

## Warren Philharmonic: “Stories, Dances, Tricks and Treats” (November 1)

by Robert Rollin



Under talented conductor Susan Davenny Wyner, the Warren Philharmonic presented a vibrant, imaginative family concert called *Stories, Dances, Tricks and Treats* at Christ Episcopal Church in Warren last Sunday, November 1. The opening half more than justified this title and contained a delightful mélange of programmatic compositions. Manuel De Falla’s *El Sombrero de tres picos* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*), *Ballet Suite No. 1* and Alexander Borodin’s *Polovetsian Dances* from the opera *Prince Igor*, the most substantial pieces, received particularly fine performances and enlivened the afternoon.

De Falla’s four-movement ballet tells the story of an old, but intelligent miller, his beautiful and loving young wife, and the corregidor, or town governor, who becomes infatuated with the miller’s wife while wearing his three-sided hat, the symbol of his office. The first movement, Introduction – Afternoon, exposes the narrative and the protagonists. The colorful orchestration includes an elaborate timpani part, a charming solo clarinet accompaniment figure, attractive flute and French horn solos, and a bassoon solo accompanied by pizzicato strings to represent the corregidor.

The second movement, Dance of the Miller’s Wife, is a *Fandango*, an attractive and energetic Spanish dance in three-four time. The two oboe solos — the second in the darker, low range — were lovely, and the piccolo solo sparkled. The Corregidor, the third movement, interrupts her dance with a pompously serious bassoon portrait. In the fourth movement, The Grapes, the miller’s wife pretends to offer him the fruit, but suddenly dances out of reach before he can kiss her. The performance was lovely and the tutti sections included plentiful use of xylophone, cymbals, and timpani.

*The Polovetsian Dances* came into Alexander Borodin's opera as a series of entertainments for the Russian Prince Igor while held captive in the Great Khan's court. These wonderfully orchestrated dances were source material for the musical *Kismet* by Robert Wright and George Forrest.

The opening includes entrancing horn, oboe, and flute solos, and imaginative contrapuntal treatment. The haunting melody, later turned into the popular song *Strangers in Paradise*, appears first in the principal oboe, and later in the English horn. A fine clarinet solo led to the full passage supported by multiple percussion. There was another appearance of the haunting oboe tune, followed by more tutti passages, and a strident crescendo leading to the powerful crash of hand cymbals at the close. The orchestra played the piece with poise, energy, and grace.

A visiting troupe of circus comedians attempting to attract an audience for their evening entertainment presented the Dance of the Comedians in Czech composer Bedřich Smetana's opera, *The Bartered Bride*. A host of coloristic percussion, including snare drum, bass drum, triangle, and cymbals, supported the short movement's vigorous texture. Trumpet and piccolo solos provided periodic relief.

Two short but interesting pieces represented American music of different eras. Leroy Anderson composed *The Syncopated Clock* in 1945 for Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra while on a short furlough from his activities in American Army Intelligence. It contrasted the constant regular ticking of a wind-up alarm clock, represented by the use of a wood block, with intriguingly simple-yet-subtle orchestral syncopations. The performance was excellent.

Rapper, hip-hop artist, singer, and composer Pharrell Williams's hugely popular song "Happy" was part of the 2013 soundtrack for the film *Despicable Me II*. Though one might argue that the orchestrated version lacked some of the vitality of the original, it made solid use of the brass and percussion section. At the end, the hand clapping by the musicians and audience was engaging.

The second half of the concert segued to vocal music, including Johann Sebastian Bach's cantata, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, BWV 191 and John Rutter's setting of *When the Saints Go Marching In*. The same music of the *Gloria* appears as three sections in Bach's *Mass in b*. The movements follow the tripartite pattern of Chorus-Duet-Chorus. Soloists Marian Vogel, soprano, and Eric Bower, tenor, stood in front of the orchestra and sang very effectively in the more thinly scored middle movement. The chorus stood behind the orchestra and up against the rear wall. Unfortunately, a hexagonal ceiling directly above the chorus muffled the group's sound and made it impossible to hear the

contrapuntal voices clearly in the two full choral movements. The music was certainly well prepared, but the lack of a reflective shell behind the chorus hurt the performance.

John Rutter's *When the Saints Go Marching In* offered nice orchestral syncopation in the accompaniment that supported the chorus well. Also notable were the lively clarinet and trombone obbligatos, eerie tremolos in the cellos to tone paint the word "moon," nice variety in alternating the women's and men's sections and then rejoining them later, and interesting tempo changes. However, the totality seemed to lose continuity in the wake of its variety. One longed for the simpler yet statelier New Orleans funeral marching band version.

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