HARRISBURG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday, January 12, 2019 at 8:00 p.m.
Sunday, January 13, 2019 at 3:00 p.m.

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Tales from the Vienna Woods (1868)
Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825-1899)

"This fiend of German birth, destitute of grace, delicacy and propriety, a disgusting practice," spluttered one English writer of the 1830s about that diabolic instrument of immorality, The Waltz. Why, in this depraved display, he ranted, the couple actually danced in each other's arms, refusing to keep the respectable distance that characterized all the good old dances. And it was that crafty pair of Viennese tunemongers, Johann Strauss and his buddy Josef Lanner, who were the main perpetrators of this insult to humanity, dispensing a concoction of sounds that Wagner described as "a stronger narcotic than alcohol" arousing "passions bordering on mad fury." Alas for the poor Englishman, anything *that* irresistible was bound to be a success.

The waltz was descended from an Austrian peasant dance called a *Ländler*, a heavy-handed (footed?) affair in moderate triple meter that gained great popularity during Mozart's last years in Vienna. (He wrote music for such *German Dances* when they were first allowed to join the staid, old minuet in the imperial balls in 1788.) The Viennese went mad over the new dance, and spent many nights literally dancing until dawn. Michael Kelly, a friend of Mozart and a participant in the premiere of *The Marriage of Figaro*, noted such dedication in the 1790s to this sort of merriment that, "for the sake of ladies in the family way, who would not be persuaded to stay at home, there were apartments prepared, with every convenience for their *accouchement*, should they be unfortunately required." It was really in the 1830s and 1840s, however, that the waltz established its definitive form and style and became a European mania. Strauss the Elder led a crack orchestra in his own compositions, faster-tempo and more lilting modernizations of the old *Ländler*. So great was the popularity of the waltz during his lifetime that, during at least one carnival season, the ballrooms of Vienna could accommodate 50,000 people in an evening — in a city with a population of 200,000. His reputation spread well beyond the Austrian capital, and he was called on to play 72 public concerts in England during the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837.

Papa Johann tried to discourage his sons from going into the music business, but Johann, Jr. was determined to be part of the waltz madness. He established a rival orchestra to that of his father and both prospered for a time, but at his father's death in 1849, the son merged the two ensembles. Strauss, the Younger, was soon dubbed "The Waltz King," and he ruled over his domain as had no one in the history of music. He not only made pots of money — he made people happy. One French journalist wrote in 1852, "In every house, on every piano in Vienna, lie Strauss waltzes.... They are sung and trilled and played throughout Europe. Plebeian and aristocrat hum and pipe them; orchestra and barrel organ play them. We hear them on the street, at the ball, in the garden, and at the theater." The waltz continued to flourish into the 20th century, becoming almost an opiate in the feverish years before World War I when the old Austro-Hungarian Empire was rapidly decaying. The waltz became, and remains, a symbol of a better, more care-free time, when an elegantly beribboned captain would whirl away the night with his dazzling companion. The door to this beautiful past is still held open by those who created it — Johann Strauss, father and son.

Tales from the Vienna Woods, one of the younger Strauss' greatest works, was first heard in Vienna on June 9, 1868 at a glamorous garden party given in the Augarten by the Prince and Princess Hohenlohe-Schillingfürst. Though its geographical title indicates the most immediate inspiration for the music

(Joseph Wechsberg believed it represents "the city dweller's secret longing for all the things he lacks in the grey, dark streets"), another influence on this piece was the memory of the 43-year-old composer's father. For the introduction and one of the later sections, Strauss borrowed a motive from his father's waltz *Die Schwalben* (Op. 208), and gave it one of the most poignant settings found in all of 19th-century music. *Tales from the Vienna Woods* has always been one of Strauss' best-loved waltzes. When the composer was returning to Vienna from his visit to America in 1872, he stopped at Baden-Baden to present concerts of his music. One of the spa's residents that summer was the German Emperor Wilhelm I, who insisted that Strauss play the piece time and again. Following one performance, the Adjutant General of the Prussian Court appeared on the stage and presented the completely surprised Strauss with the Order of the Red Eagle, one of Germany's highest honors.

La Valse, Poème choréographique (1919-1920)
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Ravel first considered composing a musical homage to Johann Strauss as early as 1906. The idea forced itself upon him again a decade later, but during the years of the First World War, he could not bring himself to work on a score which he had tentatively titled "Wien" ("Vienna"). Since the war had sapped a great deal of his energy, causing his health to be precarious for the rest of his life, it took a proposal from the great ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev in 1918 to convince Ravel to bring the project to fruition. (Diaghilev hoped to pair Ravel's new work with Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, but upon its completion, the impresario was dissatisfied with *La Valse* — "a masterpiece, but it's not a ballet," he said — which then had to wait until 1929 for its stage premiere under Ida Rubinstein.)

By January 1919, when Ravel was immersed in the composition of his tribute to Vienna, he said that he felt he was "waltzing frantically." He saw *La Valse* both as "a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz" and as a "fantastic and fatefully inescapable whirlpool." The "inescapable whirlpool" was the First World War toward which Vienna marched in three-quarter time, salving its social and political conscience with the luscious strains of Johann Strauss. There is more than a touch of the surreal in *La Valse*. Familiar and real things are placed against a background strange and a little threatening in its disorienting effect. This artifice paralleled the situation that Ravel saw as characteristic of late 19th-century Vienna in particular and Europe in general.

A surrealistic haze shrouds the opening of *La Valse*, a vague introduction from which fragments of themes gradually emerge. In the composer's words, "At first the scene is dimmed by a kind of swirling mist, through which one discerns, vaguely and intermittently, the waltzing couples. Little by little the vapors disappear, the illumination grows brighter, revealing an immense ballroom filled with dancers; the blaze of the chandeliers comes to full splendor. An Imperial court ball about 1855." In the form typical of the Viennese waltz, several continuous sections follow, each based on a different melody.

At the half-way point of the score, however, the murmurs of the introduction return, and the melodies heard previously in clear and complete versions are now fragmented, played against each other, unable to regain the rhythmic flow of their initial appearances. Persistent rustlings in the low strings and woodwinds, flutter-tongue wails from the flutes, snarling muted brass, abrupt and violent crescendos challenge the old waltz melodies. The musical panacea of 1855 cannot smother the reality of 1915, however, and the music becomes consumed by the harsh thrust of the roaring triple meter transformed from a seductive dance into a demonic juggernaut. The dissonances grind, the rhythms become brutal, the orchestral colors blaze as the world of order is sucked toward the awaiting cataclysm in what Ravel called "a fantastic and fatal sort of dervish's dance." At the almost unbearable peak of tension, the dance is torn apart by a five-note figure spread through the entire orchestra, a figure so alien to the triple meter that it destroys the waltz and brings this brilliant, forceful and disturbing work to a shattering close.

Symphony No. 11 in G minor, Op. 103, "The Year 1905" (1957)
Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

"I went with the demonstrators to the Winter Palace, and the spectacle of the savage violence meted out to our unarmed working people that day imprinted itself forever on my memory. January 9, 1905 was sunny and frosty. From every corner of St. Petersburg, the city's poor wound their way in endless files toward the Tsar's palace. The lines of demonstrators criss-crossed the old city like the threads of a spider web. The people crowded close to the palace and waited, an hour, then another hour. Would the Tsar come out and accept the workers' petition? But the Tsar did not appear. The entreaties of the unarmed people were answered by a bugle call…. Again we waited, tense and with a vague foreboding. Another signal. The troops stirred slightly. Yet the crowd was still smiling, shifting from foot to foot from the cold and the frost. There was a third signal, and then an unusual booming sound. What's that? They're shooting? 'It's nothing,' said a voice, 'those are just blanks.' Yet people were falling nearby — women, children…. The people could not believe what was happening. But the Tsar's mounted police were galloping to the attack — to attack the people!"

Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), who was to become a leading figure in the Russian Revolution as the organizer of the country's women workers, its Commissar for Social Welfare, and the Soviet ambassador to Mexico and Sweden, left this horrifying account of "Bloody Sunday" — January 9, 1905 — when a peaceful protest by the workers of St. Petersburg tried to present a petition to Tsar Nicolas II, Russia's "Little Father," for relief of their no-longer-tolerable oppression. The workers, carrying religious icons and singing hymns, were met by the imperial troops with stunning violence in the vast square outside the Winter Palace (which today houses the Hermitage Museum), and 1,200 died. Revolution in Russia was born that day, and it erupted a dozen years later with a force that changed the course of history.

Dmitri Shostakovich first considered writing a work to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of "Bloody Sunday" in 1955, but it was apparently an event with striking similarities to the catastrophe of 1905 that finally sparked the composition of his Symphony No. 11 — the brutal suppression of the October 1956 uprising in Budapest by Soviet tanks and machine guns. In *Testimony*, Solomon Volkov's controversial edition of Shostakovich's purported memoirs, the composer is quoted as saying, "The people think and act similarly in many things. I wanted to show this recurrence in the Eleventh Symphony. I wrote it in 1957 and it deals with contemporary themes even though it's called 'The Year 1905.' It's about the people, who have stopped believing because the cup of evil has run over." The work was premiered in Moscow on October 30, 1957 as part of the fortieth anniversary observances of the 1917 Revolution, and earned for Shostakovich a Lenin Prize in April 1958 and an invitation to chair the jury of the prestigious Tchaikovsky Piano Competition that same month (which was won by Van Cliburn in a triumph that echoed around the world).

The Eleventh Symphony, matched in its scale in Shostakovich's output only by the Fourth and Seventh ("Leningrad") Symphonies, distills the emotional import of the tragedy of 1905 into four epic movements through which are woven traditional folk melodies as well as a quotation from the composer's own work. The icy pre-dawn in St. Petersburg's huge *Palace Square* is suggested by ominous, slow-moving chords in hollow harmonies. The quiet taps on the timpani and the distant fanfares might be either a call for the workers to gather or a premonition of the tragedy to come. The flutes present an ironically sweet harmonization of the 19th-century prison song *Listen*, which is taken up as the movement's main thematic material: *Autumn's black night — and in that gloom, An awful vision: prison. As the hours drag by, In the night's long silence, Hear, like a sigh, the cry, Echoed slowly, sadly … Listen. The Convict*, another Russian melody suggesting the oppression of the people (*The night is dark so mark each minute, Though high walls hide the stars*), is intoned solemnly by the cellos and basses. The movement ends with a return of the glacial chords and the unsettling fanfares.

The 9th of January evokes the massacre. The thematic substance of the movement derives from the folksong *O Thou, Our Tsar, Our Little Father*, which is given in a furious, triple-time, accompanimental version by the low strings before being presented in its original form by clarinets and bassoons. A chorale-like setting for brass of *Bare Your Heads* from Shostakovich's *Ten Poems for Chorus on Texts by Revolutionary Poets* of 1951 bridges to a melancholy transformation of *Our Tsar* that is redolent of a Tchaikovsky waltz, perhaps a sad reflection on the imperial world that was beginning to crack on that

frozen January morning. The music then builds with overwhelming force as the Cossacks menace the crowd. A momentary lull is provided by an echo of the glacial chords from the first movement before the Cossacks' full fury is unleashed by a hammered imitative passage whose theme is derived from the quiet timpani strokes heard at the Symphony's outset. The glacial chords come again, now quivering with trills of disbelief and horror, as do the fanfares, tinged with dissonance, and a dying attempt to revive *Listen*.

The third movement, *In Memoriam*, is a requiem not just for those who died but also for the failed hope that a new life could be wrested from the old regime. Another folksong, *You Fell As Victims*, is given by the violas as a lament over the trudging, dirge-like foundation in the pizzicato cellos and basses.

In his study *The New Shostakovich* (1990), Ian MacDonald posits that the title of the finale — *Nabat*: "*The Tocsin*" or "*The Alarm*" — was borrowed from a 19th-century journal edited by Narodnik Piotr Tkachev, who advocated that no action, however apparently immoral, was forbidden to the true revolutionary. The powerful, marching music (based on the protest anthem *Rage, Tyrants*) that occupies most of the closing movement suggests the revolutionary fever that spread inexorably among the Russian masses following "Bloody Sunday." After a shattering climax, a long English horn incantation of *Bare Your Heads* leads to the Symphony's culmination, which overlays the triple-meter transformation of *O Thou, Our Tsar, Our Little Father* from the second movement with a final stentorian proclamation of *Bare Your Heads*.