

Programme notes

“From the Highlands to the Caucasus”

Tonight's items were all intended by their respective composers to invoke particular locations, though some are more specific as to place and time than to others.

Hamish MacCunn's 1887 overture "Land of the Mountain and the Flood" became familiar to British television audiences in the 1970s as the theme tune to "Sutherland's Law", in which the title character catches murderers by staring moodily at dramatic Scottish landscapes. The overture's intention to capture those landscapes is signalled by its title, which quotes from the canto "O, Caledonia!" from Walter Scott's 1805 poem "The Lay of the Last Minstrel". Drawing from the same source, the composer might equally have called it "Land of the heath and shaggy wood". The work received its premiere when its composer was just eighteen, and was described by George Bernard Shaw as "a charming Scotch overture which carries you over the hills and far away". MacCunn was not able to follow up this early success as a composer, but he did become a noted opera conductor and champion of Wagner's music, continuing the Germanic influence that Vaughan Williams was later to lead English music away from. More of that further on.

- Did you like that? Try Felix Mendelssohn's "Hebrides Overture" or Arthur Sullivan's Symphony in E major, "The Irish"

Aram Khachaturian was born to Armenian parents in Tblisi, in what is now Georgia, and although he spent much of his working life in Moscow, is today claimed by Armenia as a national hero. He was commissioned in 1941 to provide incidental music for a production of Mikhail Lermontov's 1835 play "Masquerade". The play tells how the tragic hero, much like Shakespeare's Othello, murders his wife as a result of getting the wrong end of the stick. The Waltz caused the composer particular difficulty, since it had not only to convey the darkness beneath the surface glitter of high society in imperial Russia but also to live up to the words of the play's doomed heroine, who comments "How beautiful the new waltz is! ... something between sorrow and joy gripped my heart." In 1944 Khachaturian put the incidental music together into a symphonic suite, of which this Waltz is the first movement.

- Did you like that? Try Dmitri Shostakovich's "Waltz no. 2" or Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition"

Frederick Delius' "La Calinda" comes from an 1897 opera, "Koanga", which is set on a plantation in Louisiana in the late eighteenth century. Delius drew on his own experience as a young man in Florida and the African American rhythms and harmonies he heard there. The opera concerns an African Prince and voodoo priest who has been captured into slavery and finds himself in a love triangle with the plantation owner's secret half-sister and an evil overseer; appropriate levels of mayhem result. Being preposterous, the opera is not much performed these days, but this interlude is attractive enough to have become a popular stand-alone concert piece. A "Calinda" is a traditional dance of Martinique, derived from an African form of martial art.

- Did you like that? Try Delius' "Walk to the Paradise Garden" or Anatoly Liadov's "The Enchanted Lake"

On the death of Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1958, The Times wrote of him that "his achievement was to cut the bonds that from the times of Handel and Mendelssohn had bound England hand and foot to the Continent. He found in the Elizabethans and folk-song the elements of a native English

language that need no longer be spoken with a German accent". Many of those traditional English folk songs were collected and recorded from rural singers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some by Vaughan Williams himself. The English Folk Song Suite of 1923 brings together no fewer than ten of them, into three movements: a March, called "Seventeen Come Sunday"; an Intermezzo, called "My Bonny Boy"; and a further March, "Folk Songs from Somerset".

- Did you like that? Try George Butterworth's "The Banks of Green Willow" or Vaughan Williams' "Five English Folk Songs"

Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov was born and received his musical education in St Petersburg, including teaching from Rimsky-Korsakov, but on graduation he moved to Tbilisi to take up a job as director of the local orchestra. There he developed an interest in Georgian folk music before moving to become a professor, and subsequently Director, at the Moscow Conservatory. His time there would have overlapped with that of the young Khachaturian, but they do not appear to have connected across the forty-year age gap despite a shared interest in the music of the Caucasus.

This suite of Caucasian Sketches was written in 1894 and is now the most performed of Ippolitov-Ivanov's compositions, along with a second Suite written in 1896. There does not seem to be an official narrative to expand on the descriptive titles of the four movements, so the following has no formal credentials beyond setting out what your writer hears.

At the beginning of "In a Mountain Pass" the horns call us to attention as dawn breaks and snowflakes start to fall. We set off, joined by woodwinds, passing magnificent rocky landscapes before the snow stops and we pause at a frozen lake. The cor anglais admires the scene and the strings go skating to a sweeping, graceful melody in a languid waltz time. Our journey resumes, again under floating snowflakes, until we arrive and our guides bid us farewell.

We find ourselves "In the Village", where we overhear a conversation between a cor anglais and a viola in which they discuss exotic musical scales. They arrive at a market place where there is hustle and bustle, above which sellers of spices, silks and other oriental goods cry their wares. Our musicologists pass by, continuing their discussion, until they reach their destination.

This is "The Mosque", where we respectfully observe as the oboe calls woodwinds and horns to prayer and then leads them in a solemn chorale featuring some thrilling cadences.

We emerge from the mosque to find that "The Procession of the Sardar" is getting under way. A march tempo is established and instruments scurry to join the parade. There's an elephant, followed by snake charmers, and eventually a fanfare announces the Sardar himself. The word "Sardar", or "Sirdar", is of Persian origin, historically used as a royal or noble title across the Near and Middle East (and in space - Frank Herbert's "Dune" uses the derivation "Siridar" as the title for planetary rulers). The Sardar's splendid arrival is followed by a brief glimpse of his elegant, enigmatic wife, the Sardarni; and then the retinue marches magnificently on to a rousing stop.

- Did you like that? Try Alexander Borodin's "In the Steppes of Central Asia" or Khachaturian's Violin Concerto in D minor

Programme notes by The Jabberer

