Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (18th variation)

Composer Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff 1873 –1943) Russian composer

Most known as a pianist, and conductor in his time

One of the greatest pianists of the early 20th century

One of the last of the Romantic Era Russian Composers

Emigrated to America in 1917 after the Russian Revolution

Spent most of his time performing after moving to the US (only composed 6 pieces between 1917-1943)

One of these compositions was Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (1934) written while summering at his home on Lake Lucerne, Switzerland

Paganini was an Italian violinist and composer who lived a full century before Rachmaninoff. The original piece is titled *Caprice No. 24 in A minor*

(Caprice - piece of music free in form and lively)

The Piece:

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini is a 15 minute work that includes 24 variations on Paganini’s theme. We will listen to the 18th variation.

In this variation, Rachmaninoff takes the original theme and “inverts” it, or turns it upside down (all the intervals go in the opposite direction from the original)

Listening

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini

Obviously for piano soloist with orchestra (but note how the piano starts off this variation without orchestra

Listen for the lush, full harmonies

Listen for how there is a main melody in the piano with chords and running notes underneath - this melody is then taken by the instruments in the orchestra.

After a loud middle section with full orchestra, note how part of the main theme returns in the piano again at the end of the variation.

The Blue Danube

Composer: Johann Strauss II (1825 – 1899) Austrian composer

Composed over 500 waltzes and other dance music, also wrote several operas (Die Fledermaus - The tick)

Father was also a composer, but rigorously opposed his son becoming a musician

The Piece:

The Blue Danube (Actual title An der schönen blauen Donau - On the beautiful blue Danube)

Composed 1866

Complete piece lasts 10 minutes (we will listen to only the extended introduction)

Classic example of Viennese Waltz (waltz was very popular in Vienna during the 1800s)

The Danube is a river that runs through Vienna

Listening

Note the triple time signature (**1** - 2 - 3)

Listen for the main melody in the strings with the wind instruments adding punctuation (on beats two and three)

Listen for how many sections there are (how many different melodies there are). See if you can count how many there are, but how closely related some of them are…

Remember that this is music for a specific purpose - dancing - it is not really supposed to be a “concert” piece.

Spring (from The Four Seasons) 1st movement

Antonio Vivaldi (1678 – 1741)

Italian composer, violinist, and priest of the Baroque Era

known mainly for composing instrumental concertos, especially for the violin, as well as sacred choral works and over forty operas

Concerto - work for solo instrument (sometimes more than one solo instrument) and orchestra

Worked for Ospedale della Pietà, home for abandoned female children in Venice much of his life

Ordained as a priest in 1703 (nicknamed *The Red Priest* because of his shockingly red hair)

The Piece:

Spring (from *The Four Seasons),* 1st movement (allegro)

Each of *the four seasons* is an individual concerto, each with 3 movements (fast-slow-fast)

All meant to evoke the image of the various seasons, they were actually written to accompany sonnets. (Sonnet is simply a poem with 14 lines and a specific rhyme scheme) As a result, the pieces could be considered an early example of “program music” or music meant to represent something non-musical in essence)

All composed in 1723

Listening

Solo violin with orchestra accompaniment

Note how the lead players of the sections of the orchestra also get solo sections (this is a way that Vivaldi alters the texture of the sound)

Listen for the terraced dynamics (loud, then soft, then loud)

Listen for the structure - Note how the main theme returns at various points throughout

Listen for the section that sound almost as thought they are improvised (some of these sound like birds to me)

listen for the extremely quick notes in one section for the soloist

Note the orchestration - strings with harpsichord - this puts us in the Baroque Era

Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum (1st movement of Children’s Corner)

Composer: Claude Debussy (we listened to *Clair de Lune* earlier)

The piece

Children's Corner (L. 113) is a six-movement suite for solo piano by Claude Debussy composed in 1908.

This is the 1st movement from the suite

Title is a reference to a book of etudes commonly used in France at this time written by Muzio Clementi.

(an *etude* is a piece written for a specific instructional purpose)

The collection is dedicated to his daughter, Claude-Emma, who was three years old at the time - but the music is obviously not meant to be played by children, rather the pieces in the set are meant to conjure up images of childhood and some represent some of the toys that Claude-Emma played with on a daily basis.

Listening:

What “instructional purpose” might Debussy be after in this piece?

Note the different moods represented throughout (playful, thoughtful, excited, etc.)

O Fortuna from *Carmina Burana* (Latin for *Songs from Beuern*)

Composer: Carl Orff (1895-1982) German composer

Started off as a child writing music to accompany puppet shows he staged for his brothers and sisters

Used very colorful orchestrations in his later compositions

Famous for developing on of the three great philosophies of music education (The Orff -Schulwerk method - which combines movement, singing, playing and improvisation - along with the Kodaly and Dalcroze methods)

His compositions tend to be somewhat minimalistic - simple harmonies, strongly based on rhythmic elements, little melodic interest

The Piece:

Carmina Burana is actually the name of a 12th century manuscript of 254 poems and other dramatic texts, written by monks.

The texts are a bizarre combination of Medieval Latin, Middle High German, and some old French.

The poems include songs of morality, songs mocking the Catholic Church, love songs, and songs about drinking, gambling, lust, gluttony, etc. (Some of them are really naughty).

Orff chose 24 of these songs and in 1936 set them to music.

There are 25 movements, the piece we will listen to is actually the 1st and 25th movements.

Officially this is considered a *Cantata -* a composition for voices (solo and choral) with instrumental accompaniment in multiple movements.

O Fortuna has been used in multiple movies and commercials.

Listening:

What sort of mood does the piece evoke in the listener?

What is the instrumentation?

What sort of texture is involved throughout? Does the choir sing the same words and rhythms throughout or do they have different material at the same time (voices enter at different times) (Homophonic or polyphonic)

Note how repetitious the music is, how simplistic. Would you consider it to be melodic?

Note how the first two sections are direct repetitions, then the final section is exactly the same, but is much higher in pitch, with more instruments.

Note also how the whole piece is in minor (sound ominous) except the very end, which sound much more triumphant and celebratory. Why?