

## PROGRAM NOTES

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Monty Carter, Program Annotator

**Felix Mendelssohn** (1809-1847):

***The Hebrides Overture*** (1830)

You're just out of your teens and on a European excursion, becoming acquainted with the wider world, compliments of your generous dad. Out of Berlin, you and a buddy embark on the British Isles. You're especially enthralled by the Scottish language and landscape, and before long, you're hot on the trail of a Gaelic ghost, the warrior-hero Finn MacCumhaill. Finn's digs are in a cave on an island in unnavigable waters, so you have to row there in a skiff. Whew, you're too seasick to write in your travel journal at the moment, but that doesn't keep you from being in awe of the place.

Fingal's Cave is on the uninhabited island of Staffa, near Mull in the inner Hebrides of Scotland. Ancient and desolate, its Gaelic name, *Uamh-Binn*, means "cave of melody," after the eerie sounds that swirl in from the breaking waves.

You write your sister Fanny about this haunting place. That's what Felix Mendelssohn did. But to show her how much the Hebrides affected him, he enclosed 21 measures of music that came into his head when he was there. It was the opening theme of the *Hebrides Overture*, his first draft of which he presented to his dad as a birthday present a year and a half later.

**Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov** (1844-1908):

***The Tsarina in a Barrel at Sea*** from *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (1900)

While Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov is any orchestra lover's dream, what he most wanted was to be known as a composer of Russian opera, inhabiting historical dramas and epics, the folkloric surrealism of Nikolai Gogol, and the mystical magnetism of fairy tales.

Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* is based on the poem of the same name by Alexander Pushkin, Russia's most celebrated poet, whose centenary the composer commemorated with the work in 1900.

The Tsar is away at war when the Tsarina bears his son. Her jealous sisters alter the notification of the birth with a warning that the Tsarina had borne "neither a daughter nor a son, neither a mouse nor a frog, but a monster!" By the Tsar's decree, mother and child are put out to sea. Thanks to Rimsky-Korsakov, this fairy tale will have you by the tail.

(The barrel's a tight fit but it's conveniently waterproof, and oh! that baby's gonna grow up fast. Not a monster, mouse or frog, but he does get a go-around as a bumblebee. The buzz is that his soulmate is a Swan-Princess. And yeah, the Tsarina and her unbelievably gullable hubby make up, too.)

**Arnold Bax** (1883-1953):

*On The Seashore* (1908) orchestrated and edited by Graham Partlett

A Druid's dark foretelling, if you're buyin' what he's selling,  
Claims the newborn known as **Deirdre** is a threat:  
Many hearts she will enslave and many men send to their grave.  
Fall for Deirdre? That's a fall you will regret.

Another innocent infant unjustly dissed, tsk tsk. In this 12<sup>th</sup> century Irish love story, Deirdre grows up to be astonishingly beautiful, no fairy dust needed. King Conor falls in love with her, but Deirdre's heart belongs to Noísi. Deirdre and Noísi elope, and they live happily ever ... nope. Deadly rumpus the king brings, which propels our heroine to bring about tragic bloodshed of her own: there on the seashore she commits her ultimate act of defiance, shattering her head against a rock.

Passionate and prolific, the works of Sir Arnold Bax have surprisingly drifted away from concert halls in our day. But his seven symphonies and multiple tone poems, ballets, film scores, concertos and chamber works are zesty late-Romantic border-busters, well worth seeking out.

**Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976):

**Four Sea Interludes** from *Peter Grimes* (1948)

Dawn • Sunday Morning • Moonlight • Storm

The natural world does not know or care of human travails, but nature's ways sure seem to convey them. Both are hauntingly portrayed in *Four Sea Interludes* from Benjamin Britten's opera, *Peter Grimes*. He drew these selections out for a concert suite even before the opera's premier.

We're used to operas in which the chorus provides commentary on the story line or on the motives or conflicts of the characters. But in *Peter Grimes* it's the sea that gives commentary and signals the scene changes. As Thomas May has noted, Britten masterfully "modulates between outer landscape and inner psyche." In the music we sense human turmoil and nature's cyclic drama as one.

English composer Benjamin Britten, who started writing music at age 5, was just about the last composer brought up on live music alone. Dad refused to have a phonograph or even a radio in the house (we don't know why), but Mom hosted music soirees in their home, and that helped plenty. When he was 10, Benjamin heard his first 20<sup>th</sup>-century tone poem: *The Sea*, by Frank Bridge. Britten was "knocked sideways" by it, as he later said. So began an extraordinary journey, a diverse and self-aware artistic life.

**Claude Debussy** (1862-1918):

*La Mer* (1905)

*De l'aube à midi sur la mer*

*Jeux de vagues*

*Dialogue du vent et de la mer*

Musical masterpieces are all the more exquisite when experienced in live performance. You, dear audience, know this – and thanks for spreading the word! You *engage* with it when it is unfolding before you. You observe it with your eyes and ears. You follow and anticipate. We love it when you do this, for we love engaging with *you*.

The richest personal engagement with the music of Debussy, however, is passive. The tone colors, textures and tonalities play a similar role that *light* does in the Impressionist paintings to which his music is often compared. No attempts needed to predict its progressions or pinpoint its threads, the music simply asks that you let it inhabit you and carry you along.

Claude Debussy told a friend, “You may not have known that I was destined for a sailor’s life, and it was only by chance that fate led me in another direction.” To Debussy the sea was “my old friend ... it is always endless and beautiful. It is really the thing in nature which best puts you in your place.”

*La Mer* certainly puts its listeners in a beautiful place. Its movements translate as: *From Dawn to Noon on the Sea*; *The Play of the Waves*; and *Dialogue of the Wind and Sea*.

**Jacques Ibert** (1890-1962):

*Escales* (Ports of Call) (1830)

Rome – Palermo. *Calme*

Tunis – Nefta. *Modéré, très rythmé*

Valencia. *Animé*

Jacques Ibert’s father was a financier who wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. But mom was a musician who snuck their boy treats in the form of violin and piano lessons. Jacques worked for his dad for a couple of years after high school, but then he left to attend the Paris Conservatoire.

Dad was none too pleased about it and withdrew financial support. But this helped more than hurt his son’s endeavors, for the skills Jacques honed to pay the bills did much to stake his claim as a composer. He worked as a collaborative pianist, a pop songster and, like many of our favorite 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, an improviser of background music for silent films. He would later write over 60 film scores for sound movies.

Ibert’s life and work were profoundly impacted by the First and Second World War. He had a stint in the French Navy in the middle of his Paris Conservatoire years. The tranquil, chic and lively movements of *Escales* were inspired by his experiences in the Mediterranean, and helped lead to his appointment as director of the French Academy in Rome, a most fruitful time in his life as an artistic ambassador. That was dashed by

World War II, and his music was banned in France by the Nazi-allied Vichy government. When peace at last returned to Europe, Jacques Ibert and his music returned to their happy dual life in France and Italy.