

Grieg's Piano Concerto

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Thomas Adès: *Shanty – Over the Sea*

London native Thomas Adès has been at the forefront of British music for a quarter of a century. The remarkable consortium of nine international orchestras on four continents that commissioned *Shanty – Over the Sea* attests to his international reputation and stature. *Shanty* taps into the English folk tradition. Adès has written: “A shanty is a song in many verses sung by a group of sailors at work. The melody is sung many times, never the same, with a strong rhythmic pulse but not necessarily literal unanimity. A shanty, along with any folk song in the English-language traditions, creates depth through repetition of the melody and variation of the story. In this Shanty fifteen individual voices, sometimes together and sometimes divergent, create a widening seascape. In a Shanty, the cyclical verses build a story of the harsh, mechanical routine of the petty captain’s rule, and accumulate a longing for mutiny. As in a Slave Spiritual, there is an implied yearning for liberation, freedom from the false, arbitrary regime of the petty masters, and a dream of a safe harbour beyond.”

Edvard Grieg: Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 16

This popular concerto needs little introduction. Grieg’s music communicates with fiery passion from its explosive, dramatic opening, sustaining interest and excitement throughout its first movement. The second movement shows an unexpected affinity with the delicate, rhapsodic lyricism of Chopin, while the finale is propelled by vigorous Norwegian dance rhythms. Both Tchaikovsky and Liszt were lavish in their praise for this wonderful concerto. Though strongly influenced by Schumann’s Piano Concerto—also in A minor—Grieg’s Concerto is rich in its Norwegian character. This is particularly true in the finale, a vigorous Norwegian *halling* that will have your foot tapping.

Igor Stravinsky: *Petrushka* (1947 Version)

Petrushka is a ballet about three puppets (Petrushka, a Ballerina and a Moor) presented at a fair by a

Showman. Petrushka falls hopelessly in love with the ballerina. In a classic love triangle, he loses her to a fierce Moor. Stravinsky's scenario sets the tale at a Shrovetide Fair, an Easter fair that took place in St. Petersburg's Admiralty Square. He incorporated Russian folk songs and other borrowed material into his colorful score. Guest conductor Andrey Boreyko has chosen the composer's 1947 revised version of the suite from *Petrushka*, which employs a slightly smaller orchestra. The score's instrumental timbres remain bright and pungent—including a prominent role for orchestral piano—but they still have delicacy. The four movements make an effective concert piece.

Thomas Adès: *Shanty – Over the Sea* (US Premiere, NJSO Co-Commission)

Thomas Adès

Born: March 1, 1971, in London, England

Composed: 2020

World Premiere: February 8, 2021, in Wollongong, Australia, by the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances are both the New Jersey Symphony and US premieres.

Duration: 8 minutes

Instrumentation: strings (the score specifies five first violins, five second violins, three violas, three cellos and one contrabass).

Britain's Thomas Adès rocketed to fame in the early 1990s with a series of remarkable chamber works, simultaneously cultivating his reputation as a brilliant pianist. A London native, Adès studied at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and at Kings College Cambridge, where his composition teachers included Alexander Goehr and Robin Holloway. He was only 24 when his first opera, *Powder Her Face*, was commissioned and premiered by the Almeida Opera Festival. Before the millennium turned, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra commissioned his *Asyla*, which won the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition—then the largest purse in classical music—in 2000. He remains the youngest composer to have received that award.

Adès has fulfilled his early promise as a composer and pianist, and he has expanded his activities to include conducting. He served as artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 1999 to 2008 and remains active on both sides of the Atlantic. He became the Boston Symphony Orchestra's first ever artistic partner in 2016.

His composer's note explains his title and the piece's connection to the English folk tradition:

A shanty is a song in many verses sung by a group of sailors at work. The melody is sung many times, never the same, with a strong rhythmic pulse but not necessarily literal unanimity.

A shanty, along with any folk song in the English-language traditions, creates depth through repetition of the melody and variation of the story.

In this Shanty fifteen individual voices, sometimes together and sometimes divergent, create a widening seascape.

In a Shanty, the cyclical verses build a story of the harsh, mechanical routine of the petty captain's rule, and accumulate a longing for mutiny. As in a Slave Spiritual, there is an implied yearning for liberation, freedom from the false, arbitrary regime of the petty masters, and a dream of a safe harbour beyond.

Shanty is written for the musicians of the orchestras who play it.

In an interview with ABC's Andrew Ford at the time of the UK premiere, Adès spoke about the work's genesis:

I'd pictured my first piece for string orchestra—such a fascinating, strange and special medium—to be a sonata/symphony, multi-movement type of work. I don't know whether it's because of the weirdness that's been happening all over the world since I started writing it, but it was just determined to be this one statement. It's a shanty—a repetitive, communal ritual thing—which is designed to create a kind of protective mantra around people who are embarking on great peril ... Embarkation—I'm sort of obsessed with that word and what it might mean. I think it is one of the most human tendencies, one of the most human desires: to go somewhere. Some birds have it; some animals, not that many. But we definitely do. ... It's certainly not natural for humans to want to stay in one place ... This piece is about that desire.

Shanty – Over the Sea was commissioned by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, New Jersey Symphony (the sole American co-commissioner), Münchener Kammerorchester, Hong Kong Sinfonietta, Amsterdam Sinfonietta, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, Kammerorchester Basel with Gstaad Menuhin Festival & Academy, Istanbul Music Festival and Barbican Centre with Britten Sinfonia.

Edvard Grieg: Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 16

Edvard Grieg

Born: June 15, 1843, in Bergen, Norway

Died: September 4, 1907, in Bergen, Norway

Composed: 1868–69, but revised repeatedly through 1907

World Premiere: April 3, 1869, in Copenhagen. Edmund Neupert was the soloist; Holger Simon Paulli conducted.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1929–30 season. Percy Grainger was the soloist; Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 30 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, solo piano and strings.

For most of the 19th century, Germany was the center of the musical world. Aspiring performers and composers from all over Europe went to Germany to pursue their education. That was the case for Norway's celebrated musical son, Edvard Grieg. At age 15, his family sent him to study at the Leipzig Conservatory. Leipzig was a particularly celebrated city for music: Bach, Mendelssohn and Schumann had all lived and worked there.

Though Grieg was not happy in Leipzig, he became immersed in the city's vibrant musical culture. Before returning permanently to Norway, he also spent time in the Danish capital of Copenhagen. There, the most influential composer was Niels Gade, who had worked in Leipzig for many years and was close friends with Mendelssohn. Thus, the German influence on Grieg was strengthened.

Beginning in the 1860s, however, Grieg began to take a strong interest in the folk music of his homeland. Thenceforth his music took on an increasingly Norwegian slant. Today, Grieg is regarded as the most important composer that Norway has produced, and the father of Norwegian nationalist music.

In spite of his celebrity in his homeland, Grieg's international reputation rests primarily on the Piano Concerto, Op. 16. As its low opus number indicates, it is a relatively early work, completed when the composer was only 25. The concerto is important for a number of reasons. It was Grieg's largest orchestral work and the last piece that he wrote in the Austro-Germanic style he had learned in Leipzig. After the concerto, Norwegian folk music influenced all his music. The concerto was thus a turning point.

Even if that were not the case, however, Grieg's concerto would be a marvel. Along with the piano concerto by Robert Schumann (also in A minor), with which it is frequently compared, Grieg's masterpiece holds court as the quintessential romantic concerto. His biographer John Horton calls it "the most satisfying and successful of Grieg's attempts at composing in the larger traditional forms, and the one that is generally agreed to be the most complete musical embodiment of Norwegian national Romanticism."

Grieg acknowledged that he had studied Schumann's Piano Concerto carefully before embarking on his own. Like the Schumann, Grieg's concerto opens with a dramatic flourish for the soloist. He also follows Schumann's lead by dispensing with the extended orchestral passage preceding the piano entrance (called a double exposition), an approach that is familiar in the Mozart piano concertos.

Grieg's concerto has several distinct and contrasting theme groups, including a completely new melody that oboes and bassoons introduce in the coda. The pianist's cadenza dazzles with romantic passagework in a heroic style.

After all the dust kicked up by the first movement, Grieg's Adagio settles things down. Muted strings introduce the music, joined first by bassoon, then upper winds, before the soloist enters. Grieg's piano writing in the opening pages is reminiscent of the delicate filigree in Chopin's music; so too are his harmonies. This slow movement takes us on an extraordinary and passionate journey.

The finale gives us the most prophetic glimpse of Grieg's Norwegian voice, which he would adopt for the balance of his career. Characterized by strong rhythmic profile and a fiery—even pagan—spirit, this movement is a *halling*, a Norwegian folk dance that Grieg used in several other compositions.

A switch to a relaxed and lyrical section takes romantic liberties. Indeed, the tempo changes have a great deal to do with the dramatic tension that makes the finale so effective.

Because he was the soloist at the premiere in 1869, Grieg undoubtedly sought opportunities for display. This flashy concerto did much to establish his international reputation. He continued to revise the orchestration until the last years of his life, with special attention to the brass and woodwind parts. We hear the 1906–07 revised version.

Igor Stravinsky: *Petrushka* (1947 Version)

Igor Stravinsky

Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York, New York

Composed: 1910–11; revised 1946; the revised version of the score is dated Hollywood, October 1946. This version was published in 1947 and is generally cited as the 1947 revised version.

World Premiere: June 13, 1911, in Paris, Théâtre du Chatelet. Pierre Monteux conducted. The revised version was first performed in Cleveland on January 2, 1947. Stravinsky conducted Tableau I with the Cleveland Orchestra.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1965–66 season. Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 34 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three cornets (doubling trumpets), three trombones,

tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, gong, triangle, tambourine, tam tam, snare drum, xylophone, and long drum); harp, piano, celeste and strings.

Stravinsky's early success is inextricably entwined with the great Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets russes. *Petrushka* was the second of three great ballets he wrote for Diaghilev's troupe. It was preceded by *The Firebird* (1910) and followed by *The Rite of Spring* (1913). Collectively, they established Stravinsky as the most gifted Russian composer of his generation. All three ballets remain in the active dance repertoire. Their scores have achieved equal, if not greater, success as orchestral showpieces.

The chronology of these three masterpieces and the importance of Stravinsky's collaboration with Diaghilev are well known. Thus, it is surprising to learn that Stravinsky had crystallized his ideas for *The Rite*, submitted its scenario to Diaghilev and secured approval from him for that project *before* he started work on *Petrushka*.

Stravinsky turned to the music that developed into *Petrushka* following the premiere of *The Firebird*. His initial thought was to write a concert-piece for piano and orchestra. In his autobiography, *Chroniques de ma vie*, he wrote: "In composing the music, I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. 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."

Shortly afterward, when Diaghilev heard him play through the new concert piece, he immediately suggested that Stravinsky expand the tale of the suffering puppet into another ballet. He was particularly intrigued by the interplay between piano and orchestra, with the piano symbolizing the puppet. Stravinsky did preserve the prominent role of the piano, and one aspect of *Petrushka's* impact was an increased importance and acceptance of the piano as a member of the orchestra.

For his title character, Stravinsky selected *Petrushka*, whom the composer described as "the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries." *Petrushka* is a sort of Slavic counterpart to the Pierrot of Italy's *commedia dell'arte*. Working with Diaghilev and the scenarist/costumer Alexandre Benois, Stravinsky developed the story into a full-length ballet consisting of four tableaux.

Petrushka takes place at the Shrovetide Fair, an annual Easter festival that took place in St. Petersburg's Admiralty Square. The tale unfolds on two levels. One is personal drama and deals with a private tragedy; the other is public carnival and is more a kaleidoscopic view of the Russian people. The relationship between these two levels, both musically and psychologically, constitutes the larger message of *Petrushka*, which is a comment on the isolation and insignificance of the human condition.

The principal individual characters in the drama form a classic love triangle: three puppets (*Petrushka*, a Ballerina and a Moor) presented at the fair by a Showman. The puppet show is one of the many entertainments vying for the attention of the curious throng. In the second tableau, *Petrushka* has become enamored of the lovely ballerina, who spurns his advances and mocks him. Her other suitor, the Moor, woos

her in the third tableau; in the finale, the Moor challenges Petrushka to battle for her affections. Unarmed, our hero is doomed. The crowd mingles about in shock at the sight of his wooden remains, with sawdust spilt about. A policeman helps the Showman to dispel the myth that the puppet was ever alive. The ballet closes as Petrushka's ghost has a bitter last laugh at those whom the Showman fooled.

On a practical, staged level, the role of the crowd is crucial both to dance and music in *Petrushka*. St. Petersburg was an important capital whose fair drew colorful rural types from all over Russia. Even without seeing them milling about at the fair on stage, we can feel surging energy in the opening and closing tableaux. Stravinsky brings the hubbub and opulence of the fair to life: the rides, the shows, the trinket and snack sellers hawking their wares. With so many distractions available, the crowd is easily diverted. Petrushka's drama is only one blip on the busy electrocardiogram of the Shrovetide Fair.

Uncharacteristically, Stravinsky incorporated a considerable amount of other musical material for use in *Petrushka*. Stephen Walsh has written: "More than any other work, Stravinsky based it on borrowed material, and with a true awareness of the melting-pot nature of city life, he took his tunes from a wide range of sources."

These include "Down St. Peter's Road," a popular Russian song also used by Tchaikovsky; the St. Petersburg street tunes played simultaneously by competitive organ grinders in the opening tableau; several Russian folk songs; Viennese Josef Lanner's Styrian waltz (played by cornet and flutes with a mocking, intentionally skewed oom-pah-pah accompaniment) in the third tableau; and a popular Parisian café song, "Elle avait une jambe de bois," that virtually anyone in Stravinsky's first audience would have recognized (it is merged with a waltz in the opening tableau).

Stravinsky's original music also has its striking moments. The most famous of them is the so-called "Petrushka motive," a dissonant fanfare for two clarinets first introduced in the second tableau, which takes place in Petrushka's cell. Both play arpeggios, but one is in C major, the other in F-sharp major, tonalities diametrically opposed on the circle of fifths. The sound is queerly acidic: each line sweet and innocuous if perceived independently, but intensely pungent in simultaneous polytonal execution. It is one of several examples in this score where two keys are played at once, a musical approach that Stravinsky was to explore further, and which did much to establish him as a daring modernist. As his biographer Roman Vlad has observed: "In 1911, the vogue ran from impressionist haziness to the boisterousness of the post-Wagnerian symphony *à la* Strauss. Against this background, the unleashing of the crude, spiky, and incisive sonorities we find in *Petrushka* was bound to appear startlingly revolutionary, the more so since Stravinsky in *The Firebird* had helped to develop the technique of atmospheric harmonic effects to an unprecedented pitch of refinement."

The ballet evolved into a burlesque in four tableaux. The outer two are the public scenes; the inner two are more private, focusing on Petrushka's despair as he perceives the lovely Ballerina slipping away from him and into the Moor's arms. Their balance corresponds to the overall symmetry so remarkable in Stravinsky's score.

Because of some ambiguity in international copyright laws, the score to *Petrushka*—among other works—was published and performed in the United States without authorization. In an effort to stem such piracy, Stravinsky revised the score in 1946. Because it was published in 1947, it has become known as the 1947 revised version. Charles Hamm has written: “The new *Petrushka* is quite different from the old: it is scored for a somewhat smaller orchestra; the rhythmic notation has been simplified, and at the same time made more precise, so that less freedom of execution is left to the performers ... and it is obviously designed now as a concert piece.”