concert-going population—held Mendelssohn and his music in great esteem.