

February 8, 2019

Program Notes

La Muette de Portici (The Mute Girl of Portici) is an opera in five acts by **Daniel Auber** (1782-1871). The opera is loosely based on the historical uprising against Spanish rule in Naples in 1647. The work has an important place in music history as the earliest French grand opera. It is also known for its role in the Belgian Revolution of 1830. The opera, whose subject was revolution, was to cap a three day festival to celebrate King William I's fifteenth year of his reign. But the rebels pre-ordained the final day of the festival would be the start of the Belgian Revolution.

Harold in Italy, Op. 16, H. 68 is a symphony in four parts with soloistic viola by **Hector Berlioz** (1803-1869) in 1834. Niccolò Paganini encouraged Berlioz to write *Harold in Italy*. According to Berlioz's "Memoires," Paganini had acquired a "superb viola," a Stradivarius, but stated he had no suitable music. He asked Berlioz to write a piece for him stating that Berlioz was the only one he could entrust to the task.

The first movement refers to the scenes that Harold, the melancholic character, encounters in mountains. In the second movement, Harold accompanies a group of pilgrims. The third movement involves a love scene. In the fourth movement, spiritually tired and depressed, Harold seeks comfort among wild and dangerous company, perhaps in a tavern.

Paganini did not hear the work he had commissioned until 1838, then he was so overwhelmed by it that, following the performance, he dragged Berlioz onto the stage and there knelt and kissed his hand before a wildly cheering audience and applauding musicians. A few days later he sent Berlioz a letter of congratulations, enclosing a bank draft for 20,000 francs!

Valses nobles et sentimentales is a suite of waltzes composed by **Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937). The piano version was published in 1911 and the orchestral version in 1912. The suite contains an eclectic blend of impressionist and modernist music, which is especially evident in the orchestral version.

Carmen is an opera in four acts by French composer **Georges Bizet** (1838-1875) and was first performed by the Opera-Comique in Paris in 1875, where its breaking of conventions shocked and scandalized its first audiences. Bizet died suddenly after the 33rd performance, unaware that the work would achieve international acclaim within the following ten years. ***Carmen*** has since become one of the most popular and frequently performed operas in the classical canon; the "Habanera" from Act I and the "Toreador Song" from Act II are among the best known of all operatic arias. The opera is written in the genre of *opera comique* with musical numbers separated by dialogue. It is set in southern Spain and tells the story of the downfall of Don Jose, a naïve soldier who is seduced by the wiles of the fiery gypsy Carmen. Jose abandons his childhood sweetheart and deserts from his military duties, yet loses Carmen's love to the glamorous matador Escamillo, after which Jose kills her in a jealous rage. The depictions of proletarian life, immorality, and lawlessness, and the tragic death of the main character on stage, broke new ground in French opera and were highly controversial. After the premiere, most reviews were critical, and the French public was generally indifferent. ***Carmen*** initially gained its reputation through a series of productions outside France, and was not revived in Paris until 1883. Thereafter, it rapidly acquired popularity at home and abroad. The music has since been widely acclaimed for brilliance of melody, harmony, atmosphere, and orchestration, and for the skill with which Bizet musically represented the emotions and suffering of his characters.