

Ravel's *Boléro*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Tan Dun: Internet Symphony No. 1, "Eroica." "The Internet is really a Silk Road, which is invisible, but everyone's on it." So says Tan Dun, who fuses brake drums and Beethoven in this rousing movement with online origins.

Vaughan Williams: Tuba Concerto. Vaughan Williams emphasized the tuba's expressive potential, wide range and surprising capacity for virtuoso playing.

Saint-Saëns: *The Carnival of the Animals*. Fourteen vignettes started out as a joke and took on a life of their own. In addition to "The Swan," *Carnival* satirizes other animals, composers and pianists, all with a light touch.

Ravel: *Boléro*. Snare drums provide the pulse for this sultry Spanish dance. Ravel's slow, steady crescendo builds to a thrilling climax. Virtually every instrument in the orchestra has a turn at the theme.

TAN DUN: Internet Symphony No. 1, “Eroica”

TAN DUN

Born: August 18, 1957, in Simao, Hunan Province, China

Composed: 2008

Internet Premiere: October 6, 2008, by the London Symphony Orchestra on YouTube.

Live World Premiere: April 15, 2009, by the YouTube Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

NJSO Premiere: These performances are the NJSO premiere.

Duration: 6 minutes

Best known for his Oscar-winning soundtrack to Ang Lee’s 2000 martial-arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Tan Dun has emerged as a major figure in international music, merging Chinese instruments and culture with Western ideas. Tan composed music for the 2008 Beijing Olympics medal ceremonies; in 2013, he was named a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. The NJSO has performed his Water and Earth Concertos in recent Winter Festivals.

Internet Symphony No. 1 taps into our culture’s preoccupation with technology. The commission came from Google and YouTube, which coordinated international online rehearsals and auditions, selecting the best musicians for the Internet premiere.

The piece’s four sections unfold without pause. Vibrant brake drums and hubcaps introduce a brass chorale: the big cinematic tune. An Allegro embeds the opening motive to Beethoven’s Third Symphony, “Eroica,” with whooping, dance-like delirium. (The rhythm recalls “What Shall we Do with the Drunken Sailor”—and the suggestion is apt.) Tan Dun’s unconventional percussion punctuate throughout: a dash of modernism stirring up this joyous movement.

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (three brake drums, snare drum, bass drum, four brake gongs [hubcaps], crash cymbals, marimba, vibraphone, slapstick, chimes), harp and strings.

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Concerto in F Minor for Tuba and Orchestra

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Born: October 12, 1872, in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, England

Died: August 26, 1958, in London, England

Composed: 1954

World Premiere: June 13, 1954, at London's Royal Festival Hall. Sir John Barbirolli conducted; Philip Catelinet was the soloist.

NJSO Premiere: These performances are the NJSO premiere.

Duration: 12 minutes

If you can think of another big solo for tuba off the top of your head, it's probably the "Bydlo" movement from Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, or perhaps the dancing-bear segment in the fourth tableau of Stravinsky's ballet *Petrushka*. The orchestral literature has other surprising and memorable cameos for tuba in works as diverse as Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, Holst's *The Planets* and the Prelude to Act III of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. Shostakovich and Prokofiev both included enormous tuba parts in several of their symphonies.

Concertos for tuba are another story. They are rare, and the music is not always top drawer. That is not the case with Vaughan Williams' Tuba Concerto, which is a treasure. Yes, this is the same English master who wrote the popular *A Lark Ascending*, *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* and *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, but the Tuba Concerto represents a different side of the composer. It dates from 1954, when he was in his 80s. The London Symphony Orchestra commissioned it for Philip Catelinet, the orchestra's principal tuba, in observance of the LSO's golden jubilee. They could not have known that the commission would yield a pathbreaking masterpiece.

With this concerto, Vaughan Williams endowed tuba with a credibility it had not previously had. Few listeners had any idea the tuba could sound like this. Plus, the composer was no avant-gardist or serialist, which gave the concerto an easier path to immediate acceptance. This was Vaughan Williams, an established and beloved composer whose music was firmly rooted in English tradition. His opening march, soaring themes and respect for traditional forms all made the Tuba Concerto accessible.

An experienced orchestral composer with seven symphonies to his credit before he composed this work, Vaughan Williams was an experienced orchestral composer who recognized that the tuba rarely had the chance to shine. He chose to explore its husky, mournful character, rather than bravura elements, in this concerto. While not totally ignoring the tuba's jocular side, Vaughan Williams' serious treatment of the instrument makes a strong impression. His more contemporary style, particularly in the outer movements, also stays with the listener.

The concerto's glory is its central Romanza, which has been arranged for euphonium, bassoon and cello with piano; it is often played by tuba and piano independent of the larger work.

In addition to magical solo cadenzas in both outer movements, Vaughan Williams also wrote superbly for orchestra in this concerto, achieving a remarkable balance between soloist and orchestra. The composer acknowledged that, in places, the relationship is like that of a Baroque concerto, in which material is often shared equally between the two.

Instrumentation: two flutes (second doubling piccolo), oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, strings and solo tuba.

SAINT-SAËNS: *The Carnival of the Animals*

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Composed: 1886

World Premiere: March 9, 1886, in Paris.

NJSO Premiere: 1924–25 season. Philip James conducted; Carolyn Beebe and Creighton Allen were the soloists.

Duration: 22 minutes

By the mid-1880s, Camille Saint-Saëns was famous and successful as a composer, pianist and organist.

He was also decidedly middle-aged, and part of the established old guard in French music.

A quarter of a century earlier, his career had not yet solidified. One of his first jobs was on the faculty of the École Niedermeyer in Paris. He was 26 when he started teaching piano classes there in spring 1861—only a few years older than many of his students. They loved their young professor for his wit, energy and daring spirit. Saint-Saëns frequently departed from the official syllabus, incorporating Germanic composers such as Liszt, Wagner and Schumann into his lectures. Above all, he encouraged his students to compose and to experiment with different styles.

His students later recalled that Saint-Saëns liked to lighten things up, injecting humor and occasional mockery of the rules into his classroom improvisations. Delighted with what they heard, the students encouraged him to write down these short pieces. Twenty-five years later, some of them probably metamorphosed into *The Carnival of the Animals*.

Early in 1886, Saint-Saëns was on tour in Germany to promote his Piano Concerto No.4. Political tension between the two countries remained high, even 15 years after the Franco-Prussian war. During the concert tour, controversy erupted when anti-German statements were erroneously attributed to Saint-Saëns. The press bristled, and rising public outrage resulted in cancellation of Saint-Saëns' performances in Berlin and several other German cities.

He resumed concertizing in Austria and Bohemia, where reception to his music was more favorable. Nevertheless, the brouhaha in Germany had been upsetting, and Saint-Saëns decided to take a rest in a quiet Austrian village. There, in a matter of days, he composed the 14 movements of *Carnival*.

He had in mind an annual carnival concert during Mardi Gras, presented by Charles-Joseph Lebouc, a friend in Paris. That first performance was so successful that a repeat performance was organized just days later. Then, on a visit to Paris, Franz Liszt wanted to hear it, so another performance was presented in a private salon.

At that point, Saint-Saëns balked. He had intended the piece as a jest; now, he was apprehensive that the general public would assume his other music was like *Carnival*. He withdrew all of it except "The

Swan,” suppressing the rest. In a will drafted in 1911, however, Saint-Saëns authorized its posthumous publication. “The Swan” was played at Saint-Saëns’ funeral in Algiers.

Carnival remains one of the cleverest parodies in all music. Its 14 segments feature different instruments—a sort of French 19th-century version of Britten’s *A Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*. The movements are musical illustrations of various animals—some of which are clearly metaphors for human beings.

Several of the pieces quote Saint-Saëns’ contemporaries: No. 4, “Tortoises,” presents Offenbach’s can-can *galop* at Adagio tempo; No. 5, “Elephant,” quotes a French folk song, Berlioz’s “Dance of the Sylphs” from *The Damnation of Faust*, Meyerbeer’s *Les Patineurs* and the Scherzo from Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

No. 12, “Fossils,” is an example of Saint-Saëns poking fun at his own music. The most recognizable tune he incorporates into this silly hodgepodge (marked *ridicolo*, or “ridiculously”) is “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” which is known in French as “Ah! vous dirai-je, maman.” Opera fans may catch a fleeting reference to Rosina’s aria “Una voce poco fa” from Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*. The composer quotes two other popular French folk tunes and uses a snatch of a theme from his own orchestral tone poem, *Danse macabre*. “Fossils” uses xylophone to emulate the rattling of bones.

Though Saint-Saëns does not quote Rameau’s music, he pays tribute to the French Baroque master in No. 1, “Cocks and Hens,” and takes a bow to the budding impressionist movement in No. 7, “Aquarium.” His use of celeste in that movement is daring—Alphonse Mustel had just introduced the new instrument in 1886.

The satire is not restricted to animals or composers. Saint-Saëns also mocks himself and all students of the keyboard in No. 11, “Pianists,” and pokes fun at “Characters with Long Ears” in No. 8—surely a coded satire.

It is all done with an incomparably light touch and with great economy of means. Satirical humor and incisive vignettes have made *The Carnival of the Animals* a classic.

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet, xylophone, glass harmonica (usually played on glockenspiel or celeste), strings and two pianos.

RAVEL: BOLÉRO

MAURICE RAVEL

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris, France

Composed: 1928

World Premiere: November 22, 1928, in Paris.

NJSO Premiere: 1969–70 season; Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 14 minutes

The Polish-born composer Alexandre Tansman once told musicologist Roger Nichols:

Boléro was first performed as a ballet by Ida Rubinstein, commissioned by her, and it was not a musical success. And then Toscanini came with the New York Philharmonic and played it much faster. And Ravel was not pleased at all. We were in the same box and he wouldn't stand up when Toscanini tried to get him to take a bow. Then he went backstage and told Toscanini, "It's too fast," and Toscanini said, "It's the only way to save the work."

Neither Ravel nor Toscanini could possibly have foreseen the enormous popularity that *Boléro* would achieve. Even before Blake Edwards' film *10* (1979) assured it a permanent place in every movie soundtrack collection, *Boléro* was one of the most frequently performed compositions in any concert hall, readily recognized by non-musicians. Something about its insistent, understated (and deceptively simple) rhythm and magnificent, controlled crescendo to the ultimate orchestra climax has captured audience imaginations for nearly nine decades. With *Boléro*, Ravel secured an enviable spot in the permanent repertoire.

Ironically, he had very mixed feelings about the work, dismissing it as a "crescendo on a commonplace melody in the genre of Padilla; *Boléro*: 17 minutes of orchestra without any music." He told music critic Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi that it was an experiment: "Orchestral tissue without music. ...There are no

contrasts, and there is practically no invention save the plan and the manner of execution. The themes are altogether impersonal, folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind, and the orchestral writing is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity.”

Was it embarrassment in the face of such enormous success that caused him to be so self-disparaging?

Ballet with Spanish roots

Ravel began work on *Boléro* upon returning from a four-month tour in the United States and Canada early in 1928. Prior to his departure, he had agreed to compose a ballet for his friend Ida Rubinstein, a former dancer with Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* who had formed her own troupe. Her initial suggestion was an orchestration of pieces from Albéniz’s *Ibérica*. After discarding that idea, Ravel next thought to arrange one of his own pieces. Eventually, he began work on an entirely new composition, called *Fandango*. Shortly afterward, he altered the title to *Boléro*, completing the score in a matter of months. The ballet premiered in November 1928.

For most audience members, the music of Ravel’s *Boléro* is so familiar as to not require comment. What may enhance the experience is concentration on the intricacy of the melody, whose rhythmic nuances and sinuous wanderings are vastly more complex than one initially thinks. (Try singing the melody on your own, without a recording in the background to help you along!) Also, Ravel’s incomparable orchestration reaches a pinnacle in this work. He escalates both dynamic level and tension while sustaining a steady pulse and a virtually static harmonic rhythm. The success of his “exercise” has given Western music one of its most treasured orchestral works.

FANDANGO AND BOLÉRO

Both fandango and boléro are Spanish dances in triple time. Fandangos, which are first mentioned in Spanish literature at the beginning of the 18th century, are traditionally danced by a couple with accompaniment of castanets and guitar, often with singing as well; the balletic appeal of such a tradition is obvious. By contrast, the boléro is a more recent development, not appearing until the last quarter of the 18th century. Rarely moving at more than a moderate tempo (whereas the fandango can range from moderate to fast), boléros allowed for more intricate choreography incorporating some highly stylized traditional poses.

Instrumentation: two flutes; piccolo; two oboes (second doubling oboe d'amore); English horn; clarinet in E flat; two clarinets in B flat; bass clarinet; two bassoons; contrabassoon; four horns; high-D trumpet; three trumpets in C; three trombones; tuba; soprano and tenor saxophones; timpani; two snare drums; cymbals; tam-tam; celeste; harp and strings.