

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
November 18, 2017
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This Peoria Symphony Orchestra string orchestra program, titled “Serenade for Strings,” is framed by two of the finest Romantic era string serenades: a fine early work by Elgar and the much more substantial serenade composed by Tchaikovsky a dozen years earlier. Pianist Orion Weiss joins the orchestra for the *Concerto Grosso No. 1* by Bloch, an early 20th-century work that replicates the spirit of the Baroque.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)
Serenade for Strings in E minor, Op.20

Elgar composed this work in March 1892. The first complete performance was in Antwerp, in July 1897.

Elgar was one of the leading figures in what has come to be known as the “second English Renaissance” and he was the first English composer since Henry Purcell (d.1695) of truly international standing. But all of that still lay in the future when he wrote the *Serenade* heard here. Elgar was a fine violinist, and spent most of his early career as a performer, but beginning in the late 1880s, he began to focus increasingly on composition. His reputation grew slowly, until the triumphant premieres of his *Enigma Variations* (1899) and the oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900). The *Serenade* is a much more smaller work, and seems to have been a revision of an earlier set of pieces he had composed in 1888. Much of his earliest orchestral music is light fare intended for small salon and dance orchestras, but this is a much more substantial piece, in the tradition of the earlier Brahms and Dvorák serenades. Years later, Elgar described it as one of his personal favorites.

Elgar’s background as a violinist allowed him to write particularly effective and idiomatic music for strings, and he described the *Serenade*—with tongue firmly in cheek—as “very stringy in effect.” It is in three movements, beginning with wistful music marked *Allegro piacevole* (a “pleasing” *Allegro*). There is a underlying note of sadness in the main theme heard at the outset, and Elgar sets against this a more lilting middle section with brief solo turns for the principal violin. The long central *Larghetto* begins with an introduction that adapts ideas from the opening movement, but Elgar then introduces a gorgeous Romantic theme that is spun out in the same patient way as in his more famous “Nimrod” movement from the *Enigma Variations*. There is a brief contrasting interlude before this theme returns in the full orchestra. The movement ends in a whisper. The brief closing movement (*Allegretto*) returns to the *Serenade*’s opening mood, but in a more dancelike character.

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959)
Concerto Grosso No.1 for String Orchestra with Piano Obligato

Bloch composed this work between December 1924 and April 1925. It was first performed at the Cleveland Institute of Music in June 1925.

The Swiss-born composer Bloch was trained in his native Geneva, and in Brussels, Paris, and Germany. By 1916, he had emigrated to the United States, where he became a citizen in 1924. In 1920, Bloch became the founding director of the Cleveland Institute of Music, and later directed the San Francisco Conservatory. Though he lived in a time of modernist experimentation, his music remained essentially Romantic and conservative in style. In 1917, he published a lengthy essay that argued against what he saw as the intellectual sterility of much of the music of the *avant garde*, stating that:

“...an intellectual barrier exists between their emotion and work—a sort of sensory perversion that twists their thoughts, inhibits their inspiration, and warps their taste. They are forever thinking of the development of their art, not as the corollary of a logical growth of thought, not as a spontaneous expression of life, but as a thing-in-itself, apart from life. And the truth is that they neither understand nor are they interested in anything so much as the elaboration of their technique.”

The *Concerto Grosso No. 1*, reflects his conservative tastes, but it is also a truly “neo-classical” work in the same sense as contemporary pieces by Ravel and Stravinsky, adapting 18th-century forms in a 20th-century idiom. According to his daughter, some of his students in Cleveland expressed doubts that one could write a truly modern work using Baroque forms and harmonies. In response, he sketched out the *Prelude* in late 1924 and had the student orchestra play it. When they responded enthusiastically, he reportedly said: “What do you think now? It has just old-fashioned notes!” He revised the *Prelude* and composed the remaining movements during an extended stay in Santa Fe over the next few months.

The Baroque concerto grosso usually featured a strictly defined group of soloists pitted against the full ensemble, but here the solo lines are freely intermixed in the texture, and the solo groups are changed frequently. The piano is not often a true solo part, but instead an *obbligato*—a decorative part that plays off of the primary melodies. The brief *Prelude* begins with crisp chords, and continues in a brilliant “pseudo-Baroque” texture. The lovely *Dirge*, the longest and most complex movement, has a pensive main theme that alternates with contrasting material. At the center, there is a lovely, but increasingly tense episode for piano and string sextet before the piano briefly takes a lead role and brings back the main idea. The movement eventually closes with warm chords. The *Pastorale and Rustic Dances* alternates between relaxed lyricism and a series of bumptious country dances—most of which were based upon fiddle tunes of Bloch’s native Switzerland. True to Bloch’s Baroque inspiration, the final movement is a lively *Fugue*, though its angular theme clearly comes from the 20th century, not the 18th. Solo instruments play a somewhat more reserved contrasting episodes but Bloch brings the fugue to a conclusion in a brilliant style.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Serenade in C Major, Op.48

Tchaikovsky composed the Serenade between September 21 and November 4 of 1880. It was first played at a private concert by Moscow Conservatory students on December 3, 1880, and the public premiere was in St Petersburg on October 30, 1881. Duration 31:00.

In October of 1880, Tchaikovsky wrote to his patron and confidante Nadezhda von Meck: “You can be assured, dear friend, that my muse has been benevolent lately, when I tell you that I have written two long works very rapidly: a festival overture for the upcoming Exhibition and a serenade in four movements for string orchestra. The overture [the *1812 Overture*] will be very noisy. I wrote it without much warmth and enthusiasm—therefore it has no great artistic value. The serenade, on the other hand, came from an inward impulse. I felt it, and I venture to hope that this work is not wholly lacking in artistic qualities.” The *Serenade* was an immediate success, and remained one of Tchaikovsky’s personal favorites. It remains is one of the most popular Romantic scores for string orchestra.

Tchaikovsky described the opening movement (*Pezzo in forma di sonatina*) as “...my homage to Mozart; it is intended to be an imitation of his style.” The opening passage clearly hearkens back to the slow introductions to a few of Mozart’s symphonies, but the middle section of the work is set in one of the lightest of Classical forms, the sonatina: a sonata form with very little in the way of development. The *Waltz (Moderato)* is lilting and graceful, spinning out two lovely themes, and occasionally slowing to hold the highest note in a phrase for moment before continuing its forward motion. The *Elegy (Largo elegiaco)* is also in a very simple form. The beginning is a emotional passage for the entire orchestra, which gives way to a more agitated section (*Poco più animato*). The opening music returns at the end, and is expanded in a brief coda.

The *Finale (Tema Russo)* is the most nationalistic of the *Serenade*’s movements. For the opening passage (*Andante*), Tchaikovsky borrows a folk tune from the Volga region, passing it from the upper strings to the lower. The main theme of the movement, marked *Allegro con spirito*, is a popular dance tune from Moscow, and this is pitted against a more songlike melody of distinctively Russian character. Tchaikovsky skillfully weaves these themes together until the very end, when he brings back the very opening music of the first movement. After this reminiscence, the tempo quickens gradually for a lively coda.