

A Grand Tour

All aboard, for a tour of Europe that will be musically opulent, geographically eccentric and historically infeasible. While a well-resourced, adventurous and long-lived person born in the 1830s could have attended the first performances of all today's pieces, they wouldn't have done it in the same order as our programme, and they certainly couldn't have been at all the events depicted.

We start in Helsinki in 1900, where Jean Sibelius' *Finlandia* was composed as a covert call to resistance against the policy of the Russian czars to limit the special status of the Grand Duchy of Finland and fully integrate it politically, militarily, and culturally into the empire. In order to avoid Russian censorship the piece had to be performed under false names including *Happy Feelings at the Awakening of Finnish Spring* and *A Scandinavian Choral March*. It would seem Russian censors were easily fooled, for audiences can very clearly hear the drama of oppression and the Finnish national struggle and then a serene hymn of faith and patience. Finland gained its independence following the Russian Revolution and the Great War but the hymn continues to serve as Finland's unofficial national anthem and has also been used as a Christian hymn in Britain and Italy.

Gustav Holst, on the other hand, spent the early 1900s earning a living playing trombone in a popular orchestra called the "White Viennese Band". He thought this "a wicked and loathsome waste of time", but Vaughan Williams was unsympathetic, saying that "the very worst a trombonist has to put up with is as nothing compared to what a church organist has to endure." Holst nevertheless remained under Vaughan Williams' influence and followed him into an interest in English folk song, leading to the first performance in 1910 of what Holst later described as "my first real success". *A Somerset Rhapsody* combines four English folk songs into a narrative of Somerset life. We start early in the morning mist, where the only person awake is a sheep shearer. Out comes the sun and along come some soldiers to disrupt the pastoral idyll. Through some discombobulating modulations they recruit a local lad, who is torn between military adventure and his lass but eventually departs as evening falls and our sheep shearer makes his way back home.

Back a few decades, or seven centuries, to Alexander Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*. This adapts the early Russian epic *The Lay of Igor's Host*, which recounts an incident from the campaign of the 12th-century prince Igor Svyatoslavich against invading Polovtsians (by today's geography Igor was actually Ukrainian; the Polovtsian empire lay across what is now southern Russian and Kazakhstan). Borodin embarked on this daunting project in 1869 with a cry of "He who is afraid of the wolf doesn't go into the woods!" but by the time he died eighteen years later, he left only a collection of fragments in various states of completion, to be assembled and filled out by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov for a first performance in 1890. Glazunov is said to have put the overture together from memory, having heard it played on the piano. The *Polovtsian Dances* which close Act II were among the completed sections.

What is happening at this point, is that following defeat in battle Igor and his handsome (of course) son Vladimir have been taken prisoner by their enemy, the proud and fierce (of course) Khan Konchak of the Polovtsian empire. The Khan has a beautiful (of course) daughter Konchakovna, with whom Vladimir is (of course) in love, but despite the great respect and honour which their fathers show to each other, young love appears doomed (don't worry, Act III will see them right). Anyway, the Polovtsians entertain their "guests" with a bit of a knees-up. There's an Introduction in which our woodwinds make everybody else jealous, then dances including the maidens' Gliding Dance and the men's Wild Dance.

We will all need a nice cup of tea after that. *Interval*

The play *L'Arlésienne*, by Alphonse Daudet, tells how a young man, Frédéri, comes to end his own life, and destroy several other people's, for unrequited love of a woman we never get to see. It met with little success at its first performance in Paris 1872; sophisticated Parisians could not rouse themselves to take an interest in misdirected passions and pointless deaths in bourgeois Provence. They did, however, like the incidental music by Georges Bizet, who was therefore motivated to extract a stand-alone concert Suite from it. This was so successful that his publishers had **Suite no. 2** cobbled together after the composer's death (at the age of thirty-seven) in 1875. It would seem, however, that the well was running a bit dry by then. The Pastorale (featuring a chorale originally sung by an offstage chorus) and the Intermezzo (featuring Vivette, the girl Frédéri ought to have married) are new settings of music from the play. But the Minuet is taken from another work altogether, Bizet's opera *La jolie fille de Perth*, and the final Farandole reprises music already used in the first Suite. This had in turn been adapted from a traditional Provençal Epiphany carol dating back to the thirteenth century.

By the mid-1840s Hungary's Franz Liszt, rock god colossus of the piano, had been striding across Europe for several years, hobnobbing with contemporary A-listers such as Berlioz, Chopin, the Schumanns and Wagner, doing admirable charitable work and carrying on with other people's wives. In 1847 he played gigs in Kiev, Turkey and Russia before retiring from the concert stage at the height of his pianistic powers. He also started work on his **Hungarian Rhapsody no. 2**, published in 1851 not so much a composition as a gauntlet thrown down to challenge other pianists. There were eventually to be nineteen such Rhapsodies, but this one remains the most well-known. It draws on two traditional dances, a serious and dramatic lassan (actually from Romania) and a lively, toe-tapping friska. The piano original is, gratuitously, in C sharp minor, but subsequent orchestrations, including this splendidly colourful one by Karl Müller Berghaus, take a more humane approach to key signatures. We begin with some melodramatic cape-swirling and lurch through a series of increasingly deranged tempo changes to a furious finale.