

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes  
December 16, 2017  
Michael Allsen

This program titled “Winter Dreams”—after the title of the youthful symphony by Tchaikovsky heard at the beginning—is a wonderful sampler of music connected to winter or the holiday season. After Tchaikovsky, we turn to virtuosic and sometimes comical music by Vivaldi, the “Winter” concerto of his *Four Seasons*. The lovely *Fantasia on “Greensleeves”* by Vaughan Williams sets a traditional English tune that served as the basis for one of the most beloved Christmas carols. We follow that with much less serious music: the hilarious *Toy Symphony*. Wagner’s passionate *Siegfried Idyll* was a birthday present for his wife—a birthday that just happened to fall on Christmas Day. Next is a colorful *Sleigh Ride* by Leopold Mozart that includes everything from a spirited gallop through the snow with jangling sleigh bells, to chattering teeth, to a courtly ball at the end of the ride. The program ends with a rarely-heard work by Hely-Hutchinson, his *A Carol Symphony*, which includes brilliant arrangements of several familiar Christmas songs.

**Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)** was never a relaxed composer—he was highly sensitive to any criticism, and often crippled by self-doubt—but few of his works caused him more apprehension than his first symphony. The symphony was composed in 1866-67, while he was scraping together a living teaching at the Moscow Conservatory. Producing a symphony was clearly the duty of any ambitious young composer, and Tchaikovsky’s letters to his brother reveal his anxiety about composing the work, leading to insomnia and even a brief mental breakdown, with panic attacks and hallucinations. Even a relatively successful premiere in Moscow in February 1868 did little to relieve his insecurity, and he continued to revise the symphony prior to its publication in 1874. Writing nearly two decades after its composition, Tchaikovsky’s opinion about his first symphony had mellowed, and he described it as “...an immature work, although fundamentally it is still richer and content than many of my other, more mature works.” Tchaikovsky himself was responsible for the title of the symphony, “Winter Dreams,” though it is unclear whether he had a specific programmatic meaning in mind. The first movement, titled “Daydreams of a Winter Journey,” is set in a rigorous classical sonata form, based upon two sets of ideas. The first theme is heard in flute and bassoon, above a breezy background—a distinctly Russian-sounding melody. After a rather stormy transition section, the clarinet introduces the brighter second theme. Though this is a serious movement and there are a few moments of great drama, Tchaikovsky maintains a lightness throughout that shows his youthful admiration for the music of Felix Mendelssohn.

The Venetian **Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**, nicknamed the “Red Priest,” was the most prominent and influential Italian composer of his generation. His concertos—over 500 in all—were particularly popular: widely circulated and emulated in his day. Vivaldi’s *Opus*

8 collection of 1725 begins with the famous set of four violin concertos collectively known as *The Four Seasons*. Each is given a descriptive title: *La Primavera (Spring)*, *L'Estate (Summer)*, *L'Autunno (Autumn)*, and *L'Inverno (Winter)*. Programmatic titles like this were not unusual for Vivaldi, but here he went a step further, publishing sonnets with each concerto that describe the action of each season—and, as if you could miss the point, the sonnets also provide cues to specific measures in the music. Vivaldi himself may have been responsible for these picturesque bits of poetry. The shivering violin lines at the beginning of **Winter** set the tone for the entire movement. Vivaldi uses the imagery of wind and cold as the inspiration for the most virtuosic solo passages in the entire set. In contrast, the *Largo* is a cozy picture of a winter day spent inside in a warm room: a lovely solo melody set above a string background that suggests a gently crackling fire. Vivaldi seems to have meant the last movement in part as slapstick comedy: tiptoeing across the ice, falling on your butt, and eventually scooting across the ice happily until it finally cracks. The final line of his sonnet is fitting end to the piece as a whole: “This is Winter, but it brings joy!”

The familiar ***Fantasia on “Greensleeves”*** by **Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)** was originally part of the 1929 opera *Sir John in Love*, his version of Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, with its corpulent main character, Sir John Falstaff. Much of the libretto for this opera was drawn directly from Shakespeare and other Elizabethan poets, and to create a proper mood, many of the musical themes are drawn directly from popular 17th-century ballad tunes and keyboard music. The *Fantasia* was first composed as an orchestral passage in the opera, played after Mrs. Ford suggests that Falstaff words and deeds “...do no more adhere and keep place than the Hundredth Psalm to the tune of *Greensleeves*.” In 1934, Ralph Greaves arranged this passage as a separate orchestral work for flute, harp, and strings. In this setting, *Greensleeves* (which of course became the tune of the 19th-century carol *What Child is This*) is stated at the beginning and end, surrounding a more sprightly version of the contemporary tune *Lovely Joan*.

Just who composed the ***Toy Symphony?*** When it was first published in 1820, it was credited to “Haydn” and Joseph Haydn’s popular biographers dutifully cooked up a story about the composer creating this to delight the children at a Christmas party. Other possible contenders include Leopold Mozart, Joseph Haydn’s brother Michael, and an Austrian monk, Edmund Angerer. The work was published long after all of the possible candidates had died, and the true author may never be known. Whoever wrote it, this is a truly charming little 18th-century novelty piece—a tiny “symphony” in three movements, lasting all of seven minutes. The soloists play a collection of all of the noisemakers that would have been heard in an Austrian home on Christmas morning: toy trumpets and drums, rattles, and a host of birdcalls, including an irrepressible cuckoo.

**Richard Wagner (1813-1883)** wrote the lovely ***Siegfried Idyll*** in 1870 as a birthday gift to his wife Cosima. In 1870, the Wagners were living in a villa in Tribschen, in central Switzerland. Cosima, who celebrated her birthday on December 25, records in her diary for that day: “When I woke up I heard a sound, it grew ever louder, I could no longer

imagine myself in a dream, music was sounding, and what music! After it had died away, R. came in to me with the five children and put into my hands the score of his 'symphonic birthday greeting.' I was in tears, but so, too, was the whole household; R. had set up his orchestra on the stairs and thus consecrated our Tribschen forever!" It was indeed a thoughtful gift—from a composer who did not have a reputation for being unselfish—and Wagner had his hired musicians play the work two more times that day. The original title of the piece was *Tribschen Idyll with Fidi's Birdsong and the Orange Sunrise, as Symphonic Birthday Greeting. Presented to his Cosima by her Richard*. "Fidi" was the family nickname for their youngest son, Siegfried, but the meanings of the birdsong and the sunrise undoubtedly had private meanings to the couple, as do a number of musical references, such as the gentle lullaby introduced by the oboe. This single-movement work is the only regularly-performed purely instrumental piece by Wagner, but it has clear connections to his operatic work. He took time off from work on *Siegfried*—the third of the "ring cycle" operas—to write Cosima's birthday present, and music from the *Idyll* was later reused in the opera. Wagner originally intended for this to remain a private piece, but needing money, he published it in 1878 under the title *Siegfried Idyll*, at the same time revising it from the original version for 13 instruments to a work for a small chamber orchestra. The music is unfailingly tender throughout, dominated by a lush, romantic theme heard at the beginning—a melody that Wagner would later use in *Siegfried* as a yearning love song sung by Brünnhilde in Act III.

Today **Leopold Mozart (1719-1787)** is known almost exclusively as the stern father of Wolfgang, but he was a prominent and successful musician in his own time. ***The Sleigh Ride***, composed just before Wolfgang was born, certainly shows that Mozart the elder had as good a sense of humor as his more famous son. Wolfgang must, in fact, have known and enjoyed his father's piece—he included a short *Sleigh Ride* in his *German Dances*, K.605, in 1791. Leopold's more complicated piece is a programmatic serenade, with short titles for each section: a musical picture of a cold evening's ride to a party. The score calls for sleigh bells, rattle, a whip, and triangle. The action begins with a short *Overture*, followed by the *Sleigh Ride* itself, a lively duple-meter dance accompanied by jangling sleigh bells and punctuated by the cracking of a whip. We hear the *Shaking of the Horses* (personified by the low strings), and a short procession. After a repeat of the opening sections, there is a nice bit of musical pantomime—*The Young Lady Shivers With Cold*, in which string tremolos stand in for chattering teeth. The sleigh finally arrives at the party, a ball with a small dance orchestra. *The Ball Begins*, not surprisingly, with a courtly menuet, and the *End of the Ball* is a spirited *Kehraus*, a lively rondo-form dance.