

Program Notes

Program music is conceived and written with the intention of portraying a narrative, or at least evoking a certain storyline. Some of the most notable programmatic works include Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote*, which is widely considered to be one of the pieces that marks the culmination of the genre. Despite being most often associated with the Romantic Era, program music has been composed since the Renaissance, and is still written by modern composers. It is also found outside of classical music, especially in the works of Duke Ellington.

The lines used to define what constitutes program music are often blurred, especially since works from the Romantic Era were frequently given titles. An added degree of murkiness to these pieces comes in their stories of origin. Many works that were not dubbed programmatic by their composers have since, and quite often posthumously, been assigned programs. The opposite is also true, where works initially had programs that were later removed.

Jean Sibelius is hailed as Finland's greatest composer and, through his music, he helped create a national identity as the country gained independence from tsarist Russia. Many of his pieces are inspired by nature, mythology, or epics. His **Night Ride and Sunrise** was, as the title indicates, inspired by a pre-dawn excursion and witnessing the sun's rising. In one sense, Sibelius was not unclear about the piece's inspiration, but he did complicate its origin by giving several stories as to how he conceived the work. One account is that he was inspired by a visit to the Colosseum in Rome, in 1901. Another, which he gave in his later years, was that he witnessed a striking sunrise while on a sleigh ride, sometime around the turn of the [twentieth] century. Sibelius also stated that it represented the average man alone in a gloomy forest enjoying his solitude and in awe of the stillness of nature, then rejoicing at the break of dawn.



Sibelius

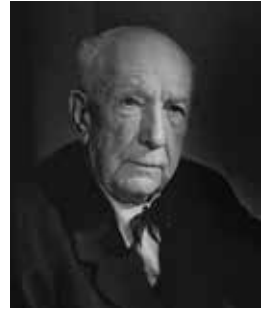
The work was completed in 1908, and premiered in St. Petersburg in 1909, under the baton of Alexander Sitoli. It was not well received, as audiences in the empire's then capital were not accustomed to the musical language that was forming in Finland, which was still a Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire. The poor reception is also the fault of Sitoli, who admitted the performance was truly sub-par. The music

was not reminiscent of works that were considered mainstream, such as Debussy and Strauss, nor did it align with the styles of Russian composers. Instead, it represented Finland on multiple levels: its landscape, traditions, and folklore. Even if the conductor and orchestra were better prepared and performed the work's premiere very well, the Russian audience would still have found the music confusing and stylistically incomprehensible.

As one of Sibelius's earlier pieces, the composition is a looser form than his mature works, but the elements that would become Finnish music are already evident. The first half of the piece contains a galloping rhythm, representing the nighttime sleigh ride. This motif varies in volume, intensity, and melodic shape, evoking a sense of the irregular terrain one would experience while riding through the woods. The sunrise begins slowly, and happens seamlessly, growing out of the darker music in the first half of the piece, just as the protagonist would witness in his jaunt through the woods.

While Sibelius diverted from the heavy influence of Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss wholeheartedly embraced it, and, along with Mahler, was a driving force in late German Romanticism. Similar to Sibelius, though, Strauss did manage to leave his own stylistic mark on the era, and found his greatest inspirations in the forms of literature. Strauss's tone poems, some of which are his best known and most frequently performed works, mark his departure from a more conservative style of composition. In these works, he began writing with greater ambition and more virtuosity. Throughout his career, Strauss also wrote a tremendous amount of vocal music – both before and after his shift in compositional style. In addition to opera, he was a prolific composer of art songs, which were often written with his wife's voice in mind. Though they were initially written for voice and piano, many were later orchestrated.

Having always loved the soprano voice, Strauss set Joseph von Eichendorf's poem *Im Abendrot* (At Sunset) to music after reading it and finding in it special meaning. The text of the other three songs were written by Hermann Hesse: *Frühling* (Spring), *September*, and *Beim Schlafengehen* (While Falling Sleep). He wrote these three for soprano and orchestra, and considered setting two more, but was unable to finish the songs before his death in 1949. These works were given the title **Four Last Songs** at the time of their publication, in 1950. This collection of four



Strauss

songs would become his epitaph.

Strauss commissioned the Wagnerian soprano Kirsten Flagstad to premiere these songs while they were being composed. Oddly, he had not heard the soprano sing, and ultimately never would, but wished for her to perform them because he felt a certain sympathy towards her, as the two were known Nazi collaborators. Flagstad dutifully honored the request, and the songs were premiered on May 22, 1950 in London's Royal Albert Hall, under the baton of Wilhelm Furtwängler.

The order of the pieces is seemingly up for debate, since they were written as follows: *Im Abendrot*, *Frühling*, *Beim Schlafengehen*, *September*. At their premiere, however, the order was: *Beim Schlafengehen*, *September*, *Frühling*, *Im Abendrot*. This could be due to the then 55-year-old Flagstad having a substantially darker and less flexible voice than the voice type for which they were written, or it may simply have been a matter of artistic choice.

Further complicating the matter, the songs were published in the order: *Frühling*, *September*, *Beim Schlafengehen*, *Im Abendrot*. This arrangement makes much more sense thematically, and in terms of assigning a type of program to the grouping. All but the first song deal with death, and were composed shortly before Strauss died. In the final song, after the words "Is this perhaps death?" Strauss quotes his own tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*, musically connecting it to the theme of the three previous songs.

While Strauss abandoned the more conservative method of composition during his career, and wrote tone poems, which depicted a very specific program, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky adhered to the more standard Romantic Era practice of assigning titles to his works, as well as their movements. This is not to say that he never wrote music without subtitles. In fact, many of his pieces were given such labels much later by critics. Additionally, Tchaikovsky did not adhere to many of the ideas or models the Russian school felt were conservative, or at least traditional. Due to finding his own unique style, Tchaikovsky is one of the composers who is responsible for the formation of what is now called the "Russian sound."



Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky gave his **First Symphony** the title "Winter Dreams." Additionally, he entitled the first movement "Dreams of a Winter Journey" and the second "Land of Gloom, Land of Mists." These were not meant to assign a program to the work, but were instead used as

descriptors for the work, helping to give clearer purpose to the chosen key of G-minor.

The work was written when Tchaikovsky was only 25 years old, not long after he accepted a professorship at the Russian Musical Society, the school that would later become the Moscow Conservatory. Under the guidance of Nikolai Rubinstein, whose brother Anton was Tchaikovsky's teacher in St. Petersburg, the young composer was encouraged to write a symphony after his successful *Overture in F*, which was written a few months before he relocated to Moscow.

Tchaikovsky found composing his first symphony to be an arduous task. He began in 1866 and finally finished two years later. After the work's premiere, under the baton of Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky, still unhappy with his symphony, revised it again in 1874. It is this version that was given the title "Winter Dreams." While the work is much less emotionally wrought than his later works, it does possess a certain degree of straightforwardness. Despite his use of what one might consider non-academic counterpoint, Tchaikovsky creates an atmosphere of thematic material that evolves gradually and organically. The work's drama unfolds smoothly throughout the movements, portraying a scene that, if not programmatic, at the very least conjures images that fit within a scene expressed by its title.