

Erich Korngold: *Suite Op. 23*

In 1909 a 12-year old Erich Korngold composed a ballet-pantomime, *Der Schneemann*. In 1910 it was performed publicly to acclaim, and Vienna and all of Europe were talking about the century's new Mozart. The young Korngold, with very little formal training in music – but with the personal stamp of approval from Sibelius, Mahler, and Puccini – was at the beginning of a life in music. We still remember him today for the 22 incredible film scores he wrote in Hollywood during the golden age of film music, but we mostly have forgotten that he composed 42 pieces of “serious” music and always claimed this was where his heart really lay.

In 1917, the Austrian concert pianist Paul Wittgenstein was shot in the right arm during the assault on Ukraine during World War I. His arm had to be amputated, but during his time in a prisoner-of-war camp in Siberia, he vowed to continue his career. Wittgenstein (his younger brother Ludwig was the famous philosopher) came from a wealthy family, and so he set about commissioning piano concerti for the left hand alone. Britten, Hindemith, Ravel, Richard Strauss and other notable composers all wrote works for him. In 1923 Korngold also wrote a concerto for him and in 1930 the Op. 23 Suite.

While Korngold published 24 or 25 works before his first film score, many try to hear or analyze “movie music” into everything Korngold wrote. A renowned concert pianist recently claimed that the first, third, and fourth movements of the 1930 *Suite* were “inspired by Erol Flynn,” perhaps not realizing that Korngold hadn't even met Flynn, and possibly never even seen a swashbuckler, until he was signed to write the score for *Captain Blood* in 1935.

As a Hollywood composer, Korngold was always given an immense amount of freedom. So similarities between his pre-Hollywood “serious” music and his film scores were more likely the result of Korngold bringing 27 years of his previous compositional technique and well-developed composer's ear to Hollywood. The techniques that created his earlier work happened to fit perfectly with what films needed at the time.

Coming at this from the other direction, then, it may not be so silly after all to hear a bit of swashbuckling in the first, third and fifth movements of the *Suite*. And then we might also hear Richard Strauss in “a nostalgic recollection of the waltz” in the second movement. And perhaps we can hear a recollection of Mahler's “transcendent, sublime” music in the fourth movement. After all, who wants to argue with Leon Fleisher?

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Ludwig van Beethoven: *Violin Sonata # 4 in A minor*

It wasn't an innovation for Ludwig van Beethoven to have built pieces by repeating small bits of music in harmonically and rhythmically varied sequences. To write in this manner was more or less idiomatic to Beethoven's time and place, and was especially characteristic of the music of Joseph Haydn (who was one of Beethoven's teachers). However, such profoundly piecewise works as Beethoven's — works set up up almost as though they ought to be taken apart, or as though they might fly apart on their own — can even now sound odd and experimental. This sense of a piece being reduced to its most essential bits is strong in the Op. 23 Sonata for Piano and Violin.

Perhaps the clearest example of this profound reductionism is in a short interjection in the first movement, which sounds (no exaggeration) like this: ‘da-dum, da-dum, da-dum’. In the first movement, this bit of music is just an aside, but from its humble origins it goes on to become the germ of the entire second movement, and even sticks around a bit in the third. The third movement is another odd mix of construction and destruction: it is, quite conventionally, in rondo form, but rather than expanding upon the rondo theme between its statements, Beethoven seems to pull apart the music, lose the forest for the trees, or even dodge momentarily into the music of previous

movements. Each reappearance to the theme comes to seem more like a rising-from-the-ashes than like a return-of-the-familiar.

There is something peculiar and upside-down about the whole piece, with its mirrored and argumentative risings and fallings; in some ways, it seems almost to move backward, beginning furiously presto and disappearing at its end like a genie into a bottle. The work is from fairly early in his career (just after the First Symphony and the first set of string quartets), and contains all of the singular orneriness of method and mood that would establish not only his name, but also a new role for composers, composition, music, and artists in the European tradition.

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Antonín Dvořák: *Dumky Trio*

In the first edition of the “Dumky” Trio in 1894, the German publisher N. Simrock added a footnote at the bottom of the first page of the score explaining,

“Dumky” [plural of “dumka”] is a Little Russian [i.e., Ukrainian] word and cannot be translated. It is a kind of folk poetry often found in Russian literature, usually of a melancholic character.

We might best call this the tip of the iceberg. Despite the publisher feeling the need to provide an explanation, it’s not as if Dvořák was the first to have composed a dumka. There were dumkas by many other composers that appeared in the late 19th century, including ones by Chopin, Liszt, Borodin, Balakirev, Tchaikovsky. But before the mid-19th century, the word “dumka” associated either with published or folk music was virtually non-existent.

In general usage, *duma* (pl. *dumy*), as well as its diminutive *dumka* (pl. *dumky*), means “thought” or “contemplation” in many Slavic languages. (It was taken up as the name for a congress or deliberative body in the former Soviet Union. But we will ignore the politician and follow the bard.) More of a poetic conceptual scheme than a musical form, the earlier *dumas* that inspired the creation of *dumkas* were lyrico-epic works of folk origin about events in the Cossack period of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The early *dumas* were narratives concerned with military confrontation. But rather than celebrating a victory or promoting courage in battle as one might expect, they were infused with religious and moralistic elements. They were usually concerned with the struggles of the Cossacks and the Eastern Orthodox Church against enemies of different faiths. Significant losses in these struggles account for the consistently dark tone of the *dumas* – somber, funereal, brooding. After the Cossack Hetmanate was dissolved by Catherine II of Russia, the singing of *dumas* began to die out, another tradition threatened with extinction.

Then in 1871 there began a series of scholarly papers accompanied by performances of traditional *dumas* at musicology conferences in Kiev and Saint Petersburg (the late 19th-century saw the birth of ethnomusicology). The performances were by one of the last of the bards, Ostap Veresai. Many composers either would have heard Veresai’s *dumas* or seen transcriptions of them.

At some point in this transfer from itinerant bard to cosmopolitan composer, *duma* became *dumka*. The epic *duma*’s form was characterized by uneven periods governed by the unfolding of a story. Each period was a finished, syntactical whole conveying a complete thought. But at this point, shifting to the relatively sudden appearance of *dumkas* mid-century, we enter a no man’s land of musicological conjecture. That is, we have no idea *exactly how* it happened, but we can make an educated guess.

As epic poetry, a traditional *duma*’s length is supported by its story line floating on a music that supports mood changes in the text shifting between darker and lighter. The musical mood-changes and other characteristic

features can be transferred to a more abstract (non-verbal) musical form, but not the epic length which would be excessive without the story line. So the conjecture is that composers taken with the idea of the *duma* around 1870 selected a period or two from the *duma*, retaining the *duma*'s idea of mood changes within the period resulting in a "little *duma*," a "shorter *duma*" – a *dumka*. We now return to consideration of Dvořák's chain of *dumkas* that comprise the *Trio*.

Attempts have been made to force the structure of the *Dumky Trio* into a classical form such as the sonata by treating the first three *dumkas* as the "first movement" and the final three *dumkas* as movements 2, 3, and 4. Some listeners may try to follow along as if it were a giant quasi-rondo form such as A–B–A–C–D–A– None of these attempts at force fitting work because, in the end, this work is simply a collection of six *dumkas* that take us through *twenty-five tempo changes* (or mood shifts if you prefer): six complete thoughts that add up to a story told with nothing but tones. So given what we know about the history of the *dumka*'s predecessor, the *duma*, we're tempted to ask if Dvořák may have been attempting to regain the epic stature of the old *duma* with each of the six *dumkas* representing a period in an epic *duma*.

There are two primary ways that Dvořák expresses the alternation of darker and lighter moods between the sections in each *dumka*. One is by alternating minor and major modes; for example, E minor makes a turn to E major then back again and so on. The other way is by alternating slower and quicker tempos. At times he uses these two by alternating a slower tempo in a minor mode (dark mood) with a quicker tempo in a major mode (light mood). At other times he mixes these up by combining slower with major (for dark or light) and contrasting that with sections that are quicker and in minor (for light or dark). The result is surprisingly coherent – a whole of contrasts. But what is the plot if these six *dumkas* are not separate, but add up to an epic "Duma" Trio? As so often in music, the story, if there is one, is the listener's to conjure.

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