

# Program Notes

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By Mark Eliot Jacobs

MILY BALAKIREV

## *Islamey or Oriental Fantasy* (1869).

Orchestrated by Sergei Lyapunov (1912)

**Instrumentation:** piccolo, 2 flutes, oboe and English horn, piccolo clarinet in E-flat, 2 clarinets in A, 2 bassoons, 4 F horns, 4 B-flat trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, 2 harps, and strings

**Duration:** about 9 minutes

In the late 19th century the music of the east was a matter of great fascination to many Russian composers. Mily Balakirev (1836–1910) composed his piano composition *Islamey* in the space of one month in the fall of 1869 and revised it in 1902. The inspiration for the piece was a trip to the Caucasus area situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In a letter home Balakirev wrote:

...the majestic beauty of luxuriant nature there and the beauty of the inhabitants that harmonizes with it – all these things together made a deep impression on me... Since I interested myself in the vocal music there, I made the acquaintance of a Circassian prince, who frequently came to me and played folk tunes on his instrument, that was something like a violin. One of them, called *Islamey*, a dance-tune, pleased me extraordinarily and with a view to the work I had in mind on Tamara I began to arrange it for the piano. The second theme was communicated to me in Moscow by an Armenian actor, who came from the Crimea and is, as he assured me, well known among the Crimean Tatars.

The original piano version of *Islamey* is a notably difficult piece to play. Today there are several versions containing many editorial layers of varying levels of difficulty. It has been orchestrated twice. The first one was created by Alfredo Casella in 1907. The second, and the one on tonight's concert, was made by Balakirev's loyal former



student composer Sergei Lyapunov (1859–1924) in 1912, two years after Balakirev’s death.

*Islamey* is comprised of three distinct parts, first an *Allegro agitato* with its distinctive main theme (the *Islamey* of the quote above), then a *Tranquillo – Andantino espressivo* with its own contrasting theme (from the Armenian actor), and lastly an *Allegro vivo – Presto furioso*, which returns to the main theme.

*Islamey* had a lasting influence on Russian Orientalism. Borodin quoted the piece in his opera *Prince Igor* (composed 1869–1887). Rimsky-Korsakov quoted it in his *Scheherazade* (1888).

## EDWARD ELGAR Cello Concerto (1919)

**Instrumentation:** solo cello, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets in A, 2 bassoons, 4 horns in F, 2 trumpets in C, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

**Duration:** about 30 minutes.

Edward Elgar was the quintessential English composer of the Edwardian era. Of humble social origins from a small English village, and self-taught as a composer, Edward Elgar (1857–1934) struggled in his music career all his life. His major compositional influences included Robert Schumann, who he considered his ideal composer. Elgar very much identified himself as an outsider both musically and socially. He did not achieve much recognition as a composer until age



Edward Elgar

42 with the premiere of his *Enigma Variations* (1899). His heyday was the first two decades of the 20th century. He was knighted by Edward VII at Buckingham Palace in 1904.

The cello concerto was Elgar's final major composition. The October 1919 premiere by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Elgar, suffered from a lack of rehearsal time. The remainder of the performance was conducted by Albert Coates, who used up most of the available time. The concerto did not really make its way into the orchestral repertoire until the release of a recording of it by the cellist Jacqueline du Pré in the 1960's.

In contrast to the lyrical, assertive and confident violin concerto (1909), the cello concerto is relatively contemplative and dark. The design of the concerto is in two pairs of movements: *Adagio – Scherzo* and *Adagio – Allegro*.

The first movement of the concerto begins with an extended recitative for the solo cello. Shortly afterward, the violas introduce the main theme of the movement. This theme was one of the composer's most personal ones. It occurred to him as he was recovering from a surgery. He once commented that, "if you ever hear someone whistling this melody around the Malvern Hills, that will be me." The effervescent scherzo of the second movement ensues after a brief introduction.

The *Adagio* third movement is the very heart of the work. The solo cello soars above a relatively sparsely orchestrated accompaniment with a single lyrical theme. The music flows directly into the noble fourth movement.

## IGOR STRAVINSKY

### Petrushka (1910–1911; rev 1946–47)

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, gong, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, xylophone, glockenspiel, offstage snare drum and long drum, harp, piano, celesta, and strings

Duration: about 34 minutes

At the turn of the 20th century Parisian audiences were hungry for great works from abroad. This was the milieu needed by the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev to launch his sensational *Ballets Russes* company in 1909. The *Ballets Russes* was an active participant in Paris art scene until the market crash of 1929.

For the 1910 Ballets Russe season, Diaghilev requested a new ballet based on the Russian fairy tale of the Firebird from the well-established Russian composer Anatoly Liadov. Time constraints prevented Liadov from accepting the commission, so Diaghilev sought out the relatively unknown composer Igor Stravinsky, who completed the score to *The Firebird* in collaboration with choreographer Michel Fokine, with scenario and set design by Alexandre Benois. The ballet was an instant success and made Stravinsky an international music celebrity for life.

For the 1911 season, Stravinsky proposed a new ballet based on ancient pagan rites of prehistoric Russia. The *Rite of Spring* would have to wait for the 1913 season. From his 1936 autobiography, Stravinsky recalls,

Before tackling the *Sacre du Printemps*, which would be a long and difficult task, I wanted to refresh myself by composing an orchestral piece in which the piano would play the most important part – a sort of *Konzertstück*. In composing the music, I had in mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggi. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet-blasts. The outcome is a terrific noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet. Having finished this bizarre piece, I struggled for hours, while walking beside Lake Geneva, to find a title which would express in a word the character of my music and the personality of this creature.

One day I leapt for joy. I had indeed found my title – *Petrushka*, the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries.



Igor Stravinsky

The puppet *Petrushka* is better known in English-speaking countries as *Punch*. Stravinsky presented the piece *Petrushka's Cry* to Diaghilev, who enthusiastically set in motion a new collaboration for a new ballet with the same team that created last season's *Firebird*. *Petrushka's Cry* would become the basis for *Petrushka's Room*, the second tableau of the ballet.

*Petrushka* is set in the 1830's at St. Petersburg during the annual pre-Lenten Shrovetide Fair or *Maslenitsa* (derived from the Russian word for oil or butter, "maslo".) It is also variously known as "Butter Week", "Cheese Week" and "Pancake Week," the latter for the delicious *blini* associated with it. Held around the vernal equinox, the holiday originates from pre-Christian Pagan traditions. In the Eastern Orthodox Christian pre-Lenten tradition, the eating of meat was already forbidden prior to *Maslenitsa*. During the festival, which ends with Lent, dairy and eggs are still allowed. The festival is a merry farewell to winter and a welcoming of spring. Around 1900 Prince A. P. Oldenburg led a successful effort to outlaw the festival in Russia due to the perceived wide abuse of alcohol by its participants. By 1911 Butter Week was little more than a fond memory in Russia.

In creating the scenario for the ballet, Alexandre Benois felt a distinct duty to immortalize his childhood memories of *Petrushka* and the Butter Week on the stage. He envisioned the way in which ballet artists should depict the puppets: *Petrushka*, the *Ballerina*, and the *Moor*. A showman or charlatan introduces the puppets to the revelers at the fair and they are shortly brought to life by a magician. This life would of course be accompanied by suffering: the poor creatures are set into a love triangle from the very start, with both *Petrushka* and the *Moor* vying for the affection of the rather vapid *Ballerina*. Benois promoted the character of the *Moor* from the *intermezzi* that usually appeared between the acts of a typical Shrovetide street performance to a principal participant.

The ballet is comprised of four tableaux, the first and last set in the external world of the fair, the inner two in the internal world of the puppets. The first tableau begins with a depiction of the chaotic revelry at the fair which is suddenly interrupted by drummers introducing the magician and his three puppets. The magician brings the puppets to life with his flute, and to the amazement of the crowd, the trio perform a Russian dance among the revelers. The first tableau contains quotations from several Russian folk songs. Also heard is the chorus from a

contemporary French popular song “La jambe be bois” about a beautiful girl taking pains to disguise the fact she has a wood prosthetic leg. This seems very apt for a ballerina puppet. Stravinsky was not aware that the song was under copyright and had to pay a fee to use it.

The second tableau takes place in Petrushka’s room where the Charlatan keeps him locked up when he is not performing. Although the puppet’s rooms are essentially offstage prop boxes, the interiors are vast and fantastical. The walls of Petrushka’s room depict the night sky with a half moon over snow-capped mountain peaks. Benois’ scenario states that “while the Magician’s magic has imbued all three puppets with human feelings and emotions, it is Petrushka who feels and suffers the most.” Petrushka is kicked into his room. Bitterly aware of his own ugliness and lack of belonging, he expresses his detestation for his master and his love for the Ballerina. Throughout the ballet, Petrushka is represented by the eponymous “Petrushka chord” consisting of two major chords with roots a tritone (augmented fourth) apart. The clashing sound of this chord helps to depict the puppet’s inner anger toward his master and himself.

The third tableau takes place in the gaudily decorated room of the Moor. When the Ballerina enters, she dances for the Moor. The jealous Petrushka enters next, only to be chased out by the Moor with his scimitar aloft.

The final tableau takes us back to the fair for a series of dances before the culmination of the sad story of the puppets. First is the *Dance of the Nursemaids*, set to the tune of the folk song “Along the Road to St. Petersburg.” A peasant and a dancing bear intrude on the dance. The clarinets portray a peasant playing a pipe to accompany the ursine intruder, who is portrayed by solo tuba. Next is a gypsy dance, and then the dance of the coachmen and stable boys. The nursemaids return to dance with the coachmen and stable boys. Now some mummers come to perform and among them is the Devil, who frolics with the crowd. The dance suddenly stops and Petrushka enters being pursued by the Moor (still wielding his scimitar) and the Ballerina. The Moor strikes Petrushka with the scimitar, killing him. The magician returns to demonstrate to the concerned revelers that Petrushka is only a puppet, shaking some sawdust out of his head. The crowd disperses as the magician drags the broken puppet away. Suddenly, to the piercing sound of a muted trumpet, Petrushka’s ghost appears above the little puppet theater to taunt the magician.