



Holiday  
December 1, 2023

## PROGRAM NOTES

### Prelude to Hänsel und Gretel

Engelbert Humperdinck (1854 - 1921)

The original Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921) was a German composer best known for his fairytale opera, Hänsel and Gretel, which he wrote in the early 1890s. Humperdinck was strongly attracted to music from earliest childhood. He eventually succeeded in studying music, despite strong opposition from his father who had wanted his son to be an architect. At the age of twenty five, Humperdinck studied first in Cologne, and then in Munich, and was hugely influenced by Richard Wagner, whom he met in Italy.

The enchanting “fairytale play” was originally a labour of love. Humperdinck’s sister had written some verses based on the famous Grimm’s fairy tale and she asked her brother to set

them to music for a Christmas party for her children. He then enlarged it to 16 songs with piano accompaniment, called it a 'Singspiel', and presented it to his fiancée at Christmas in 1890 as an engagement present. Hardly had the holiday passed, when he began work orchestrating it. The Singspiel gradually became a fully fledged three-act opera and was given its first performance on 23 December 1893, at Weimar. Richard Strauss conducted and – with its Wagnerian techniques and traditional German folk songs – the opera was an instant success.

Humperdinck himself considered the overture to be a prelude and is said privately to have called it 'Children's Life'. As with many overtures, it makes reference to songs and dances in the opera including the Witch's spell hocus pocus and the final scene The witch is dead. It opens with a gentle hymn, 'Evening Prayer', which is one of the most beautiful chorales for the French horn section ever written. Humperdinck later returns to this theme for the 'prayer and dream' scene in the opera. A trumpet fanfare introduces a faster section, which starts serenely and gradually introduces tension. Towards the end of the overture, the composer weaves together all the various themes in an elegant counterpoint worthy of Wagner's Meistersinger prelude. This leads to a stirring climax, after

which the opening horn chorale once again establishes the dreamy mood with which the opera begins.

– <https://www.bhso.org.uk/>

## Havanaise

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 - 1921)

It is said that the inspiration for the Havanaise came to Saint-Saëns in November 1885 while on a concert tour of Northern Europe. On a cold night in Brest he sat staring into the fire when suddenly the sound of the burning wood evoked a melodic idea in his head. The work was originally conceived and written for violin and piano, and the orchestral version was completed in 1887. It was dedicated to the virtuoso violinist Raphael Diaz Albertini.

Saint-Saëns' main passion, apart from music, was for travel. He visited many countries including Algeria, Argentina, Ceylon, Egypt, Russia, Scandinavia, Sri Lanka, the United States, Vietnam, and Uruguay for which country he composed the National anthem. He frequently used idioms learned on his travels in his music, particularly those of North Africa.

The havanaise (habañera in Spanish) is a dance in 2/4 time, with a characteristic four note repeating rhythm. It originated in Havana in the mid nineteenth century. In contrast to Bizet's famous habañera in Carmen, Saint-Saëns uses the Latin American idiom with restraint. The characteristic four note repeating rhythm is heard quietly in the cellos at the outset, accompanying the soloist who plays a lyrical, romantic melody in a triplet-duplet rhythm which permeates the piece. The gentle and reflective mood recurs regularly, often accompanied quietly by the havanaise rhythm. It is contrasted with fiery episodes full of virtuosic passages for the soloist. The piece ends calmly and quietly with a high E from the soloist.

– <http://www.theportobelloorchestra.co.uk/>

## **The Nutcracker Suite, op. 71a**

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893)

The Suite from the ballet The Nutcracker was compiled as a substitute for the symphonic ballad The Voyevoda on the programme of a Russian Musical Society concert in Saint Petersburg scheduled for 29 February/12 March 1892, at

which Tchaikovsky was due to conduct his own works. Having destroyed the score of the ballad *The Voyevoda* following its premiere in November 1891, Tchaikovsky suggested replacing a suite of numbers from his new ballet *The Nutcracker*, which he was preparing to orchestrate.

Among the surviving rough sketches of the ballet, and also among notes on the manuscripts and other documents, are a number of variants of titles of the Suite. Originally Tchaikovsky intended to call it 'Suite from the ballet "The Fir Tree" (Сюита из балета «Елка»), or Suite from the ballet "The Christmas Tree" (Сюита из балета «Рождественская елка»), suggesting that the title of the ballet had not yet been settled upon.

The earliest lists of numbers for the Suite also contained *Chocolate (Spanish Dance)* and *Final Waltz*. The second movement – *Danses caractéristiques* – was to be called *In the Kingdom of Sweets and Toys (В царстве лакомств и игрушек)*. The *Danse des mirlitons* was originally *Reed Pipes (Свирелки)*, and the *Danse de la Fée Dragée* was to have been *The Sweet Fairy (Фея конфект)*.

Tchaikovsky had begun orchestrating the numbers in the Suite by 28 January/9 February 1892. By 31 January/12 February

1892 the first number of the Suite was ready. According to the author's note on the manuscript score, the orchestration was completed on 8/20 February, at Maydanovo.

– <https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/>

## Sleigh Ride

LEROY ANDERSON (1908 - 1975)

“I began *Sleigh Ride* in the summer of 1946 in a cottage in Woodbury, Connecticut, where my wife and I were spending the summer with our 18-month-old daughter. The original version began with what later became the middle section. I recall working on it in the middle of a heat wave, so there is no basis for the music except the title itself.

“That same summer I also worked on *Fiddle-Fiddle* and *Serenata*. After moving to Brooklyn, New York in the fall I finished *Fiddle-Fiddle* on January 1, 1947 and *Serenata* on February 12, 1947 in addition to making

arrangements for the Boston Pops concerts in the spring.

“I had felt that the original theme of *Sleigh Ride* was not strong enough to start the number but would make a good middle section. I finally worked out a satisfactory main theme, introduction and coda and finished the orchestra score on February 10, 1948. *Sleigh Ride* was first performed on May 4, 1948 in Symphony Hall, Boston as an extra at a Pops concert conducted by Arthur Fiedler.”

– *Leroy Anderson on Sleigh Ride*

## **The Night Before Christmas**

AARON DAI (B. 1967)

When Clement Clarke Moore wrote the poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas*—also known as *The Night Before Christmas*—in 1822, his large country estate called “Chelsea” extended all the way from what is now Eighteenth Street to Twenty-Fourth Street, and from Eighth Avenue to Tenth Avenue in Manhattan. A wealthy

gentleman and devout Episcopalian, Moore lived with his family atop an enormous hill (now long gone) near the corner of Twenty- First Street and Ninth Avenue. Today's Chelsea district takes its name directly from Moore's estate, and The Chelsea Symphony therefore has a kind of native connection to the man and his legacy.

Originally written for Moore's children, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* is primarily responsible for establishing the contemporary American conception of Santa Claus, including his appearance, the night he visits, his method of transportation, the number and names of his reindeer, and his act of bringing toys to children. Before the poem, American ideas about St. Nicholas and other Christmastide visitors varied tremendously, with significant differences between ethnicities, religions, and social classes. Moore's vision of Santa Claus created a happy medium among these often competing ideas—a quintessentially American tradition in and of itself.

— *Aaron Dai*