Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)
Ancient Airs and Dances Suite no. 1

The beginning of the twentieth century was a period marked by furious experiment as composers looked for new directions that would take them away from what had come before, namely nineteenth century Romanticism. One of the most important developments came near the end of the First World War as a number of composers began to explore pre-romantic music. These were styles which featured an emotionally restrained approach that offered a refreshing change from the melodramatic and sometimes bombastic style played by the gigantic ensembles of the late Romantic era. Sometimes called the “Back to Bach” movement when it alluded to baroque style, this style became more or less officially known by the vague term neo-classicism. Neo-classicism would eventually come to refer to a style that was unmistakably modern but influenced by various characteristics of baroque music such as the use of small performing groups and an increased use of counterpoint. Another aspect of the movement, though, was the borrowing of actual old music and then arranging it in modern style. One of the early examples of this old -wine-in-new- bottles approach were the three suites of *Ancient Airs and Dances* by Ottorino Respighi, the first of which, heard today, was written in 1917. Respighi was something that not all composers are, namely a trained musicologist with an extensive knowledge of baroque and pre-baroque music. In this case, Respighi borrowed lute music of the Italian Renaissance period that had been collected by a fellow musicologist and early music performer named Oscar Chilesotti.

These “handshakes across the centuries”, as they have been called, offered various possibilities. A few years after Respighi had written his first suite, Igor Stravinsky, for example, produced his ballet *Pulcinella*, which borrowed baroque period melodies but made substantial changes in rhythms and harmonies. Respighi, on the other hand, remains closer to the originals, using primarily his remarkable skill at orchestration to bring 16th century lute music into a different context. Incidentally, Respighi acquired some of his knowledge of orchestration from one of the greatest masters of the art, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who wrote a well known textbook on the subject and served as Respighi’s teacher for a brief period while he was living in St. Petersburg and playing the viola in the Russian Imperial Theater. Respighi’s orchestrations are best known to the public through his large, colorful works such as *Pines of Rome*, but here he creates an intimate, chamber-music like atmosphere.

The opening movement, entitled Balletto *detto Il Conte Orlando*, is based on a work dating from 1599 by the Italian composer Simone Molinaro. The movement begins with full orchestra in a major key and then moves to a contrasting section in minor announced by the oboe. A brief return of the opening material closes the movement.

The second movement, entitled *Gagliarda*, is a reworking of a piece written in the 1550’s by Vincenzo Galilei, father of the famous astronomer and an important musical figure of the time in his own right. The galliard, as it is spelled in English, was a popular dance of the Renaissance and early Baroque periods. This movement opens with full orchestra and then
moves to a contrasting middle section featuring smaller groups of instruments. The drone bass in this section emphasizes the folk-like character of the dance, after which we hear a reprise of the opening portion.

The third movement, Villanella, is based on a renaissance period lute piece by an anonymous composer. This poignant slow movement begins with a beautifully expressive oboe solo playing plaintively against pizzicato strings. A contrasting middle section is somewhat faster and then the opening portion returns, this time featuring a cello solo.

The finale, Passo mezzo e mascherada, is also based on anonymous sources. The passo mezzo was a lively Italian folk dance while the mascherada was music intended for use at masquerade balls. A single trumpet is added here for the first time, helping to bring the work to a festive conclusion.

Daniel Maki

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
Sinfonia Concertante

The likely inspiration for this concertante was a similar work—though with six solo parts for flute, oboe, bassoon, violin, viola, and cello—by Haydn’s pupil, Ignaz Pleyel. That is to say, what probably happened is that Johann Peter Salomon, the violinist and impresario responsible for bringing Haydn to London in 1791 and again three years later, encouraged him to try his hand at the genre with which Pleyel had scored such a success. It seems unlikely that Haydn would have written a work of this type without specific encouragement. Unlike Mozart, he was neither a man of the theater, at least not primarily, nor a virtuoso performer, and he was not much drawn to the composition of concertos. His last had been the D major cello concerto of 1783, and only one more was to follow, the trumpet concerto of 1796. (In 1792 he promised a concerto to the French-Irish violinist Francois Hippolite Barthelemon but never got around to writing it.) Haydn’s manuscript looks like something written in a tremendous hurry, and it is not impossible that the Concertante was written between February 27, when Pleyel’s work appeared on Salomon’s program, and March 9, the date of the premiere. At any rate, it pleased, eliciting not quite the rapture nor the encores of his most famous London symphonies, but still, most distinctly, enough to be repeated the following week and again on May 3, as well as being one of the first works up for revival when Haydn returned to England in 1794.

"A new composition from HAYDN combined with all the excellencies of music," wrote the reviewer for the Morning Herald. "It was profound, airy, affecting, and original, and the performance was in unison with the merit of the composition." The Morning Chronicle reported that the new work was performed "with admirable effect, the solo parts were finely contrasted with the 'full tide of harmony' of the other instruments, and they were ably sustained by the respective performers." The violin solo is primus inter pares, and Salomon came in for praise as having "particularly exerted himself." Mr. Menel, the cellist, one suspects, may have had trouble: a few of his perilously high-flying measures in the finale are struck out (as are the corresponding measures in the violin part) , though Haydn, perhaps hoping to find a more secure player on another occasion, left these places untouched in his autograph score. The Concertante was one of the Haydn pieces that went underground in the nineteenth century,
and when a miniature score was published in 1922—a very corrupt one, incidentally—it had been pretty well forgotten and came out as a remark-able novelty. A recording that Charles Munch made in Paris in the 1930s first brought the Concertante to general attention, while the assumption of the work into the standard repertory was, as the Boston Symphony's own performance history indicates, a development of the post-war years.

As eighteenth-century composers use the term, a "sinfonia concertante" (or however you would like to spell it) might be a concerto with more than one solo instrument, for example, Mozart's very well-known Sinfonia concertante in E-flat, K.364, for violin and viola, or something closer to what the name actually suggests, a symphony that behaves in the manner of a concerto. Haydn's Concertante tends toward the latter idea. His various "principale" and "obbigato" parts are demanding and grateful; nevertheless, they are not as unambiguously soloistic as the cello and trumpet parts in Haydn's most famous concertos, nor even as much as the violin and viola lines of Mozart's K.364. The layout of Haydn's autograph makes his intention quite clear. In the fashion of the day, he puts brass and drums at the top of the page and then proceeds in the following order: flute, oboe I obbligato, oboe II, bassoon obbligato, "violino principale," "violino I ripieno" (meaning the section as distinct from solo), violin II, viola, violoncello obbligato, and "bassi continui" (including the cellos other than the soloist and a keyboard instrument). In other words, the soloists are grouped among their colleagues, except of course the bassoonist, who has none. This is one aspect of the piece that modern editions have tended to obscure, most of them adding an extra ripieno bassoon. Only the Eulenburg miniature score edited by Christa Landon (1968) gets it absolutely right.

The Concertante begins with an understated beginning that is almost in medias res. The solo quartet emerges unexpectedly early, to recede quickly into the orchestral texture once more. The development, going through a considerable chain of minor keys, is a serious matter indeed. The cadenza is Haydn's own and is fixed in the autograph. In the Andante, Haydn gives us something close to chamber music, the accompanying orchestra having next to no independent action and being reduced to flute, oboe, the two horns, and strings. Haydn had confidence in Mr. Holmes's top register, for in the third measure he sends the bassoon to high B-flat. The finale, too, begins as though one had suddenly switched it on. Just as suddenly, it interrupts itself to make way for the violinist in the guise of an operatic diva under full recitativo sail. (Haydn's Symphony No. 7, Le Midi, has a similar excursion into operatic gesture.) The recitative makes its presence known once more before the spirited Allegro sweeps all before it.

Michael Steinberg

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
Serenade No. 2 in A Major, Opus 16

For those who know a bit of Brahms it is generally a pleasant surprise to encounter his two Serenades, written in 1858-59. In them one finds little of the sober, somber, craggy Brahms or his penetrating lyricism. Instead, these are light, largely sunny, at times even folksy outings. Why they turned out that way has, for all his relative youth at the time, a long background.

Born in 1833, Brahms grew up in Hamburg, the son of a street musician, and from early childhood was trained toward a career as a concert pianist. When he brought his first pieces to
his teacher, the man realized that he had not a piano prodigy, but a composer prodigy, on his hands. When Felix Mendelssohn died, that teacher observed: "A great master of the musical art has gone hence, but an even greater one will bloom for us in Brahms." Brahms was fourteen at the time. At age twenty he knocked on the door of Robert and Clara Schumann in Düsseldorf, introduced himself, and played them a few of his pieces. That night Robert wrote in his journal: "Visit from Brahms (a genius)." Shortly after, Schumann published an article that called this young student the coming savior of German music—saving it, that is, from what Schumann saw as the vandalisms of Wagner and Liszt, who had turned away from Classical forms and genres. Brahms, Schumann declared, is "a real Beethovener." The article made Brahms instantly notorious around the European musical world. Soon after that, Schumann fell apart and was committed to an asylum from which he never emerged.

Brahms knew that the article had made him famous before he had much to show for it or much sense of where he was headed. It placed a crushing and lifelong burden on his creativity. For some years after, he composed as best he could in a sort of limbo, trying one thing and another. Schumann had called him a "Beethovener," and among other things that meant he was expected to write symphonies. He made a stab at one that did not take off, though it provided the germ of his First Piano Concerto. Brahms knew the musical world was waiting to see what he could do with a symphony, and many were hoping for him to fall on his face. He also knew that his craftsmanship might not be up to the task. That was demonstrated when he got himself into the massive First Piano Concerto, which took an excruciating four years to finish as he struggled with matters of form and orchestration. When he showed the beginning of an orchestral draft to his older friend Joseph Joachim, a violin prodigy and experienced composer, Joachim burst into laughter.

For Brahms these were his years in the wilderness, uncertain in his work and his life and his income. But part of that time he had a pleasant job in the little court of Detmold. There he directed a women’s choir and performed solo and chamber music on keyboard, and had capable musicians and a small orchestra at his disposal. Naturally he began to write choral music, which at first he found frustrating. "My stuff is written so impractically!" he groaned to Joachim.

At Detmold in 1858 he produced a Serenade in D major for a chamber ensemble of winds and strings, then turned it into an orchestral piece, his first completed one. On the title page he wrote "Symphony-Serenade" then, probably with a sigh, scratched out "Symphony." He was not going to masquerade this effort as more ambitious than it was. Besides, it was in the mode of a serenade: tuneful, largely cheerful, in six movements. In it he proved himself entirely competent with the orchestra, but not yet with a particularly distinctive voice.

The next year he produced the A major Serenade No. 2, eventually Opus 16, for chamber orchestra. There are five movements, the central one an expansive Adagio and around it two faster dancelike movements. It calls for a full complement of woodwinds and two horns, but strings without violins. That scoring throws the main focus of the piece on the winds, and gives the ensemble a darker cast than usual. The reason Brahms left out the violins is obscure, but he did it once more in the opening movement of his German Requiem, beginning that elegiac work with a twilight ambiance.

The modest wind theme that opens the A major Serenade is not particularly "Brahmsian" to our ears, but it is warm and winning, introducing a movement of great charm.
The movement also has some elements prophetic of the later Brahms, such as a frequent juxtaposition of duple and triple patterns, and a tendency to roam harmonically beyond the expected for an unpretentious serenade. Roaming harmony and intricate rhythms would be thumbprints of his mature style. The formal outline is traditional sonata form, the second section with a sighing theme, then a lilting one. Brahms would stay true to the old forms, but as here he would handle them freely. He does not repeat the exposition but rather begins the development with a feint at a repeat; the development is long and wide-ranging in keys; and the recapitulation gets back to the home key of A major for a quiet interlude before it arrives at the opening theme.

Second is a jaunty scherzo marked “Vivace,” featuring tousled rhythms resulting from two-beat patterns intruding into the three-beat meter. Call the middle Trio section ironically earnest.

Note: third movement will not be performed tonight

The fourth movement, titled “Quasi Menuetto,” is a fast 6/4 heard as two-beat 3+3, so really it has little to do with the old Classical-era minuet. But it is dancelike in its lilting and gracious way, with a whispering, rather ironically conspiratorial Trio.

The finale is the expected dashing Rondo, brightened with the addition of a piccolo. The recurring theme is a folksy tune, but keeps bursting into triplets, and the main theme keeps changing in a generally untrammeled formal outline. A jubilant ending assures us that it has all been in good fun.

If Robert Schumann had not written his article that thrust the young composer into premature fame and left him burdened for the rest of his life, Brahms might have given us more relaxed, expansive, and delightful outings like the Serenades. As it is, we must be content with the two we have.

Jan Swafford