

## American Philharmonic – Sonoma County

### Program notes for 2011-2012 Season

October 9, 2011 – *Dark Shadows At Twilight*

A Night on Bare Mountain

Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881)



Mussorgsky's musical talents showed in his youth in his skill at the piano. Joining the army at age 17, he attained popularity with his singing skills. When he was 18, he was introduced to the composers Dargomijsky and Balakirev. In 1858 he resigned his commission in order to devote himself to music. He received tutelage and assistance from Rimsky-Korsakov and Balakirev.

His compositions were bold and unconventional; these qualities did not endear him to other composers of the time. The first completed version of his piece, "St. John's Night on the Bare Mountain" was so strongly criticized by Balakirev that Mussorgsky never attempted to have it performed. His downfall was the drinking habit he learned while in the army. It reduced his capacity to work and contributed to his early death.

The program of this piece is, briefly: 1-Assembly of the witches, their talk and gossip. 2-Satan's journey. 3-Obscene praise of Satan. 4-Sabbath. The piece starts winding down with the ringing of the village church bell; the spirits of darkness disperse and day breaks.

Funeral March for a Marionette

Charles Gounod (1818-1893)

The unmistakable profile of Alfred Hitchcock appears on the screen, and a coven of bassoons hoots out a lugubrious and quirky theme. It's unlike any other television theme heard up until that time. It's Gounod's March.

Gounod was the child of a distinguished painter and an accomplished pianist. After attending the Paris Conservatory, he won the Grand Prix de Rome for composition at the age of 21. After two years of study in Rome, he returned to Paris. Working as an organist and neglecting his musical studies for years, he was almost at the point of joining the priesthood when he decided to dedicate himself to composition.

The Funeral March is program music gleaned from comments in the score, as follows:

- Beginning; "The Marionette is broken. Murmurs of regret from the troupe."
- At the entrance of the main theme; "The Procession."
- At the introduction of a new theme in a major key; "Here many of the principal personages stop for refreshments."
- At the return of the main theme; "Return to the House."

## Tzigane, Rapsodie de Concert (Gypsy)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

An only child, Ravel started studying piano at age seven and composition at twelve. Starting at the Paris Conservatory in 1889, he was a model student and earned many honors. The Paris Exposition held as great a fascination for him as for Debussy; the variety of kinds of music to be heard was unprecedented. At the same time, beautiful and innovative music was being written by such luminaries as Debussy, Chabrier, and Satie. Late in an evening of music at a pianist's home, Ravel asked the Hungarian violinist Jelly D'Aranyi to play some gypsy tunes. Then he asked for another. And another. At 5 a.m., with all tired out except Ravel and D'Aranyi, the musical evening ended and the idea for Tzigane, Rapsodie de Concert was born. The composition was completed two years later. D'Aranyi played the violin solo at the premiere in 1924 despite having had only two days to learn the music, and the work caused a sensation. The passionate play through the full range of the instrument and the gradually increasing tempos are hallmarks of music that Hungarians still dance to today.

## Symphonie Fantastique

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)



Berlioz's father was a doctor, who intended for Hector to become a doctor in spite of his obvious musical talent. But Hector had his own ideas. Berlioz was confident of his skills from a very young age; he wrote to a music publisher at age 15 to have some of his works published. He played the flute and flageolet but never learned piano, and was proud not to be dependent on it. At the age of 16 he started his medical studies, which took him to Paris two years later. He completed a Bachelor of Science degree in 1824, but he had been working on music all the while. The influences he found in Paris made it too difficult to keep up the pretense of interest in medicine. He decided to dedicate himself to music that same year.

The inspiration for the *Symphonie Fantastique* came in 1827, when Berlioz saw Harriet Smithson playing the part of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He was deeply affected by Shakespeare and quite enamored of Miss Smithson, but he did not actually meet her until five years later. The roller-coaster of emotions caused by his feelings for the actress gave him the idea for a story in music, to be subtitled "Episode in the Life of an Artist."

The movements are as follows:

1. "Reveries - Passions" (Dreams - Passions.) An Artist with a vivid imagination sees a woman who embodies his ideals, and falls in love. This vision inspires a musical phrase, now called an *idée fixe*, which appears in every movement. The movement begins in what sounds like a fog, or like the spirit of a life searching for a goal or purpose. After

building to a frenzy and returning to the fog, fragments of the *idée fixe*, the theme representing the woman, begin to appear. Then as if everything snapped into perfect focus, the theme briefly takes over the piece, and only this single melody line plays.

2. "Un Bal" (A Ball.) He attends a ball, but the music representing his beloved returns to haunt him. A waltz creates the scene of dozens of swirling couples in a grand ballroom. The *idée fixe* appears amidst the flow of the dance as if the beloved is seen from a distance among many dancers.

3. "Scène aux champs" (Countryside scene.) He finds himself in the countryside - hope and dark presentiments. An English horn plays a cowherd's tune, and is answered by another player in the distance.

4. "Marche au Supplice" (March to the scaffold.) In an opium dream, he has a horrible vision that he has killed his beloved. He is condemned to death and witnesses his own execution.

5. "Songe d'un nuit du Sabbat" (Dream of a Sabbath night.) He is surrounded by sorcerers and devils come to celebrate the sabbath. The final movement is a nightmare built of a nightmarish image of the beloved and the *Dies Irae* theme, part of the Catholic Mass for the dead.

Notes by R. M. Teplitz