

A Few Words About the Program:

George Gershwin really needed a vacation in the early part of 1932 and chose a location not many of us can even consider now – Havana. After “two hysterical weeks” where “no sleep was to be had” he returned home refreshed and inspired. Gershwin had paid very close attention to the island’s traditional music and almost immediately set to work on a concert overture in response to his experiences. Originally called *Rumba*, in honor of Cuba’s most intoxicating cultural export at the time, the ***Cuban Overture*** was an impressionistic depiction of the unique rhythmic identity Gershwin found there. To ensure authenticity, the composer actually brought several percussion instruments back with him to New York and wrote them into his infectious orchestral trip report. This music was as close to Cuba as many in 1932 could get, and it still reminds us today that seemingly faraway places can be right next door.

Born in Seville in 1854 and educated in all of the traditional western forms, Geronimo Giménez is best known today for his zarzuelas. For lack of a better term, zarzuelas were Spanish folk operas/musicals and Gimenez created not less than 100 of them during his career. Among his most enduring were *La Tampranica* (1900) and ***La boda de Luis Alonso*** (1897). “The Wedding of Luis Alonso” was a sequel to the equally popular “Luis Alonso’s Dance” (1896) and had not the zarzuela form fallen out of favor early in the next century, Giménez might have died a rich man in 1923. He did not. Thanks, however, to the unaccountable winds of public opinion that regularly buffet the legacies of artists throughout history, the zarzuelas of Geronimo Giménez regained their place decades later and the reputation of the man and his cultural passion has been redeemed.

Opera and ballet excerpts are often so popular in the concert hall that we forget they were meant for the stage as part of a much larger experience. This certainly seems to be the case with Khachaturian’s fiery ***Sabre Dance***. The ballet *Gayane* dates from 1942 and tells the story of an Armenian woman’s struggle between loyalty to her husband and devotion to her nation. The *Sabre Dance* appears in the third act, when all is well again and Gayane’s concerns are washed away by folk music and wedding festivities (not to mention the arrest of her terrible husband). As a stand-alone work, *Sabre Dance* has reached a level of pop culture resonance reserved for very few classical works. Countless movies and television shows have used it. Dozens of bands have covered it. And nearly 20 professional figure skaters have chosen it for their championship routines.

Another case in point for the argument above is the incredibly popular ***Die Fledermaus Overture***. Though the opera itself is in the common repertoire today, the overture is performed more frequently alone than in context and it is some of the most delightful music Johann Strauss II ever wrote. The story of the farce is spun from the purest theatrical cotton candy. Intricate but ridiculous social commentary? Lovers in disguise? A hilarious jailer? Dancing and cavorting on a Viennese New Year’s Eve? It’s all there and the overture sets the scenes with the sure hand of a true master. Strauss wrote this gem in 1874 and, with the temporary exception of Paris, it was a hit in every city that presented it. Though not known to have “champagne” tastes himself, Brahms was said to have loved it enough to return for several repeat performances during a revival in Germany.

Mendelssohn was in Italy for the better part of a year between 1830 and 1831. He spent time in Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples and other cultural hubs before returning home by way of Switzerland. Much of Mendelssohn's attention was devoted to museums and galleries where, as an amateur artist, he was anxious to expose himself to the rich history of Italian painting. Though he was a decent enough watercolorist, it is the music Mendelssohn began in Italy that most lastingly reflects his time there. He composed several sacred works while in the liturgical embrace of Rome and also considered material for his loosely referential "Scottish" and "Italian" symphonies. Scotland is rarely mistaken for Italy, but it is not entirely criminal that Robert Schumann would later assume one for the other in a review of Symphony No. 3 since neither of Mendelssohn's travel symphonies remembers its inspiration in any obvious way (the highly-stylized **Salterello** finale of the "Italian" notwithstanding). Without the nicknames, in fact, it could be credited as an honest mistake for anyone to hear the open vistas, religious gravity and mighty architecture of Italy in both pieces. Where Symphony No. 3 has moody mists and storms, No. 4 is all bright sun and blue sky.

Argentinian composer Carlos Gardel wrote his tango *Por Una Cabeza* in 1935. The phrase translates to "by a head" and refers specifically to horse racing and the many narrow victories that drive gamblers so crazy. The lyrics of this tango speak of just that sort of man, a compulsive track better whose obsession with women is no less powerful and just as frequently frustrating. Had Gardel and his musical partner Alfredo La Pera been blessed with impressively long lives (they died in a plane crash the very year this work was conceived), they might have seen their tango grace such Hollywood films as *Scent of a Woman*, *Schindler's List* and *True Lies*.

Kol Nidrei for cello and orchestra by Max Bruch was written in 1880 and premiered the following year under Bruch direction. The words "Kol nidrei" mean "All vows": the text is a renunciation of false allegiance sworn under duress. The chant itself has the character of a lament. The chant is said to have originated at the time of the Inquisition in Spain, when many Jews, known as Maranos, outwardly adopted Christianity but continued to practice their hereditary faith in secret.

Bruch first became acquainted with the Kol Nidre melody when his teacher [Ferdinand Hiller](#) introduced him to the Lichtenstein family, the head of which served as the cantor-in-chief of Berlin. Cantor [Abraham Jacob Lichtenstein](#) was known to have cordial relations with many Christian musicians and supported Bruch's interest in [Jewish music folk](#). While some commentators have criticized the lack of Jewish sentiment in Bruch's concert-hall Kol Nidrei, Bruch never presumed to write Jewish music. He only wished to incorporate Jewish inspirations into his own compositions.

Kol Nidrei is an [Adagio](#) on 2 [Hebrew](#) Melodies and consists of a series of [variations](#) on these themes. The first theme, which also lends the piece its title, comes from the [Kol Nidre](#) prayer, which is recited during the [evening service](#) on [Yom Kippur](#). In Bruch's setting of the melody, the cello imitates the rhapsodic voice of the [cantor](#) who chants the liturgy in the [synagogue](#). The second subject of the piece is quoted from the middle section of [Isaac Nathan's](#) arrangement of "O Weep for Those that Wept on [Babel's](#) Stream", a lyric which was penned by [Lord Byron](#) in his collection [Hebrew Melodies](#) (this collection also includes the famous poem "[She Walks in Beauty](#)").

Tchaikovsky's Variations On A Rococo Theme for cello and orchestra (1877) Tchaikovsky wrote this work for his colleague, Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, at the Moscow Conservatory. The work is a set of 8 variations on a theme of the composer in the mid-18th century Rococo style. Tchaikovsky intended the work to be a tribute to his idol, Mozart. The work we hear today is not exactly what Tchaikovsky wrote. The work was extensively edited by Fitzenhagen without the approval of the composer. Tchaikovsky made little protest to the changes even when the piece was being published, allowing Fitzenhagen's edits to stand.