

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)***Fantasia on Greensleeves***

The tune we know as “Greensleeves” is one of the most lovely and tender of English melodies and is sometimes attributed to King Henry VIII, who was (among other things) a composer and patron of the arts. Vaughan William’s *Fantasia on Greensleeves* has become for many music-lovers the standard orchestral version of the tune. Composed originally for his 1928 opera, *Sir John in Love*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* comedy about Sir John Falstaff, this version was created for a Promenade Concert in 1934, and is scored for strings, harp and flutes. In spite of the work’s title, “Greensleeves” is not the only melody that forms the fabric of the piece: Vaughan Williams incorporates another melody, the folk-tune “Lovely Joan” which he found in East Anglia on one of his folk-song collecting excursions. Listen for it presented in the lower strings immediately after “Greensleeves” itself has been played.

As for the connection between “Greensleeves” and Christmas? The original lyrics, of course, which recount the travails of a rejected lover, are not the link. But from the 17th Century on the melody attracted other words, and by the 19th Century lyrics such as “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” and “What Child Is This?” had become a standard part of many Christmas carol collections.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1872-1958)***Nutcracker Ballet, excerpts***

What would a Christmas concert be without the sounds of Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker* ballet? Although the premiere of the ballet in 1892 was not notably successful, Tchaikovsky’s music was immediately acclaimed and has since become one of his best known and most widely admired compositions. And the ballet too grew steadily in popularity throughout the 20th Century. Today, the ballet, with its blend of domestic reality with magical fantasy, is an indispensable element in the programme of many ballet companies, especially at Christmas time in North America. Of the two pieces on tonight’s programme one, the March, comes from the family scene at the start of Act 1 where the children are led in to view the newly decorated Christmas tree. The other, the Waltz of the Flowers, is from Act 2, set in the Nutcracker Prince’s Land of Sweets. Here, in heroine Clara’s honour, “sweets” (chocolate, coffee, candy canes and more) from around the world perform, including a row of beautiful flowers who dance their elegant Waltz.

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)***“Hallelujah” Chorus from Messiah***

Handel’s renowned masterpiece, *Messiah*, is an oratorio in three parts, first performed at Easter time in 1742. Performance of *Messiah* at Christmas is natural, however, as Part 1 recounts God’s Promise of salvation, and ends with the appearance of the angel to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, the announcement to them of Jesus’ birth (the Incarnation) and the promise of his healing ministry. Part 2 of *Messiah* presents the tribulations of Christ’s ministry that lead to His Passion and Crucifixion, but ends in His triumph over death and the assertion of God’s power on earth. This is the context of the “Hallelujah” Chorus, the final section of Part 2, and what makes it the emotional and doctrinal heart of the oratorio. Such is the significance of the text and the uplifting power of this music that it is easy to believe the reports from Handel’s servant: that upon completing the composition of this chorus the servant found Handel at his desk, weeping, and exclaiming, “I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels.”

Georges Bizet (1838-1875)

“Farandole” from L’Arlésienne, Suite #2

Alphonse Daudet’s play, *L’Arlésienne* (1872), was not a great success, and the entre’acte and incidental music composed for it by Georges Bizet (he of *Carmen*, and *The Pearl Fishers*) didn’t meet with much approval either. That was because the theatre orchestra was small so the instrumentation was limited, and many of the 27 pieces were quite short (between six and twenty bars only). The play closed after 21 performances. However, when Bizet reduced the number of items and rearranged the music into a suite for a larger orchestra, concert-goers changed their minds, and the two *L’Arlésienne* Suites have since remained popular and admired concert hall favourites.

The Farandole is the last piece in Suite #2, which was compiled after Bizet’s early death by fellow composer Guiraud. Bizet’s score for *L’Arlésienne* draws on folk music traditions from the south of France, and the farandole is a lively dance from Provence in which the dancers join hands and form a chain. Yet the opening of the piece is not a dance at all, but a march: the very stately carol the March of the Kings that dates from the middle ages and portrays the Three Kings associated with the birth of Jesus. Once this stirring march has been declaimed, delicate drum taps lead into the sprightly dance tune led by the flute out of which most of the remainder of the piece is made. But Bizet has a surprise for us in the last minute: he brings back the March of the Kings and blends it with the farandole folk tune to create an energetic, joyful and celebratory sounding finish.