

Overture, *Le corsaire*, Opus 21 (1844)

Hector Berlioz was born in La Côte-Saint-André, Isère, France, on December 11, 1803, and died in Paris, France, on March 8, 1869. The first performance of *Le corsaire* took place on January 19, 1845 at the Cirque Olympique in Paris, with the composer conducting.

The first performance by the Charlotte Symphony took place on April 12, 1975 at Dana Auditorium, Queens University of Charlotte, with Jacques Brouman conducting. The fifth and most recent performance set was with North Carolina Dance Theatre on May 11 and 12, 2001 in the Belk Theater, with David Tang conducting.

The stories behind the compositions of Hector Berlioz are often as captivating as the music. In February of 1831, Berlioz, while en route to Rome, made a voyage from Marseilles to Livorno. The journey almost ended in disaster when a raging storm nearly capsized the vessel. During the voyage, Berlioz made the acquaintance of a “Venetian, an underbred fellow, who spoke abominable French, (who) averred that he had commanded Lord Byron’s corvette during the poet’s adventurous excursions in the Adriatic and the Grecian Archipelago.”

While in Rome that summer, Berlioz spent hours in St. Peter’s Basilica, immersed in Byron’s popular 1814 pirate tale, *The Corsair*: “I sat drinking in that burning poetry. I followed the Corsair in his desperate adventures; I adored that inexorable yet tender nature—pitiless, yet generous—a strange combination of apparently contradictory feelings; love of woman, hatred of his kind.”

While in Rome, Berlioz learned that his fiancée, Camille Moke, had married another man. The feverish Berlioz planned to avenge his dishonor with the murder of the offending parties and his own suicide. The intricate plot, which involved Berlioz disguising himself as a chambermaid (!), ended when the composer threw himself into the Mediterranean and was “yanked out like a fish.” Berlioz spent three weeks recuperating in Nice, where he made the first sketches of what would ultimately become his *Corsaire* Overture.

In 1844, Berlioz returned to Nice to recover from an illness. There, Berlioz completed the first version of the Overture, which he entitled *Le tour de Nice (The Tower of Nice)*, in commemoration of an ancient ruin that captivated his imagination. The premiere of *The Tower of Nice* took place in Paris on January 19, 1845, with Berlioz conducting. The performance was relatively unsuccessful.

While in London from 1851-2, Berlioz revised the Overture. He called the revised composition *Le corsaire rouge*, a reference to James Fenimore Cooper’s *Red Rover*, another work Berlioz greatly admired. Finally, Berlioz shortened the title to the now-familiar *Le corsaire (The Corsair)*.

Berlioz launches his *Corsaire* Overture with two sharp chords, followed by scurrying violins and chirping winds. A lyrical interlude (*Adagio sostenuto*) leads to the main *Allegro* section, featuring a reprise of the opening violin and woodwind figures, followed by the introduction of the bold descending and ascending main theme. The violins present a contrasting lyrical theme, derived from material first presented in the *Adagio*

section. But for the most part, the *Corsaire* Overture proceeds in heroic fashion right to the fanfares and C-major chords that cap the work.

8 minutes

Suite from *Appalachian Spring* (1945)

Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 14, 1900, and died in North Tarrytown, New York, on December 2, 1990. The first performance of the ballet *Appalachian Spring* took place at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., on October 30, 1944. The first performance of the Suite from *Appalachian Spring* took place at Carnegie Hall in New York City on October 4, 1945, with Artur Rodzinski conducting the New York Philharmonic.

The first performances by the Charlotte Symphony were on March 8 & 9, 1967 at Ovens Auditorium and in Gaffney, S.C. with Richard Cormier conducting. The sixth and most recent performance set was on May 12 & 13, 200 in the Belk Theater, with George Hanson conducting.

In 1943, the legendary American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham accepted a commission to stage new works for the Festival of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, held at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. For that event, Graham, in turn, commissioned music by three prominent contemporary composers—Paul Hindemith, Darius Milhaud, and Aaron Copland.

It was Graham who chose the title for Copland's piece—*Appalachian Spring*, taken from the heading of a poem by Hart Crane. Copland began work on the score in June of 1943. Because of various delays, the premiere of *Appalachian Spring* (as well as of the Hindemith and Milhaud ballets) did not occur until October 30, 1944. Graham and Eric Hawkins danced the principal roles.

Copland scored the original ballet for a chamber group of thirteen instruments. Subsequently, Copland arranged a Suite from *Appalachian Spring* for a larger ensemble. The Suite received its premiere in 1945. That same year, *Appalachian Spring* won both the Pulitzer Prize for music and the Music Critics Circle of New York award for outstanding theatrical work of the 1944-5 season.

Appalachian Spring takes place in the early part of the 19th century, in the hills of Pennsylvania. The story concerns the wedding of a young farmer and his bride.

The Suite is divided into eight sections, performed without pause. The composer offered the following program notes for the Suite's 1945 premiere:

I. Very Slowly. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.

2. Fast. Sudden burst of unison strings in A-major arpeggios starts the action. A sentiment both exalted and religious gives the keynote to this scene.
3. Moderate. Duo for the bride and her Intended—scene of tenderness and passion.
4. Quite fast. The revivalist and his flock. Folksy feelings—suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.
5. Still faster. Solo dance of the Bride—presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear and wonder.
6. Very slowly (as at first). Transition scenes reminiscent of the introduction.
7. Calm and flowing. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer-husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme. The theme, sung by a solo clarinet, was taken from a collection of Shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and published later under the title *The Gift to be Simple*. The melody I borrowed and used almost literally is called "Simple Gifts."

'Tis the gift to be simple
 'Tis the gift to be free,
 'Tis the gift to come down
 Where we ought to be.
 And when we find ourselves
 In the place just right
 'Twill be in the valley
 Of love and delight.
 When true simplicity is gain'd
 To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd
 To turn, turn will be our delight,
 'Till by turning, turning we come out right.

8. Moderate. Coda. The Bride takes her place among her neighbors. At the end the couple are left "quiet and strong in their new house." Muted strings intone a hushed, prayer-like passage. We hear a last echo of the principal theme sung by the flute and a solo violin. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.

23 minutes

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-Flat Major, Opus 73 ("Emperor") (1809)

Ludwig van Beethoven was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna, Austria, on March 26, 1827. The premiere of the "Emperor" Piano

Concerto took place in Leipzig, Germany, on November 28, 1811, with Friedrich Schneider as soloist and Johann Philipp Christian Schulz conducting.

The first performance by the Charlotte Symphony took place on April 4, 1941 in the Armory Auditorium with Guillermo S. de Roxlo conducting. The thirteenth and most recent performance was on October 5, 2002 in the Belk Theater with Christof Perick conducting.

The “Emperor” Piano Concerto is stirring testimony to Ludwig van Beethoven’s ability, through the sheer force of will and genius, to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Beethoven, a fiery virtuoso, had previously stunned Vienna with brilliant performances of his keyboard compositions, including four concertos for piano and orchestra. By the time the composer began work on his E-flat Concerto in 1808, however, Beethoven’s increasing deafness had made public appearances all but impossible. The “Emperor” is the only Beethoven Piano Concerto not premiered by the composer himself.

Beethoven completed his Fifth Piano Concerto in 1809, the year Napoleon invaded Vienna. In May, Napoleon’s forces bombarded the city. Beethoven’s lodgings stood directly in the line of fire. He took refuge in a basement of another home. During the massive shelling, Beethoven tried to protect the last remnants of his hearing by covering his ears with pillows.

The succeeding French occupation brought physical and economic chaos. On July 26, 1809, Beethoven wrote to his publisher: “Normally I should now be having a change of scene and air—The levies are beginning this very day—What a destructive, disorderly life I see and hear around me, nothing but drums, cannons and human misery in every form....”

Through all of this turmoil and despair, Beethoven never lost his fierce sense of independence and rebellious spirit. Once, during the occupation, a friend spied Beethoven in a café. The composer stood behind a French officer, shaking his fist and proclaiming, “If I were a general and knew as much about strategy as I do counterpoint, I’d give you fellows something to think about.” And there is an undeniable pride and heroism in the E-flat Concerto, a work that refuses to capitulate to the misery Beethoven suffered during its composition.

The Concerto’s nickname, “Emperor,” was first used after Beethoven’s death. It relates not to any specific political figure, but to the work’s majestic character. Beethoven composed no more piano concertos during the remaining 18 years of his life. Nevertheless, the “Emperor” is as fitting a summation of the composer’s achievements in the realm of the Piano Concerto as is the immortal Ninth in the symphonic repertoire.

The grand opening movement (*Allegro*) begins in dramatic fashion as the orchestra’s imposing chords are answered by the elaborate flourishes of the soloist. The heroic mood of the opening measures pervades the remainder of the movement. The beautiful slow second movement (*Adagio un poco mosso*) features a lovely melody, introduced by the

muted violins. Toward the conclusion of the movement, one of several masterstrokes in this work creates a moment of incomparable magic. After a sudden and unexpected shift from B to B-flat, the soloist quietly entices the listener with fragments of the principal theme of the spirited finale, which follows without pause (*Rondo: Allegro*). Beethoven adds a touch of mystery just before the closing measures, with the pianist accompanied only by the timpani. Suddenly, a series of ascending flourishes by the soloist leads to an athletic restatement of the principal theme, as Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto reaches its triumphant conclusion.

38 minutes

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer