

HARRISBURG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday, February 9, 2019 at 8:00 p.m.

Sunday, February 10, 2019 at 3:00 p.m.

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Mysterious Mountain (Symphony No. 2), Op. 132 (1955) Alan Hovhaness (1911-2000)

Alan Hovhaness, one of the most intriguing and prolific figures in American music, was born Alan Vaness Chakmakjian in Somerville, Massachusetts on March 8, 1911; his Armenian-born father was a chemistry professor and his mother was Scottish. Hovhaness began improvising and composing at an early age and studied at the New England Conservatory in the 1930s with Frederick Converse. In 1940, he was appointed organist at an Armenian church near Boston, from which post he investigated the music of his father's native land. Two years later, he attended the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood on scholarship, but criticism there of his music by Copland and Foss, his intensive study of Oriental music, philosophy and religion, and his increasingly mystical attitude toward his art left him dissatisfied with his earlier work, so he summarily destroyed most of what he had written before 1940, said to have consisted of seven symphonies, five string quartets, a number of operas and several hundred other compositions.

The influence of Armenian and Oriental music on Hovhaness' work became pervasive after 1945. In style, his works are primarily melodic, often melismatic and incantatory, with a harmonic vocabulary dependent on various modal formulas. There are frequent excursions into fugue and imitative textures, testimony to his long interest in the music of the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. During the 1950s, he traveled widely, notably to India, Japan and Korea, where his music was well received and where he discovered new stylistic elements that soon appeared in his compositions. Like Olivier Messiaen of France, Hovhaness sought to reconcile mystical and mundane, Occidental and Oriental, ancient and modern in music of distinctive personality. He died in Seattle on June 21, 2000.

Hovhaness' musical output is diverse in content and vast in quantity, probably exceeded in the 20th century only by that of the Frenchman Darius Milhaud. There are nearly 400 separate pieces, including nine operas, two ballets, 67 symphonies (!), several dozen independent works for orchestra and wind band, a hundred chamber pieces, an almost equal number for voices, and many compositions for solo piano. Most of his works have evocative titles. Among the symphonies, for example, are ones called *Mysterious Mountain*, *Nanga Parvat* (one of the world's most remote mountains, in Kashmir), *Silver Pilgrimage* (after a novel by the Indian writer M. Anantanarayan), *Fra Angelico* (the 15th-century Florentine painter), *St. Vartan* (an Armenian folk hero martyred in 451 A.D.), *Ararat*, *Odysseus* and *Mount St. Helens*; one of his symphonies was written for string orchestra and Korean percussion instruments. The composer spoke of his music in almost metaphysical terms: "To me, atonality is against nature. There is a center to everything that exists. The planets have the sun, the moon, the earth. The reason I like Oriental music is that everything has a firm center. All music with a center is tonal. Music without a center is fine for a minute or two, but it soon sounds all the same.... Things that are very complicated tend to disappear and get lost. Simplicity is difficult, not easy. Beauty is simple. All unnecessary elements are removed – only essence remains."

Hovhaness wrote the Symphony No. 2, *Mysterious Mountain*, in 1955 for Leopold Stokowski's first concert as music director of the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Of its title, he noted, "Mountains are symbols, like pyramids, of man's attempt to know God. Mountains are symbolic meeting places between the mundane and the spiritual worlds. To some, the 'Mysterious Mountain' may be the phantom peak, unmeasured, thought to be higher than Everest, as seen from great distances by fliers in Tibet. To some, it

may be the solitary mountain, the tower of strength over a countryside – Fujiyama, Ararat, Monadnock, Shasta or Grand Teton.” The composer went on to explain about the musical structure of the work: “The first and last movements are hymn-like and lyrical, using irregular metrical forms. The first subject of the second movement, a double fugue, is developed in a slow vocal style. The rapid second subject is played by the strings, with its own counter-subject and with strict four-voice canonic episodes and triple counterpoint episodes.... In the last movement, a chant in 7/4 is played softly by muted horns and trombones. A giant wave in a thirteen-beat meter rises to a climax and recedes.... A middle melody is sung by the oboes and clarinets in a quintuple beat. Muted violins return with the earlier chant, which is gradually given to the full orchestra.”

Following the premiere of *Mysterious Mountain*, Hubert Roussel, critic of the *Houston Post*, wrote, “Hovhanness produces a texture of the utmost beauty, gentleness, distinction and expressive potential. The real mystery of *Mysterious Mountain* is that it should be so simply, sweetly, innocently lovely in an age that has tried so terribly hard to avoid those impressions in music.”

Suite from *Appalachian Spring* (1943-1944) Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

In 1942, Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, one of America’s greatest patrons of the arts, went to see a dance recital by Martha Graham. So taken with the genius of the dancer-choreographer was Mrs. Coolidge that she offered to commission three ballets specially for her, and Graham chose as composers of the music Darius Milhaud, Paul Hindemith and an American whose work she had admired for over a decade – Aaron Copland. In 1931, Graham had staged Copland’s *Piano Variations* as the ballet *Dithyramb*, and she was eager to have another dance piece from him, especially in view of his recent successes with *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*. She devised a scenario based on memories of her grandmother’s farm in turn-of-the-20th-century Pennsylvania, and it proved to be a perfect match for the direct, quintessentially American style that Copland espoused in those years.

The premiere was set for October 1944 (in honor of Mrs. Coolidge’s 80th birthday) in the auditorium of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the limited space in the theater allowed Copland to use a chamber orchestra of only thirteen instruments (flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano and nine strings). He began work on the score in June 1943 in Hollywood while writing the music for the movie *North Star* and finished it a year later in Cambridge, where he was delivering the Horatio Appleton Lamb Lectures at Harvard. The plot, the music and most of the choreography were completed before a title for the piece was selected. Graham was taken at just that time with the name of a poem by Hart Crane – *Appalachian Spring* – and she adopted it for her new ballet, though the content of the poem has no relation with the stage work.

Appalachian Spring was unveiled in Washington on October 30, 1944, and repeated in New York in May to great acclaim, garnering the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for Music and the New York Music Critics Circle Award as the outstanding theatrical work of the 1944-1945 season. Soon after its New York premiere, Copland revised the score as a suite of eight continuous sections for full orchestra by eliminating about eight minutes of music in which, he said, “the interest is primarily choreographic.” On October 4, 1945, Artur Rodzinski led the New York Philharmonic in the premiere of this version, which has become one of the best-loved works of 20th-century American music.

Edwin Denby’s description of the ballet’s action from his review of the New York premiere in May 1945 was reprinted in the published score: “[The ballet concerns] a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the 19th century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end, the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house.”

Copland wrote, “The suite arranged from the ballet contains the following sections, played without interruption:

"1. *Very Slowly*. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.

"2. *Fast*. Sudden burst of unison strings in A-major arpeggios starts the action. A sentiment both elated and religious gives the keynote to this scene.

"3. *Moderato*. Duo for the Bride and her Intended — scene of tenderness and passion.

"4. *Quite fast*. The Revivalist and his flock. Folksy feelings — suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.

"5. *Still faster*. Solo dance of the Bride — presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear and wonder.

"6. *Very slowly (as at first)*. Transition scene to music reminiscent of the introduction.

"7. *Calm and flowing*. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer-husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme. The theme, sung by a solo clarinet, was taken from a collection of Shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and published under the title *The Gift To Be Simple*. The melody I borrowed and used almost literally, is called 'Simple Gifts.' It has this text:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'Tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down
Where we ought to be.
And when we find ourselves
In the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley
Of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd.
To turn, turn will be our delight,
'Til by turning, turning we come round right.

"8. *Moderate. Coda*. The Bride takes her place among her neighbors. At the end the couple are left 'quiet and strong in their new house.' Muted strings intone a hushed, prayer-like passage. The close is reminiscent of the opening music."

Eine Alpensinfonie ("An Alpine Symphony"), Op. 64 (1911, 1914-1915)
Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

In 1831 Hector Berlioz weathered a wild and stormy sea voyage from Marseilles to Livorno on his way to install himself in the Eternal City as winner of the *Prix de Rome*; the *Corsair Overture* is, in part, a musical record of that adventure. When he was a boy, Claude Debussy enjoyed halcyon paddles in the Mediterranean on family outings at Cannes, but twenty years later he nearly perished in a violent passage along the Brittany coast; both impressions found their way into his *La Mer*. And so it was also a first-hand experience of nature that planted the seed for Richard Strauss' most grandiloquent composition — *An Alpine Symphony*.

Strauss was born and raised in Bavaria, lived in the region for most of his life, and ultimately settled in the lovely twin-towns of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, tucked beneath the northern face of the massive Zugspitze. As a teenager, he once went on an Alpine climb with a local group of hikers. The party lost its way during the ascent, and was overtaken and drenched to the skin by storms on the way down. Strauss wrote to his friend Ludwig Thuille (a composer and later professor of composition at the Munich Conservatory) that he had found the experience so exhilarating that he was inspired to improvise some musical impressions of the climb at the piano: "Naturally it conjured up a lot of nonsense and giant Wagnerian tone-painting." It was not until 1900, more than two decades later, that Strauss again broached the subject of his mountain music. Soon after finishing *Ein Heldenleben*, he wrote to his parents that he was considering a tone poem "which would begin with a sunrise in Switzerland. Otherwise so far only the

idea (love-tragedy of an artist) and a few themes exist." It was just at that time, however, that his creative energy shifted from the concert hall to the opera stage, and, except for his 1904 paean to life among the pots and pans, the *Symphonia Domestica*, all of his compositions for the next dozen years were operas.

Der Rosenkavalier was premiered with great success at Dresden on January 26, 1911, and Strauss was eager to follow it quickly with other stage works. However, his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, was a meticulous and thoughtful writer who found it impossible to produce a new book on such short notice. Since Strauss was not one to take potential inactivity sitting down (he called the Oboe Concerto and the Duet-Concertino, composed when he was in his eighties, "wrist exercises ... to prevent my right wrist from going to sleep prematurely"), he sketched out a fifty-minute *Alpine Symphony* early in 1911, "though," he confessed, "it gives me less pleasure than shaking maybugs off trees." Despite such initial reluctance, however, much of the new work was sketched during the spring and early summer before he turned to the composition of incidental music for Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, which five years later grew into the iridescent opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Strauss occasionally tinkered with the *Symphony* during the following years, but did no serious further work on it until November 1914, when Hofmannsthal was (again) keeping him waiting for the final act of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. The polishing and orchestration of *Eine Alpensinfonie* took exactly 100 days; the work was completed on February 8, 1915. Except for the *Japanische Festmusik* of 1940, a political potboiler celebrating the 2,600th anniversary of the Japanese Empire, it was to be his last composition for large orchestra.

For the *Symphony's* premiere, Strauss enlisted his favorite ensemble, the Dresden Court Orchestra, and conducted them in a concert in Berlin on October 28, 1915. In gratitude for their having given the first performances of four of the six operas he had written to that time, Strauss dedicated the score to the orchestra and its director, Count Nicolaus Seebach. The work was first heard in America just six months later, when Stokowski used it as one of the blockbuster pieces (along with Mahler's Eighth Symphony) that launched his tenure as conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Strauss regarded *Eine Alpensinfonie* as one of his best works, and he conducted it whenever management assented to hire sufficient players; he requested (unsuccessfully) that it be included on his first post-World War II concert outside Germany, in London. When he crossed the German border in 1945 to take a rest cure in Switzerland after the War, he presented the frontier commander, a French officer, with the manuscript score as a prized trophy showing his respect for the nation of France (Strauss had received the Legion of Honor rosette many years before); the autograph is still in the French National Library.

Two of the outstanding musical features of *Eine Alpensinfonie* are the size of its orchestra and the specificity of its programmatic reference. Strauss here asked for a total of more than 100 players, including quadruple winds and brasses, an organ, a large string section and such instrumental exotica as a Heckelphone (a large baritone oboe that the noted German instrumental maker Wilhelm Heckel [whose family perfected the key mechanism of the bassoon] developed at the request of Richard Wagner for an instrument combining "something of the character of the oboe with the mellow but powerful sound of the alphorn"; Strauss also used it in *Salome* and *Elektra*), tenor tubas, cow bells and clever percussion contraptions to reproduce the sounds of wind and thunder. To assist the wind players in sustaining their long notes (Strauss had been challenging the breath control of the woodwinds and brasses with the notational admonition "aushalten!" since at least *Till Eulenspiegel*), he suggested that they use the *Aerophor* (mistakenly given as "Aerophon" in the score), invented in 1911 by one Bernhard Samuels of Schwerin. By means of a tube, this device could supply air from a small bellows operated by the musician's foot to the mouthpiece to sustain a tone indefinitely. (Samuels patented this curiosity in 1912.) In addition to the musicians on stage, Strauss also required a battalion of twenty horns and pairs of trumpets and trombones to sound hunting calls in the wings during the *Ascent* section of the *Symphony*. Such an effect, while unusual, was not, however, unprecedented. Ardent Wagnerian disciple that he was, Strauss could solicit as example the twelve off-stage horns in both *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan*, as well as the twelve additional trumpets plus some two dozen other players required for *Lohengrin*. Strauss is reported to have said at the dress rehearsal for the premiere, "At last I have learned to orchestrate."

Besides the sheer size and variety of the orchestra for *Eine Alpensinfonie*, Strauss' marshaling of such an army of musicians also had an implicit cultural message, as Alan Jefferson pointed out in his biography of the composer: "Even during the First World War, he was still writing for gargantuan

orchestras because it was expected of him, and also because they were easily accessible. Germany was a huge, strong, tough and rich nation, demanding the kind of music which Strauss was able to match with his *Alpensinfonie* and his opera of 1918, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*." In contrast, by 1915 the rigors of war visited upon France following the German invasion had already forced Stravinsky to abandon the large orchestra of *The Rite of Spring* for chamber ensembles, piano and voices.

Though this work is labeled as a "symphony" – and many learned commentators have tried to squeeze its single musical span into Classical sonata-allegro or Lisztian four-movements-in-one – *Eine Alpensinfonie* is unabashedly a tone poem, the most explicit example of the genre that Strauss ever created. The score bears no fewer than 22 graphic phrases attached to its various sections, representing Alpine vistas, the phenomena of nature, and the progress of the climber. It is a piece almost entirely concerned with external depiction rather than with the expression of the intense states of personal emotion that marked *Death and Transfiguration*, *Don Juan*, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and other of his earlier orchestral works. For this, Strauss was (and continues to be) criticized, though the consummate craftsmanship of the work's scoring and the manner in which he achieved his pictorial goal are beyond reproach.

Eine Alpensinfonie is concerned with a period of 24 hours upon the mountain. The work opens with the shimmering stillness of *Night*, depicted by a descending scale evolving from a unison B-flat; every note of the scale is sustained to create a luminous curtain of harmony. The trombones and tuba present the theme of the mountain, a simple, craggy motive built around the most fundamental notes of the harmonic series. (Strauss received some criticism at the work's premiere for the diatonic simplicity of its themes. He said that their plainness was intentional and natural: "I wanted to compose for once as a cow gives milk.") The orchestra stirs, and mounts an enormous crescendo while the brasses give out fanfares built from the mountain theme to prepare for *Sunrise*, a climactic moment ingeniously derived from the descending scale of *Night*.

The Ascent commences with an energetic, wide-ranging theme that rises through the strings into the body of the orchestra. A blast of hunters' horns in the distance marks the *Entry into the Forest*. A lugubrious theme in the horns and trombones suggests dense foliage, from which float the songs of birds. The ascent resumes, and the climber finds himself *Wandering by the Brook*, which, upstream, leads to a *Waterfall*. The music suggests a striking panorama. In the mist above the whirlpool appears an *Apparition*, perhaps the Fairy of the Alps that, according to legend, has inhabited those mountains since ancient times. It was the spirit that haunted Lord Byron's *Manfred* and served as the catalyst for the scherzo of the fine symphony inspired from Tchaikovsky by Byron's poem.

Climbing above the waterfall, the traveler comes first to *Flowery Meadows* and then to *The Mountain Pasture*, where he is greeted with the sounds of cowbells and the yodels of the herdsmen. The horn gives forth a lovely bit of pastoral lyricism before the climber goes *Through Thicket and Undergrowth by the Wrong Way*, only to emerge *On the Glacier*, depicted by a fanfare-like theme of short-long rhythms. Crossing the ice, the traveler has some *Dangerous Moments* before he arrives *On the Summit*. The magnificent sight has almost taken his breath away (a halting, tentative theme in the oboe), but its grandeur soon floods over him and he experiences a *Vision*. The sun has passed its zenith for the day, however, and *Mists Arise* (rustlings and long scales in the strings). Quickly, *The Sun Gradually Becomes Obscured*. There is a brief *Elegy* (a long, unison melody in the strings), which is interrupted by the *Calm Before the Storm*. The traveler contends with violent *Thunder and Storm* during his *Descent*. The storm breaks in time to reveal the day's *Sunset*, and *Eine Alpensinfonie* closes with an introspective *Epilogue* and the return of *Night*.