

Program Notes

Text by Robert Markow

Elgar: In The South (Alassio), Op. 50

Alassio is the name of a small town on the Italian Riviera, just a few miles from France, where Elgar and his wife went in late 1903 to escape the damp chill of their native England. It was Elgar's first visit to Italy and he was duly impressed. Wandering one day through the nearby Vale of Andora, he wrote of "streams, flowers, hills; the distant snow mountains in one direction, and the blue Mediterranean in the other. [I was] by the side of the old Roman way. A peasant shepherd stood by an old ruin, and in a flash it all came to me – the conflict of armies on that very spot long ago, where I now stood – the contrast of the ruin and the shepherd – and then, all of a sudden, I came back to reality. In that time I had 'composed' the overture – the rest was merely writing it down."

Elgar was not entirely truthful about having "composed" the whole overture in that moment, for the exultant opening theme had already been jotted down some four years earlier. Nevertheless, it serves perfectly to express his new-found joy in this spot of land. The second theme is a graceful, gently flowing melody initially heard in the clarinets in the minor mode. There is a further theme in the pastoral vein. In place of a development section devoted to the themes already presented, Elgar introduces two additional episodes. The first, inspired by thoughts of ancient Roman armies, is a grand, pompous idea in the heavy brass that paints, in the composer's words, "the relentless and domineering onward force of the ancient day, and gives a sound-picture of the strife and wars, the 'drums and tramlings' of a later time." The second Elgar described as a *canto popolare* (a folk song, though it is his own), heard against an accompaniment of shimmering strings, glockenspiel and harp, first in the solo viola, then in the solo horn. The themes of the opening section return in order in the recapitulation, and the music ends in a great orchestral

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tour de force in E-flat major, the key traditionally used for “heroic” music like Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony and *Emperor* Concerto, and Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben*.

The first performance of *In the South* (or *Alassio* – the work goes by both names) was conducted by the composer on March 16, 1904 at an Elgar Festival in London’s Covent Garden. *In the South* joins Berlioz’ *Harold in Italy*, Mendelssohn’s *Italian* Symphony, Strauss’s *Aus Italien*, Wolf’s *Italian Serenade* and Respighi’s Roman Trilogy as a magnificent musical tribute to the glory of Italy and the country’s natural beauties.

EDWARD ELGAR: Born in Broadheath, England, June 2, 1857; died in Worcester, February 23, 1934

Work composed: 1903 – 1904 **World premiere:** March 16, 1904 at an Elgar Festival in London’s Covent Garden, conducted by the composer

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel), harp, strings

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Xenakis:

Κεχροψ - Κεχροψ (Κέκρωψ)

for piano and orchestra

Iannis Xenakis, whose centenary year is being observed in 2022, ranks among the most important musical thinkers of the twentieth century. Usually identified as a Greek-French composer, he was born to Greek parents in Romania, grew up in Greece, where he received much of his education, and lived most of his life in Paris (from 1947 onwards). He became a French citizen in 1965. Xenakis initially set his sights on a career in architecture and engineering, and won degrees in these subjects in both Athens and Paris. While in Paris, he became an assistant to the renowned architect Le Corbusier. He worked with Le Corbusier on projects in France, Iraq, India, and, most famously, the Philips Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair, which he

designed mostly himself using principles of catenoid construction. Also in Paris, Xenakis pursued further studies in music, particularly with Messiaen.

Xenakis is remembered above all for his use of mathematical models in his musical designs, bringing the two fields together in a sort of architectural fusion. He coined the term *stochastic music*, meaning music in which dense textures he called “clouds” or “galaxies” are constituted of random sequences of notes, as seen in such works as *Metastasis* (1954) and *Pithoprakhta* (1956). The British critic Tom Service has noted in his music a “deep, primal rootedness in richer and older phenomena even than musical history: the physics and patterning of the natural world, of the stars, of gas molecules, and the proliferating possibilities of mathematical principles.” Alex Ross, writing in *The New Yorker*, sees Xenakis as a composer who has “produced some of the rawest, wildest music in history – sounds that explode around the ears.”

Keqrops was composed in 1986 and was premiered by the New York Philharmonic with pianist Roger Woodward and conducted by Zubin Mehta, on November 13 of that year. The work has a prominent part for piano, but it is not a concerto in the traditional sense of dialogue between soloist and orchestra. Instead, the piano is closely integrated into the orchestral texture, and it plays most of the time throughout the seventeen-minute, single-movement work. (A close parallel might be found in Messiaen’s *Turangalila* Symphony.) The title, like that of many of Xenakis’ compositions, is a compound of two Greek words or roots, *kekoo* and *opsis*. Xenakis translated the title as *weaving*, but added that it could also refer to the Mycaean legend of Cecrops, first king of the city of Athens and a cultural hero who introduced his subjects to marriage, ceremonial burial, reading and writing. Dense blocks of sound, furious eruptions from a large orchestra (all woodwinds and brass except tuba are in units of four), percussive violence, close interweaving of various blocks of sound (woodwinds, brass, strings, piano), and sliding melodic clusters are features that run throughout *Keqrops* in music of furious aggression alternating with uneasy calm.

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IANNIS XENAKIS: Born in Brăila, Romania, May 29, 1922; died in Paris, February 4, 2001

Work composed: 1986 **World premiere:** November 13, 1986 in New York, by the New York Philharmonic with pianist Roger Woodward, conducted by Zubin Mehta

Instrumentation: 4 flutes, 4 oboes, 4 clarinets (4th doubling bass clarinet), 4 bassoons (4th doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, 3 tom-toms, 2 bongos), harp, strings, solo piano

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 1 in F minor, Op. 10

Few composers excel in their first attempt to write a symphony. Exceptions include Beethoven, Berlioz, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler and Sibelius, but these men were already nearing thirty or were even older when they first essayed the genre. Dmitri Shostakovich was still a student at the Leningrad Conservatory when he wrote his First Symphony, but this was no immature, bungling student work. Its premiere on May 12, 1926, under the direction of the distinguished conductor Nicolai Malko, heralded the arrival of a major figure not yet twenty, a composer already bursting with a unique musical personality and marked for greatness.

What accounts for the success of this remarkable First Symphony? Boldness of ideas unencumbered by academic and recondite procedures, a touch of “shock of the modern” tempered by memorable (if not exactly hummable) tunes, a sense of mischievousness, a flair for instrumental color, harmonic irregularities that seem like “wrong turns” in a silent film comedy, dramatic events, virtuoso writing for the orchestra, and an overall infectious enthusiasm are some of the reasons often put forth.

A short introduction presents a quirky dialogue between trumpet and bassoon. The first movement’s main theme is set to a grim marching rhythm, and is described by musicologist Edward Downes as “a cross between a quick march tune and a bit of old-fashioned ragtime.” In contrast the solo flute offers a gently lyrical, lilting theme, which is echoed by the clarinet.

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The second movement alternates a zippy scherzo subject with a slower chant-like idea. The scherzo portions are reworkings of an orchestral piece Shostakovich had written at the age of twelve(!), and incorporates a new sonority not yet heard in the symphony, the piano. At one point Shostakovich superimposes both the scherzo and the chant ideas, which initially were set to different meters, different rhythms, different tempos, and different moods.

Romantic expressiveness is found in the third movement, whose melancholic opening theme is actually a clever variation of the principal theme of the first movement (the marching tune). The movement leads without pause into the finale. The solo clarinet presents the movement's first main theme, a breathless, virtuosic affair that covers the range of the instrument. Ideas from previous movements are worked in, including a highly dramatic timpani solo derived from the rhythmic motto of the third movement. A long coda follows, growing steadily in intensity to the final frenzied outburst.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH: Born in St. Petersburg, September 25, 1906; died in Moscow, August 9, 1975

Work composed: 1924 - 1925 **World premiere:** May 12, 1926 in Leningrad, by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Nicolai Malko

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, alto trumpet, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, bells), piano, strings

Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, **Robert Markow** now writes program notes for orchestras as well as for numerous other musical organizations in North America and Asia. He taught at Montreal's McGill University for many years, has led music tours to several countries, and writes for numerous leading classical music journals.