Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor*

Instrumentation: piccolo, 3 flutes (3rd doubles piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubles English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

Duration: 14 minutes in two movements.

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THE COMPOSER – ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833-1887) – Borodin lived with his feet firmly planted in two very different worlds in the late 1860s. As both a serious musician and an accomplished chemist, he was often forced to juggle conflicting timelines and demands. A prime example comes from 1869 when Borodin was simultaneously struggling with a difficult opera project (*Prince Igor*) and a fight for a claim of research priority before the Russian Chemical Society.

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THE MUSIC – For various reasons, *Prince Igor* had to be set aside that year and, in fact, Borodin would never finish it. That task was left to Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov and the final work did see a premiere until 1890. The libretto detailed the saga of a 12-century Russian hero who, when preparing to face down a Mongol horde (the Polovtsi), loses control of his men during a sudden eclipse. Igor is captured and offered slave women in exchange for a promise of peace, but he rejects the offer in favor of escape and a return to his wife and his pride. The temptation itself is depicted in the Polovtsian Dances sequence, which has become the most oft-excerpted portion of the score. The scene is a prime example of Russian ‘Orientalism’ and quite interesting when set alongside the prevailing ‘nationalism’ of the opera in general. Borodin was not a student of the foreign culture he was attempting to capture in music, so we must view his musical impression of them as solely imaginative and as respectful as historical moment would allow. So much of the opera was completed by colleagues that it can be easy to forget that Borodin wrote the Dances himself and that the dazzling orchestration and rhythmic creativity on display in them were to his credit alone. Diaghilev liked the Dances very much and presented them, fully choreographed by Fokine, in 1909 during his first ‘Russian Season’ in Paris.

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THE WORLD – 1890 also saw the official designation of Ellis Island as an American immigration station, the publication of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the death of Vincent van Gogh and the premiere of Tchaikovsky *Sleeping Beauty* in St. Petersburg.

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THE CONNECTION – This will be the CCSO premiere performance of Polovtsian Dances.