

## ***Air on the G String* (1730) Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

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It's impossible to think "Baroque era" and not have Johann Sebastian Bach spring to mind. Born in 1685, Bach grew up in a large family of north German musicians. At just 9 years old, he lost both parents and went to live with his oldest brother (an organ player), where he developed his love of the instrument. Though during his lifetime Bach was known better as an organist than a composer (he also sang and played several instruments), he would eventually become the single greatest influence on many future composers. But for at least 50 years after his death, his treasure trove of music grew nothing but cobwebs. During his lifetime, Bach's style was considered old-fashioned and didn't garner much interest. It would take the world a while to realize his genius.

Among Bach's most popular compositions is *Air on the G String*, but around which swirls some confusion. Much of it is due to it being part of four orchestral suites, written toward the end of his life. Despite being labelled simply as 1, 2, 3, and 4, the pieces were not written in numerical order although, frankly, scholars are not exactly sure when the Suites were written. Suite No. 1 seems to date back to around 1723; No. 2 to 1738-39; No. 4 to late 1725; and the best-known, No. 3, around 1730. Calling them "orchestral" suites was odd, too. They only required an ensemble as large as a string quartet, a handful of woodwind players, some trumpets, and a percussionist.

Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major* was scored for three instrumental choirs—two oboes, three trumpets, timpani, and strings. With the suite based on a French dance rhythm, Bach created a melody as gorgeous as anything written in the Romantic era. *Air*, the second movement of the third suite, originally composed for harpsichord, was transcribed for strings by German violinist August Wilhelmj. It made many wonder whether the whole suite might have been composed for strings, but that would have been a first for Bach. No one can be sure!

*Air* is a simple, beautiful melody loved around the world. Bach originally wrote it for a patron sometime between 1717-23. But it didn't get its nickname until 1871, when Wilhelmj made a violin and piano arrangement of the second movement of the suite. By changing the key into C major and altering the melody an octave lower, Wilhelmj was able to play the piece on a single string of his violin—the G string—the lowest of the four strings. Rich, dark, soulful, and sonorous, it's ideal for music in the violin's lower range. But, up until Bach's time, it was the least-favored string for Baroque composers. (In the early 18th century, the string was reinforced with silver wiring, making it more resonant.)

Bach once said, "I have had to work hard; anyone who works just as hard will get just as far," which is very humble. No other composer of the period (except perhaps Handel) even came close to Bach's heights of achievement. The *Bach Werke Verzeichnis* (the catalogue in which Bach's compositions are organized) lists 1,128 compositions, plus 23 works that were lost or unfinished. After fathering 20 children

(only 10 of whom lived to adulthood), it's a wonder he had time to compose so prolifically.

In 1749, Bach's eyesight grew so poor that he had two operations to restore his vision, which may have actually hastened his death. He died at age 65, three months after the last operation. His widow lived for another 10 years, dying in poverty.

## **Symphony No. 3, Op. 56, A Minor, *Scottish* (1842) Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

*At the young age of 2, Mendelssohn began taking piano lessons and studying composition. By age 10 he had already made his public debut and became a conductor.*

Tonight's program of music inspired by Scotland (written by non-Scottish composers) includes a symphony written in Hamburg, Germany in 1809 by the composer Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. It's no wonder he went by simply Felix Mendelssohn. It didn't take long to recognize he was a child prodigy. At age 2, after moving to Berlin with his parents, brother and two sisters, he began taking piano lessons and studying composition. At age 7, he broadened his music lessons in Paris. At age 9, he made his public debut in Berlin. At age 10, he joined the Singakademie and became a conductor, all the while continuing to compose. As a child, Mendelssohn wrote write a handful of operas and 11 symphonies.

"It is in pictures, ruins, and natural surroundings that I find the most music."—Felix Mendelssohn

*Despite Mendelssohn starting his musical tribute to Scotland before his Italian Symphony (1833), his Scottish Symphony did not premier until long after.*

At age 20, Mendelssohn set off on a grand tour of Europe that would inspire his *Third Symphony, "Scottish,"* a musical tribute to the United Kingdom's northernmost country. He had already visited several countries when in 1829, as part of his education, his father (a wealthy banker) sent him off on a three-year expedition. After giving concerts in London, Mendelssohn headed north to Scotland, where a visit to the ruins of the chapel of Holyrood Castle near Edinburgh ignited his imagination.

Mendelssohn wrote home: "This evening in the deep twilight, we went to the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved; there is a small room with a winding staircase leading up to it...The adjacent chapel has lost its roof; grass and ivy grow thickly within; and on the broken altar Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything there is in ruins and ramshackle, open to the blue sky. I think I have today found the opening of my *Scottish Symphony.*"

A year later, Mendelssohn was still laboring over his *Third Symphony*, when the tour continued to Italy, and the seductive Mediterranean climate proved highly distracting. "The loveliest time of the year in Italy is the period from April 15 to May 15," he wrote in 1831. "Who then can blame me for not being able to return to the mists of Scotland? I have therefore laid aside the symphony for the present." The "present" turned out to be much longer than expected.

Meanwhile, he began work on his *Fourth Symphony, Italian*, finishing it in 1833, long before his *Third*. "The *Scottish Symphony* alone is not yet quite to my liking," he wrote in February 1831. "If any brilliant idea occurs to me, I will seize it at once,

quickly write it down, and finish it at last.” The “brilliant ideas” apparently never came or more distractions occurred, because it was another decade before he finally finished the score.

The delay resulted in a more polished, mature symphony. By its premiere in 1842, Mendelssohn had dropped the “*Scottish*” nickname. Many find nothing overtly “*Scottish*” about the music. (Robert Schumann, mistakenly thinking he was reviewing Mendelssohn’s *Italian Symphony*, wrote how its beauty made him regret that he had never gone to Italy!) But others swear they envision the mists of Scotland’s highlands in the deep twilight at Holyrood in Mendelssohn’s haunted opening measures. Regardless, it is expressive, entrancing music, full of urgency and drama.

*Some claim they can envision the mists of Scotland’s highlands in Mendelssohn’s work. Can you?*

The four movements, played without pause, include a dark and stormy first movement, full of swelling chords and somber music, followed by a joyous brief second movement that leads to an ensuing *scherzo*, light and graceful but at a vigorous speed. Then, only a moment separates the second movement from the third’s slow, forlorn and foreboding character, before a flowing *allegro* section, which is full of reflective chords portraying a struggle between love and fate. The final movement is fierce, arriving without warning and borrowing from Scottish folk dances. By his own admission, Mendelssohn’s finale is “warlike.” Two themes spar, one more threatening than the other. Following a quiet, pensive section, a spirited *allegro* brings the work to its majestic, affirmative close.

The *Scottish Symphony* was completed for 13 years after Mendelssohn’s visit to Scotland, making it the last of his five symphonies to be completed (despite its “Third” label). In 1842, he conducted the first performance in Leipzig, dedicating it to one of his greatest admirers, Queen Victoria. Five years later, Mendelssohn’s sister, Fanny, to whom he was very close, died suddenly, leaving a pall over him. His health deteriorated rapidly, and six months later, in 1847, he died in Leipzig of a ruptured blood vessel. Mendelssohn only lived 38 years, but it was all he needed to distinguish himself as one of the first significant Romantic composers of the 1800s.

## ***Scottish Fantasy, op. 46 (1880)***

### **Max Bruch (1838-1920)**

Born in Cologne, Germany, Max Bruch was writing chamber music at age 11, his first symphony at 14, and his first violin concerto at 26, performing it to great acclaim at 30. He was a composer whose music for violin managed to include a little of everything—singing lines, passionate phrasing, extreme dynamics, overarching drama, as well as double- and triple-stops. Bruch’s *First Violin Concerto* (1866) is his best-known work, but the composer was far from a one-hit wonder (a perception that dogged him throughout his life), having written two other much-admired violin concertos, including the *Scottish Fantasy*. Ironically, Bruch—who wrote more than 200 admirable pieces—resented the success of his *First Violin*

*Concerto*, because it eclipsed his other compositions and hindered his career.

Bruch complained: “Nothing compares to the laziness, stupidity, and dullness of German violinists. Every fortnight another one comes to me wanting to play the first Concerto. ... I tell them, ‘Go away and once and for all play the other Concertos, which are just as good, if not better.’”

Fourteen years after his first concerto, Bruch wrote the *Scottish Fantasy*. It was worth the wait; the beloved piece, a fantasy on Scottish folk melodies for violin, became one of the most admired works in the violin repertory. Bruch thought the violin could “sing a melody better than a piano,” and he used folk tunes to prove his point. He believed deeply in the spirit of each song and recreated compelling moods as well as melodies that make the violin sing.

At the time, the musical term “fantasy” indicated a more loosely structured shorter work. Bruch’s title, *Scottish Fantasy*, seems somewhat inaccurate, as the piece is a substantial, 30-minute, four-movement work that may better be described as a concerto. Bruch himself was conflicted over what to call it, changing it to a concerto at one point. But the score didn’t quite fit the definition of a larger scale work, either, so in the end, it published as: *Fantasy for Violin with Orchestra and Harp, freely using Scottish Folk Melodies*.

The sound of bagpipes is portrayed by drone basses, while the violin shoots off fireworks after it introduces the tune on double-stopped strings (two strings played with one stroke).

The writings of Sir Walter Scott play a prominent role in *Scottish Fantasy*. The work opens with a slow, solemn introduction for brass and harp, evoking a dreamy atmosphere inspired by the image of “an old bard contemplating a ruined castle and lamenting the glorious times of old.” This is followed by a recitative by the soloist, delivered on a soft bed of strings, before leading to a heartrending Adagio cantabile, based on one of two songs: *Auld Robin Morris* or *Thro the Wood, Laddie* (there’s debate as to which). The melody, regardless, is richly composed and filled out with double stops.

The G major second movement, *Scherzo: Allegro and Dance*, is based on *Hey, the Dusty Miller*. The sound of bagpipes is portrayed by drone basses, while the violin shoots off fireworks after it introduces the tune on double-stopped strings (two strings played with one stroke). The excitement ends by recalling the melody from the first movement. This leads without pause to the third movement, a set of lush, resonant variations in slower time, *Andante sostenuto*, for the song *I’m Down for Lack o’ Johnnie*. The violin rhapsodizes throughout.

The last movement opens with a hushed anticipation, until the violin arrives with a hearty dance tune—and more fireworks. Bruch gave his finale the same “warlike” marking as Mendelssohn: *Allegro guerriero*. *Scots wha hae* is the dominant folk melody, dating back to the Middle Ages, and according to legend was sung by Robert the Bruce (King of Scots), after his remarkable defeat of a much larger English army at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. (New lyrics were later provided by Robert Burns.) The violin adds excitement by playing several strings at once until a tender reprise of the first movement occurs. *Scots wha hae* returns in an exuberant burst of orchestral forces.

Bruch was cursed with fleeting fame. He was a fan of Mendelssohn and Schumann, but a strong opponent of Wagner and Liszt, and by the turn of the century, such opinions were considered archaic. If not for Bruch's friendships with the violin stars of his day and the nine works he composed for them—particularly his *First Violin Concerto* and *Scottish Fantasy*—his music might have evaporated with the mists of Scotland.

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## **Orkney Wedding with Sunrise (1985) Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016)**

The program ends with a popular work composed in the late 20th century: *An Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* by Peter Maxwell Davies. Born and trained in England, in 1971 Davies moved to the remote Orkney Islands north of Scotland, where he lived out his life. Davies, who died in 2016, is known for his highly eclectic compositions and the breadth of his musical compositions, which encompass everything from serialism to expressionism, foxtrots to pavaues (stately court dances). With more than 200 published works in every medium—*Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* his most popular—Davies is among the foremost composers of our time.

*Davies described Orkney Wedding as “a picture postcard of an actual wedding I attended on Hoy in Orkney.”*

Born in 1934 in Salford, Lancashire, Davies, an only child, was taken by his parents to a performance of *The Gondoliers* when he was 4 years old. The next day, his parents were amazed to discover he could sing all of the comic opera's songs. At age 8, his family inherited his grandmother's piano, “and I took to it like a duck takes to water,” he said. The boy was soon sending his musical compositions to BBC Children's Hour, and by age 13, he was a regular on the program.

Personally, Davies was highly opinionated and outspoken; professionally, his early music was unorthodox, dissonant and incited audiences. While his music mellowed over time, Davies did not—later declaring that “artistic terrorists” who let their cell phones ring during concerts should be fined.

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The dramatic landscape of the Orkney islands suited Davies, who wrote that there is “no escape from yourself here, you just have to realize what you are through your music with much more intensity than in urban surroundings.” He composed *Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* in 1984 on a commission from the Boston Pops Orchestra. Written shortly after his *Third Symphony*—a work flooded with memories of childhood and the death of his father—both share the key of D, which represented autobiographical significance in his work. Since its premiere, it has been performed innumerable times and is one of the few pieces in classical repertoire to feature a bagpipe solo.

A joyous (if drunken) showstopper, *Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* was described by Davies as “a picture postcard record of an actual wedding I attended on Hoy in Orkney.” He described it this way: “At the outset, we hear the guests arriving, out of extremely bad weather, at the hall. This is followed by the processional, where the guests are solemnly received by the bride and bridegroom, and presented with

*Orkney Wedding  
was commissioned  
by the Boston Pops  
Orchestra in 1984.*

their first glass of whiskey. The band tunes up, and we get on with the dancing proper. This becomes ever wilder, as all concerned feel the results of the whisky, until the lead fiddle can hardly hold the band together any more. We leave the hall into the cold night, with echoes of the processional music in our ears, and as we walk home across the island, the sun rises, over Caithness, to a glorious dawn. The sun is represented by the highland bagpipes, in full traditional splendour.”

To begin the piece, the violent storm blows in with strings lashing. This quickly subsides to an oboe solo, taken up by various woodwinds to announce the arrival of the guests. The processional is led by the oboe and followed by the violins (reminiscent of Celtic and Gaelic folk tunes). Whiskey is passed around and the celebrating begins! String glissandos mark the sound of the tipsy musicians tuning up. The dancing—from gentle (with a solo for first violin) to boisterous—gets underway. Soon the guests and musicians are reeling about in drunken merriment. (This amusing section is based on folk dances and full of “wrong” notes.)

The party ends in the early morning hours, and the oboe that marked the guests’ arrival returns for their departure and journey home across the island. Great brass swells announce the approach of sunrise, as a series of expectant trills mark dawn’s arrival. Finally, the sun—in the form of a bagpiper—makes its dazzling appearance, bringing *Orkney Wedding with Sunrise* to an exultant close. You can’t help but think what a raucous, fun wedding you’ve just attended!

## **Program Notes by Jayce Keane**

*Jayce Keane, who began her career as a journalist for The Rocky Mountain News, has been working in the orchestra industry and writing about music for the last 13 years. A longtime resident of California, she now lives in Colorado.*

Questions about the music? Email us at [info@LongBeachSymphony.org](mailto:info@LongBeachSymphony.org)