Handel: Suite No. 2 from *Water Music*

It is relatively rare that music written for a specific occasion has a life after the fact. Thousands of pieces of music written for state or royal ceremonies during the Baroque and Classical periods are now long forgotten, along with the events and monarchs they commemorated. Closer to our own time, Soviet composers dutifully churned out hours of Socialist-Realist musical drivel to placate their Communist overlords. Both the music and the events have since been “consigned to the dustbin of history,” (to quote Leon Trotsky) along with the Soviet Union itself. When was the last time you heard Prokofiev’s *On Guard for Peace*, or Shostakovich’s *The Sun Shines Over our Motherland*?

Handel’s *Water Music* is a happy exception, though in retrospect it might never have been written at all. As a young opera composer, Handel was well-known in Europe by the time he was 25. In that year, 1710, he accepted a position as the *Kapellmeister* (Music Director) at the Court of the Elector of Hannover. Handel’s popularity (and the Elector’s liberality) allowed him to travel and direct his operas while maintaining his position at the Elector’s court. Handel’s music proved to be immensely popular in London, and by 1712 he made the decision move to England, leaving behind his court post without bothering to inform the Elector. London and Hannover were worlds apart – what could possibly go wrong?

Karma was about to play a very nasty trick on Handel. Queen Anne died suddenly in August of 1714. She was succeeded by her second cousin, George I, whose previous title had been…the Elector of Hannover. While this might have resulted in a one-way carriage ride to the Tower of London under a more easily offended monarch, George turned out to be a very shrewd politician. He fully recognized Handel’s immense popularity and latched onto it, using the composer’s reputation to ingratiate himself with his new subjects.

In July of 1717, George planned a boating party on the Thames for select members of the court and Handel was commissioned to provide the music. The newspapers reported the event, as witnessed by this account from the London *Daily Courant*:

> At about 8, the King took [to the] Water at Whitehall in an open Barge ... and went up the [Thames] River towards Chelsea. Many other Barges with Persons of Quality attended, and so great a Number of Boats, that the whole River in a manner was cover'd; a City Company's Barge was employ'd for the Musick, wherein were 50 instruments of all sorts, who play'd all the Way from Lambeth the finest Symphonies, compos'd express for this Occasion, by Mr. Handel; which his Majesty liked so well, that he caus'd it to be play'd over three times in going and returning.

These “finest symphonies” were three suites of dances, patterned on the typical Baroque dance suite. Handel, keen to the acoustic needs of the music, scored the first and second suites with bright horns and
trumpets to be better heard while cruising the river, while the third suite, probably played during the King’s dinner onshore at Chelsea, utilizes the softer combination of recorders, oboes and strings.

We will hear four movements from the Suite No. 2 on this evening’s concert. The opening Allegro evokes a nobly regal atmosphere, resplendent with virtuoso fanfares for horns and trumpets. Alla hornpipe contrasts the propulsive rhythms and happily chortling horns of the outer sections with a central section in B minor for strings alone. The elegant Minuet has a graceful lilt, and the energetic final Bourée follows the same pattern, dancing through the same musical material with altered scoring at each repeat.

**Rózsa: Concerto for Viola and Orchestra**

It would seem logical that composers of “serious” concert music and film composers would be two different groups. Yet concert composers often write film music and film composers produce substantial works for the concert hall and the opera house. For William Walton (composer for most of Laurence Olivier’s Shakespearean films) and Dmitri Shostakovich (36 film scores over the course of a 47-year career), film music was a substantial portion of their output. So too Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Bernard Herrmann and John Williams created a large body of concert music in addition to their award-winning music for the movies.

Miklós Rózsa, best known for his scores for such Hollywood classics as *Double Indemnity*, *Spellbound*, *Quo Vadis*, and *Ben-Hur*, was born in Budapest and received musical training there and later in Leipzig. He made his debut as a film composer in London. With the onset of the Second World War, Rózsa made his way to Hollywood, where he became one of the most sought-after film composers. He won three Academy Awards for Best Picture: *Spellbound* (directed by Alfred Hitchcock), *A Double Life*, and *Ben-Hur*. His music became synonymous with the big-budget Hollywood epic. For *Ben-Hur*, Rózsa wrote an unheard-of three hours’ worth of music, of which nearly two and a half hours were used in the final cut.

The Concerto for Viola and Orchestra was his final concert work, completed in 1979. Originally conceived as a cello concerto for Gregor Piatigorsky, Rózsa repurposed it as a viola concerto after Piatigorsky’s death. Rózsa took four years to finish the work, and the premiere had to wait until 1984, when Pinchas Zukerman performed it with the Pittsburgh Symphony under André Previn. Rózsa considered the Viola Concerto his favorite of all the concertos he had written.

The concerto is in four movements and opens with the viola singing rhapsodically over a slightly acidic accompaniment in winds and strings. The first movement contrasts folk-like material with rapid passagework for the soloist. The overall mood of the movement is serious, sometimes ominous, sometimes more lyrical. The lyrical music predominates after the soloist’s central cadenza, with the end fading into a mysterious calm.

The nervously twitching scherzo is propelled by constantly shifting meters and spiky punctuation from brass and percussion. A half-march/half-scherzo makes two futile attempts to establish a more regular
pulse, but the edgy opening music returns to thwart any attempt to establish order. At the end of the movement, the instrumentation thins to a bare minimum, and the movement disappears like a popped soap bubble with the soloist’s final *ricochet*.

The third movement’s long-breathed lament evokes both the sound of Hungarian folk music and faint echoes of the music of Béla Bartók. The only relief from the music’s tortured brooding arrives at the conclusion of the movement, beginning in harmonics for the soloist, accompanied by bells, harp and clarinet.

The soloist dances into the finale, but the dance is far from carefree. The soloist’s manic *moto perpetuo* is punctuated by sinister chords from the orchestra. There are brief moments of reflection as well as impassioned lyricism in this movement, but the energetic dancing is never far away, constantly building in energy. The mood remains largely dark and grim, despite the soloist’s pyrotechnics. After a final surge of virtuosity from the solo viola, the concerto ends with a terse snap.

**Stravinsky: Suite from The Firebird (1919 version)**

Musician’s careers are sometimes made or broken by unusual circumstances. Leonard Bernstein’s career skyrocketed after filling in at the last minute for Bruno Walter at a New York Philharmonic concert in Carnegie Hall in 1943. Igor Stravinsky’s career may have benefitted from an even more unusual circumstance – the slovenly work habits of another composer. At a 1909 concert in St. Petersburg where the young Stravinsky had two of his orchestral works performed, the impresario Serge Diaghilev, director of the famous Ballets Russes in Paris, was in the audience. Diaghilev was impressed by the young composer’s powers of invention and his distinctive orchestration, and offered Stravinsky a few minor composing and arranging assignments for his company.

Legend has it that Diaghilev had commissioned composer Anatoly Lyadov for a new ballet for the 1910 season, but was dismayed to find out that Lyadov had barely begun work on the project (Lyadov was a notorious procrastinator when it came to composing). Diaghilev turned the commission over to Stravinsky, who responded with the work that became his first professional success: *The Firebird*. The ballet’s combination of folk-like melodic material, rich and colorful orchestration and modernist musical techniques made it an instant hit and launched Stravinsky’s career in spectacular fashion.

The original scoring of *The Firebird* called for an orchestra of more than 100 players. Stravinsky adapted the score for the concert hall, creating a concert suite in 1911. The First World War brought about a reduction in the resources of most ballet companies in Europe, limiting large-scale productions. Stravinsky also lost his musical copyrights held in Russia once the Bolsheviks took over in the wake of the 1917 Revolution. As a result, Stravinsky created a second *Firebird* Suite in 1919 employing a substantially reduced instrumentation, which is the version we will hear this evening.

The plot of the ballet comes from a Russian folk tale. The hero, Prince Ivan, wanders into the enchanted garden of the evil magician Kashchei while hunting, and sees the exotic Firebird, whom he captures and
prepares to kill. She begs him for mercy and he relents. In gratitude, she bestows a magic feather upon him and tells him that she will come to his aid whenever he needs her. Ivan then discovers thirteen princesses whom Kashchei has enchanted and with whom he falls rapturously in love. When Ivan and Kashchei meet face-to-face, the magician attacks the prince with his hordes of savage creatures. Ivan summons the Firebird, who puts Kashchei and his entire retinue into a deep sleep. While they are unconscious, the Firebird leads Ivan to the casket that contains the magic egg that holds the magician’s soul. Ivan destroys the egg, breaking the enchantment and freeing the princesses and all the other enchanted beings imprisoned by Kashchei.

The Suite consists of five movements from the ballet. The *Introduction* opens with the ominous sounds of tremolo double basses, muted trombones and bassoons, portraying the garden’s dark enchantment. The *Dance of the Firebird* features capricious writing for the solo clarinet, accompanied by muted brass, harp and strings. The *Princess’s Round Dance* begins in the solo oboe and passes to clarinet, bassoon and then to muted violins. The music rises to an ardent climax and then gradually fades. When the music reaches *pianissimo*, Kashchei’s infernal dance bursts in violently, a ferocious juggernaut of orchestral sound, full of brutal ostinatos and brusque brass, punctuated by shrieks from the full orchestra. The *Berceuse* (Lullaby) begins with a soulful melody given to the bassoon, and answered by an ecstatic outburst from the muted strings before the bassoon returns over gentle string tremolos and harmonics. The mysterious texture of quiet tremolos leads into the *Finale*, led by the solo horn. The horn melody is repeated throughout the orchestra and gradually transformed into a hymn of triumph. This hymn changes into a joyous celebratory dance in 7/4 meter, led by the trumpets. The music broadens majestically and the final powerful chorale in the brass concludes the suite in a blaze of glory.

**Ravel: Boléro**

Before leaving for a concert tour of the United States in early 1928, Maurice Ravel gave his word that he would write a new work for the dancer Ida Rubinstein and her company for that fall season. During that summer while on vacation at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, he played a rather innocuous melody for his guest, the music critic Gustave Samazeuilh. "Don't you think this theme has a certain insistent quality?" he inquired. "I'm going to try and repeat it a number of times without any development, gradually increasing the orchestra as best I can." That project bore the working title *Fandango*, but Ravel felt that it did not fit the character of the music and changed it to *Boléro*. The first performance in November 1928 at the Paris Opera was a huge success. Once Rubinstein’s performance rights expired, the work took on a second life in the concert hall, where is heard the most often today.

Ravel was as surprised as anyone that *Boléro* became such a resounding audience favorite. He considered it more a compositional exercise than an attempt at artistic expression. His later explanation of the work is almost more dismissive than informative:

"I am particularly anxious that there should be no misunderstanding as to my Boléro. It is an experiment in a very special and limited direction, and it should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from, or anything more than, it actually does achieve. Before the
first performance, I issued a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece...consisting wholly of orchestral texture without music—of one long, very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, and there is practically no invention except in the plan and the manner of the execution. The themes are impersonal—folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind. Whatever may have been said to the contrary, the orchestral treatment is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity.... I have done exactly what I have set out to do, and it is for listeners to take it or leave it."

**Boléro** has remained a popular piece to this day, used prominently in Dudley Moore’s 1979 film **10**, Bruno Bozetto’s hysterical **Fantasia** parody **Allegro Non Troppo**, and for Torvill and Dean’s gold medal pairs figure skating performance at the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics.

The construction of the work is very simple. A single snare drum taps out a two-measure bolero rhythm, which will continue through the entire 16-minute length of the work. The solo flute enters with a sinuous melody in two parts. This melody is repeated, unaltered and unmodulated, by solo instruments and then with groups of instruments. Strings gradually switch from *pizzicato* to *arco*, and divide into harmony parts within each section, creating an increasingly lush string texture. With each change in instrumentation, the volume builds imperceptively. **Boléro** remains obstinately in C major, until, just at the climax, the tonality shifts from C major to an even brighter E major for eight measures. The orchestra relentlessly pounds out the snare drum rhythm in the final bars, embellished with wild *glissandi* in the trombones and saxophones before the final snarling chords.