

***Symphony in B-flat Major, Op. 18, No. 2***

**Johann Christian Bach (1735–1782)**

Written: 1775

Movements: Three

Style: Classical

Duration: Ten minutes

Johann Sebastian Bach fathered twenty children: seven with his first wife (and cousin) Maria Barbara, and thirteen with his second, Anna Magdalena. Johann Christian was Sebastian's youngest son. He studied music with his father in Leipzig. When the old man died, J.C. moved to Berlin to study with his half-brother Carl Philipp Emanuel. When he was nineteen, Johann Christian went to Italy, converted to Roman Catholicism, and became the organist at the Milan Cathedral. Seven years later, he moved to London to write opera for the King's Theatre. Of all the sons of Johann Sebastian Bach who became composers, Johann Christian was the most famous. The fickle English taste soon tired of J. C. Bach's music. When he died, he was deeply in debt and nearly forgotten—except by those few who recognized his importance. "You have no doubt heard that the 'English' Bach has died? What a loss to the world of music!" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote to his father.

J. C. Bach wrote "symphonies" at the time that composers were wrestling with the idea that purely orchestral music could exist outside of opera. Instrumental introductions at the theater, designed to quiet the noisy crowd and get them seated for the show, were often called "overtures," but also "sinfonies." Italian opera sinfonias—spelling was all over the place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—came in three parts: a boisterous first part, a slower middle part, and then a quicker, often dance-like, third. Eighteenth-century symphonies were either opera overtures, or overtures without the opera. A collection of six symphonies by J. C. Bach, published as Opus 18, is a case in point. The second symphony is literally the overture to his opera *Lucio Silla* that he

wrote for the Mannheim court.

J. C. Bach was a transitional figure in terms of style. His music represents the movement away from the rigorous and complicated polyphony of his father to the “galant” style. As you will hear in tonight’s work, J. C. Bach’s music features clear and graceful melodies with simple accompaniment—immediately comprehensible and enjoyable. This is especially true of the melodies for the oboe in the second movement: Simple but ravishing.

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## ***Siegfried Idyll***

**Richard Wagner (1813–1883)**

Written: 1870

Style: Romantic

Duration: 18 minutes

Richard Wagner, that arch-romantic opera composer of the nineteenth century was a real “romantic.” Consider the gift he gave his new bride on her birthday. Roses? Candy? Diamonds? None of the above. Instead, when Cosima Wagner awoke on her birthday, she heard music. Wagner had assembled a small orchestra of musicians on the stairway leading to her bedroom. They were playing a piece that he composed just for the occasion. It combined themes from *Siegfried* (an opera he was working on) with the German lullaby, “Sleep My Child.”

Even before Wagner’s first wife, Minna, died in 1866, he was carrying on an affair with Cosima von Bülow. She was the daughter of the great pianist Franz Liszt and married to the conductor/pianist Hans von Bülow. When Minna died, Cosima and Wagner began living together in a villa in Tribschen, Switzerland. Cosima bore Wagner two daughters, Isolde and Eva, and in 1869, their son Siegfried was born. All of this happened before Cosima had even obtained her divorce from von Bülow! Richard and Cosima were finally married in 1870.

Wagner had another “son” named Siegfried, born a few years later. That other Siegfried is the opera of that name, the third of four operas composing *The Ring of the Nibelung*, the pinnacle of Wagner’s career. The Siegfried in the opera is the son of Sieglinde and Siegmund, the twin children of the god Wotan. Siegfried is the perfect innocent lad and “does not know what fear is.” He courageously slays the dragon Fafner. Only after entering a ring of fire and discovering Brünhilde—yet another child of Wotan—does Siegfried learn fear. It is Wotan’s hope that Siegfried and Brünhilde’s love will redeem the world.

As art imitates life, so Wagner’s operas revealed much about the man Wagner. Wagner’s illicit affair with Cosima and their illegitimate son Siegfried had their parallel in his monumental operas. Cosima was Wagner’s Brünhilde.

The *Siegfried Idyll*—originally called the *Triebtschen Idyll*—is both gentle morning music and an impassioned and intimate musical love letter. The orchestra, small enough to fit onto a staircase, reflects the intimacy. The music is full of passion, and Wagner’s bride immediately grasped the symbolism in her birthday present.

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***Overture (Suite) No. 1 in C Major, BWV 1066***

**Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)**

Written: circa 1717–23

Movements: Seven

Style: Baroque

Duration: 22 minutes

When Bach was writing for orchestra, symphonic form had not yet been invented. Instead, he wrote concertos or suites. Concertos feature a solo or group of instruments accompanied by an orchestra. Baroque composers wrote suites for individual instruments like the harpsichord or violin or for orchestras without soloists. Like the symphony, a suite has certain formal characteristics that set it apart from other types of music. The "road map" was fairly standard throughout the baroque era. They all begin with an *overture* (French for *opening*) and then proceed with a variety of dance-like movements. (Multi-movement orchestral suites were called *Overtures* during Bach's day, and the *Overture* began with a movement call an *overture*!)

Orchestral suite overtures have a specific form called the "French Overture." They begin slowly with the orchestra playing "dotted" or "long-short" rhythms. The overall character of this opening is stately and dignified. The second part of the overture is much faster with a lilting rhythm. Each section of the orchestra enters one after another in a sort of fugue. The oboes and bassoons alternate with the strings in sharing the limelight. Bach extends the overture by returning to the slow opening.

The sorts of dance movements that follow the French Overture can vary quite a lot and each dance has its own character. In the *First Orchestra Suite*, the first dance is a *Courante*—a stately dance in triple meter. A pair of dignified *Gavottes* in duple time follow. The second *gavotte* features the oboes. The following *Forlane* is a stylized version of an Italian dance that migrated to France. A pair of *menuets* in triple meter come next. The set of *bourées* are much

more boisterous in character. Again, the second *bourée* features the woodwinds. The suite ends with a set of vigorous *passepieds*, a quicker sort of menuet.

The exact dates of composition for Bach's orchestral suites are unknown, but there is good evidence he wrote them between 1717 and 1723, when he was in the employment of Prince Leopold at Anhalt-Cöthen (north of Leipzig, Germany). Leopold was a cultured young man. According to Bach, "He loved music, he was well acquainted with it, he understood it."

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***Symphony No. 1 in D Major, Op. 25***  
**Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)**

Written: 1917

Movements: Four

Style: 20th Century Russian

Duration: Sixteen minutes

1917 was a heady year in Russia. The Great War was raging. There was a revolution in February resulting in the Czar's abdication. At Sebastopol, the Black Sea fleet mutinied. There were strikes and antiwar marches. Lenin came back to Russia after a ten-year exile. There was the October revolution. And Sergei Prokofiev had one of his most productive years as a composer. Strangely, very little of his music from this time portrays the political turmoil raging about him. In this remarkable year, he wrote his *Third* and *Fourth Piano Sonatas*, the *Visions Fugitive* for piano, his beloved *Classical Symphony* and the *First Violin Concerto*.

Prokofiev was the “bad boy” of the Russian musical scene in pre-revolutionary Russia. The press referred to him as “being kind of an ugly growth on Russian music.” At a concert of his music, the great Russian pianist Nicolai Medtner remarked, “If this is music, then I am no musician.” His Opera *The Gambler*, which was due to premiere in 1917, was shelved. The reason: “While this cacophony of sounds, with its incredible intervals and enharmonic tones, may be very interesting to those who love powerful musical sensations, it is completely uninteresting to the singers, who in the course of a whole season have scarcely managed to learn their parts.”

His *Symphony No. 1* stands in marked contrast to those works that gave him such a bad reputation. He wrote it when he was summering in the countryside near Petrograd.

I had purposely not had my piano moved to the country because I wanted to establish the fact that thematic material worked out without a piano is better. . . . Composed in this fashion, the orchestral colors would, of necessity, be clearer and cleaner. . . . It

seemed to me that, were he alive today, Haydn, while retaining his style of composition, would have appropriated something from the modern. That's the kind of symphony I wanted to compose. When I saw that the idea was beginning to work, I called it 'Classical Symphony' . . . out of naughtiness and a desire to 'tease the geese' . . . Isn't it ironic that Prokofiev's "naughtiness" resulted in such an effortless, delightful work?

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