

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

***Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes* Grace Williams (1906-1977)**

Composed in 1940.

Premiered in 1940 in Manchester, England.

Grace Williams, Wales' first prominent woman composer, was born into the family of two music-loving schoolteachers in the Cardiff suburb of Barry on February 19, 1906. Her father, the director of a local boys' choir, gave Grace her first musical instruction and immersed her in the music and traditions of their native land. She began composing while still a teenager and won a scholarship to the music department at the University of Wales in Cardiff in 1923. After receiving her baccalaureate in 1926, she enrolled in the Royal College of Music in London to study composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob. She won several prizes at the RCM, including a travelling scholarship in 1930 that she used for a year of advanced study in Vienna with the Schoenberg disciple Egon Wellesz. Upon returning to London, Williams taught at the Camden School for Girls and the Southlands College of Education in Wimbledon, formed a friendship with Benjamin Britten, and began to establish a reputation for her compositions. She was evacuated to Luton with the Camden School during World War II, but continued to compose and oversee performances of her works, including the broadcast premiere of the *Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes* by the BBC Northern Orchestra from Manchester in 1940. Williams returned to London at the end of the war and worked for a while at the BBC Schools Department, but her health had suffered during the preceding years so in 1947 she went home to Barry, where she worked on educational programs for the BBC and taught briefly at the College of Music and Drama in Cardiff, but concentrated mainly on composing; she refused a proposal of marriage to devote herself to her art. Grace Williams died on February 10, 1977 in Barry, in the house where she had been born.

Williams' compositions — a ballet (*Theseus and Ariadne*), an opera (*The Parlour*, after Guy de Maupassant), two symphonies, orchestral works, concertos for trumpet, piano and violin, chorale works, chamber music and *Castell Caernarfon* for the investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1969 — are often deeply national in feeling (several quote folk melodies) and largely indebted to the British pastoral style that she had learned from Vaughan Williams. The *Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes* of 1940 skillfully weaves eight traditional songs (including one with an uncanny resemblance to *Yankee Doodle*) into an optimistic tone poem that gained immediate popularity in war-time Britain and has remained her best-known work.

***Four Last Songs for Soprano and Orchestra*..... Richard Strauss (1864-1949)**

Composed in 1948.

Premiered on May 22, 1950 in London, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler with Kirsten Flagstad as soloist.

Strauss largely withdrew from public life after 1935 to his villa at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the lovely Bavarian Alps. He lived there throughout World War II, spared the physical ravages of the conflict, but deeply wounded by the loss of many friends and by the bombing of Dresden, Munich and Vienna. In October 1945, under the threat of being called before the Denazification Board, he moved to Switzerland, where he lived for the next four years. He and his wife, Pauline, stayed in various hotels in Lugano and Pontresina (her shrewish tantrums and complaints led to frequent managerial requests for them to seek lodgings elsewhere) before settling into the Palace Hotel in Montreux. Strauss was cleared by the Board in June 1948, but he chose to stay in Switzerland for medical treatment that winter, returning to Garmisch in May 1949. Though increasingly feeble during his Swiss sojourn, his mind was clear, and he continued to compose — a Concerto for Oboe, the *Duet Concertino* for Clarinet, Bassoon and Strings, and the surpassingly beautiful *Four Last Songs*.

At the end of 1946, Strauss read Eichendorff's poem *Im Abendrot*, in which an aged couple, having moved together

through the world for a lifetime, look at the setting sun and ask, “It that perhaps death?” The words matched precisely Strauss’ feelings of those years, and he determined to set the poem for soprano and orchestra. The first sketches for the song appeared early in 1947, and the piece was completed by May 1948. During that time, a friend sent Strauss a volume of poems by Hermann Hesse, and from this collection, he chose four verses to form a five-song cycle with the Eichendorff setting. The Hesse pieces were composed between July and September 1948, making them the final works that Strauss completed. (He never finished the last of the Hesse songs.) He died quietly at his Garmisch home exactly one year later.

Strauss’ years in Switzerland were ones of reflective meditation — re-reading Goethe, composing a little, studying again the beloved score of Wagner’s *Tristan* — during which he put the finishing touches on what he called an “eighty-year, industrious, honorable and good German artistic life.” Each of the magnificent *Four Last Songs* treats metaphorically the approach of death — through images of rebirth in spring, autumn, rest and sunset — by returning one final time to the soprano voice, for which he had written so much glorious music throughout his career. In these moving compositions, Strauss left what British musicologist Neville Cardus described as “the most consciously and most beautifully delivered ‘*Abschied*’ [‘farewell’] in all music.” As though bringing round full the cycle of his life’s work, Strauss quoted in the closing pages of *Im Abendrot* a theme from his tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*, written six decades earlier, in 1889. Of these *Four Last Songs*, warm and wise rather than bitter and fearful, Michael Kennedy wrote, “The vocal line, floating, curving, soaring in an ecstasy of cantilena, is given a backcloth of Strauss’ most glowing, richly harmonized, detailed and evocative orchestration. Indeed, the voice becomes almost a solo instrument.... [There is] no suggestion of religious consolation, even *in extremis*. The beauty of the world and the beauty of the female voice were uppermost in his thoughts to the end. Has there ever been so conscious a farewell in music, or one so touchingly effective and artistically so good?”

***Pictures at an Exhibition*Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)**

Transcribed for Orchestra by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Composed in 1874; transcribed in 1923.

Orchestral version premiered on May 3, 1923 in Paris, conducted by Sergei Koussevitzky.

Though the history of the Russian nation extends far back into the mists of time, the country’s cultural life is of relatively recent origin. Russian interest in art, music and theater dates only from the time of Peter the Great (1672-1725), the powerful monarch who coaxed his country into the modern world by importing ideas, technology and skilled practitioners from western Europe. To fuel the nation’s musical life, Peter, Catherine and their successors depended on a steady stream of well-compensated German, French and Italian artists who brought their latest tonal wares to the magnificent capital city of St. Petersburg. This tradition of imported music continued well into the 19th century: Berlioz, for example, enjoyed greater success in Russia than he did in his native France; Verdi composed *La Forza del Destino* on a commission from St. Petersburg, where it was first performed.

In the years around 1850, with the spirit of nationalism sweeping across Europe, several young Russian artists banded together to rid their art of foreign influences in order to establish a distinctive nationalist character for their works. Leading this movement was a group of composers known as “The Five,” whose members included Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, César Cui and Mily Balakirev. Among the allies that The Five found in other fields was the artist and architect Victor Hartmann, with whom Mussorgsky became close personal friends. Hartmann’s premature death at 39 stunned the composer and the entire Russian artistic community. Vladimir Stassov, a noted critic and the journalistic champion of the Russian arts movement, organized a memorial exhibit of Hartmann’s work in February 1874, and it was under the inspiration of that showing that Mussorgsky conceived his *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

At the time of the exhibit, Mussorgsky was engaged in preparations for the first public performance of his opera *Boris Godunov*, and he was unable to devote any time to his *Pictures* until early summer. When he took up the piece in June, he worked with unaccustomed speed. “‘Hartmann’ is bubbling over, just as *Boris* did,” he wrote to a friend. “Ideas, melodies come to me of their own accord, like a banquet of music — I gorge and gorge and overeat myself. I can hardly manage to

put them down on paper fast enough.” The movements mostly depict sketches, watercolors and architectural designs shown publicly at the Hartmann exhibit, though Mussorgsky based two or three sections on canvases that he had been shown privately by the artist before his death. The composer linked his sketches together with a musical “*Promenade*” in which he depicted his own rotund self shuffling — in an uneven meter — from one picture to the next. Though Mussorgsky was not given to much excitement over his own creations, he took special delight in this one. Especially in the masterful transcription for orchestra that Maurice Ravel did in 1922 for the Parisian concerts of conductor Sergei Koussevitzky, it is a work of vivid impact to which listeners and performers alike can return with undiminished pleasure.

Promenade. According to Stasov, this recurring section depicts Mussorgsky “roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and, at times sadly, thinking of his friend.”

The Gnome. Hartmann’s drawing is for a fantastic wooden nutcracker representing a gnome who gives off savage shrieks while he waddles about on short, bandy legs.

Promenade — The Old Castle. A troubadour (represented by the saxophone) sings a doleful lament before a foreboding, ruined ancient fortress.

Promenade — Tuileries. Mussorgsky’s subtitle is “Dispute of the Children after Play.” Hartmann’s picture shows a corner of the famous Parisian garden filled with nursemaids and their youthful charges.

Bydlo. Hartmann’s picture depicts a rugged wagon drawn by oxen. The peasant driver sings a plaintive melody (solo tuba) heard first from afar, then close-by, before the cart passes away into the distance.

Promenade — Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells. Hartmann’s costume design for the 1871 fantasy ballet *Trilby* shows dancers enclosed in enormous egg shells, with only their arms, legs and heads protruding.

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle. The title was given to the music by Stasov. Mussorgsky originally called this movement “Two Jews: one rich, the other poor.” It was inspired by a pair of pictures which Hartmann presented to the composer showing two residents of the Warsaw ghetto, one rich and pompous (a weighty unison for strings and winds), the other poor and complaining (muted trumpet). Mussorgsky based both themes on incantations he had heard on visits to Jewish synagogues.

The Marketplace at Limoges. A lively sketch of a bustling market, with animated conversations flying among the female vendors.

Catacombs, Roman Tombs. Cum Mortuis in Lingua Mortua. Hartmann’s drawing shows him being led by a guide with a lantern through cavernous underground tombs. The movement’s second section, bearing the title “With the Dead in a Dead Language,” is a mysterious transformation of the *Promenade* theme.

The Hut on Fowl’s Legs. Hartmann’s sketch is a design for an elaborate clock suggested by Baba Yaga, the fearsome witch of Russian folklore who eats human bones she has ground into paste with her mortar and pestle. She also can fly through the air on her fantastic mortar, and Mussorgsky’s music suggests a wild, midnight ride.

The Great Gate of Kiev. Mussorgsky’s grand conclusion to his suite was inspired by Hartmann’s plan for a gateway for the city of Kiev in the massive old Russian style crowned with a cupola in the shape of a Slavic warrior’s helmet. The majestic music suggests both the imposing bulk of the edifice (never built, incidentally) and a brilliant procession passing through its arches. The work ends with a heroic statement of the *Promenade* theme and a jubilant pealing of the great bells of the city.