

Carson City Symphony
April 29, 2012, "Science and Wonder" Program
with Stephen Caplan, oboe, and Carson Chamber Singers

Program Notes by Steve Anthenien

Also Sprach Zarathustra (Introduction) - Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Richard Strauss is considered one of the foremost composers and conductors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His tone poems (descriptive symphonies), including *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, *Don Juan*, and *Death and Transfiguration*, and his operas, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Salome*, etc., are staples of the repertoire.

The son of a renowned horn player, Strauss was producing masterful compositions while still a teenager. He completed *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in 1896, after the philosophical novel written by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). The music is divided into nine segments, each titled after a chapter of Nietzsche's book.

The introductory segment, "Dawn," entered popular culture when Stanley Kubrick chose to include it in the soundtrack of his 1968 science fiction film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Instantly recognizable, the twenty-two measures of soaring, majestic music have been adapted to a variety of commercial purposes, today presented in its (nearly) original form.

Polovtsian Dances - Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)

Borodin's music is typically tuneful, and the *Polovtsian Dances*, drawn from his opera *Prince Igor*, is no exception. His music was appropriated for the 1953 musical *Kismet*, earning Borodin a posthumous Tony Award. *A Stranger in Paradise*, a vocal arrangement based on one of the melodies of *Polovtsian Dance #17*, spent time at the top of the pop music charts of the time.

A chemist by profession, Borodin was a dedicated amateur composer and cellist. After postdoctoral studies in Germany, he returned to Russia and became part of a group of composers known as the "Mighty Handful." Under their tutelage, Borodin abandoned a conservative, antiquated style of writing and developed his distinctive compositional voice.

Borodin began *Prince Igor* in 1869 and left it unfinished at his death. The *Polovtsian Dances* portion was completed in 1879, arranged for orchestra by fellow member of the "Mighty Handful" Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and quickly became a concert favorite.

O Magnum Mysterium - Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943)

Born in Colfax, Washington, to Danish parents, Morten Lauridsen is the most frequently performed of America's choral music composers. He has been a professor of music at the University of Southern California for over thirty years. He is the recipient of numerous honors, including the National Medal of Arts, several honorary doctorates, and was named an "American Choral Master" by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Lauridsen wrote *O Magnum Mysterium* in 1994 for the Los Angeles Master Chorale, during his term as their composer in residence. The composer labored to trim the piece down to its musical essentials: “O Magnum was one of the most difficult pieces for me to write, even though it is a very direct piece. I kept whacking away and eliminating other thoughts that ...were extraneous...” The result is very beautiful, and very approachable music.

***How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place, from A German Requiem -
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)***

Brahms was both one of the finest composers of the Romantic period, and a virtuoso pianist. He was very popular and influential during his lifetime; noted conductor Hans von Bulow compared him favorably with Bach and Beethoven. Brahms was a perfectionist, destroying many of his compositions and refusing to publish others, but the body of work that has survived is highly regarded and frequently performed. His compositions reflect traditional structure and strict compositional discipline, while introducing new approaches to harmony, melody, and rhythm.

Brahms began composition of *A German Requiem, To The Words Of The Holy Scriptures* in 1865, soon after, and possibly as a reaction to, his mother’s death. Brahms assembled the words himself, taking them from a German-language Lutheran Bible rather than the Latin of the traditional Requiem Mass. He offered Clara Schumann a preview of the music, to which she commented: “The Requiem...is full of tender yet daring thoughts. I cannot feel clear as to how it will sound, but in myself it sounds glorious.”

How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place is a tranquil respite mid-point in the *Requiem*, understandably the most popular movement of a piece beloved by audiences and singers alike.

***The Heavens Are Telling, from The Creation (oratorio) -
Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809)***

Haydn was one of the finest, and certainly one of the most prolific composers of the classical period. Known as the “Father of the Symphony” he also made important contributions to the development of the string quartet, piano trio, and the sonata form. After a term as a boy soprano in the choir of Vienna’s St. Stephen’s cathedral, he taught himself composition through his work as an accompanist and study of music theory treatises and musical scores. He worked as a freelance musician and composer around Vienna before securing a series of court appointments, eventually securing an engagement at the court of Esterhazy in 1761 that he would retain the rest of his life.

Haydn considered *The Creation* to be his greatest work, high consideration given the superb quality of his compositions. *The Creation* was completed in 1797, its composition apparently inspired by Handel’s oratorios that he had heard during his highly successful trips to London in the early 1790’s. The work enjoyed instant success; its public performances in Vienna sparked near-riots as patrons jostled for tickets, and soon was being performed in every part of Europe and in the United States.

Oboe Concerto #2 in C - Wilhelm (William) Herschel (1738-1822)

While William Herschel spent nearly thirty years of his adult life as a working musician and composer, his fame rests on his work as an astronomer. Known as the “Father of Astronomy“, his many discoveries included the planet Uranus and two of its moons, infrared radiation in sunlight, and two moons of the planet Jupiter.

Born in Hanover, Germany, Herschel emigrated to Great Britain at the age of nineteen and first found work as a music copyist. Having studied the oboe with his father, a military band oboist, Herschel soon added violin, harpsichord and organ proficiencies to his resume, and was retained for a succession of orchestral positions while composing twenty-five symphonies, several concerti, and a variety of other works. Why would Herschel abandon a successful music career for astronomy? As Harvard University astronomer Owen Gingrich put it, it “was a clear choice between competence and genius.”

Herschel’s musical career occurred in a period when two styles of composition overlapped, the static, sentimental *Galant*, its flowing melodies underpinned by simple accompaniments, and a more intense, dramatic style that looked ahead to Beethoven and Romanticism, later referred to as *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress). Concerto #2 in C is written in the *Galant* style, with clearly defined melodies and a conservative harmonic structure. The music is in three movements, an opening *Allegro*, offering the soloist opportunities for brilliant displays of technique, a gentle middle movement, and a lively *Rondo* conclusion.

Oblivion - Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

Born in Argentina, raised in the musical melting pot of New York City before returning to his native country, Astor Piazzolla revolutionized the tango as a compositional form, incorporating jazz and classical idioms into what he called *nuevo tango*. He was also a virtuoso *bandoneon* player, an Argentine/Uruguayan instrument somewhat similar to an accordion.

Piazzolla was spotted playing *bandoneon* by renowned pianist Artur Schnabel, who encouraged him to study composition with noted Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera. Ginastera, in turn, persuaded Piazzolla to enter a composition contest, and by winning, he was granted a scholarship to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Boulanger quickly convinced Piazzolla to abandon his formal compositions, which she felt lacked originality, and explore his musical roots. He returned to Argentina, formed an octet, and developed his *nuevo tango* style of composition.

Piazzolla lived in Italy periodically during the Argentine dictatorship of the 1970’s and 1980’s, and in 1984 composed *Oblivion* as music for a film by Mario Biondi entitled *Enrico IV*. *Oblivion* is written in the style of a *milonga*, a song form that predates the tango. It has become one of Piazzolla’s most popular works, and has been adapted for performance by a variety of solo instruments.