

Poet and Peasant Overture
Franz von Suppé (1819–1895)

Written: 1846

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Ten minutes

“Where have I heard that before?” you might ask yourself when encountering music of one of the “lesser-knowns” of orchestral music. With the music of Franz von Suppé, the answer would be: In those television cartoons you watched as a child. Maestro Bugs Bunny conducted Suppé’s *Morning Noon and Night in Vienna* in the classic *Baton Bunny*. Mickey Mouse conducted his *Light Cavalry Overture* in Walt Disney’s *Symphony Hour*; and Popeye needs a can of spinach to help him get through the *Poet and Peasant Overture* in *Spinach Overture*.

Franz von Suppé—his parents named him Francesco Ezechiele Ermengildo Cavalieredi Suppé Demelli—was born in what is now Croatia. His Belgian father was a civil servant for the Austrian Empire and his mother came from Vienna. His father discouraged Franz’s early musical talent and sent him to Padua to study law. There he saw the operas of and met Rossini, Verdi and Donizetti. When his father died, he went with his mother to her native Vienna and started studying music in earnest. He got an unpaid internship at one of the theaters in Vienna. Most of what he wrote early on couldn’t be called “opera” (or even “operetta”). Instead, it was instrumental overtures, incidental music, and the occasional song to accompany some sort of theatrical comedy. He wrote his first real “operetta” (*The Boarding School*) in 1860 and had his first international hit several years later with *The Beautiful Galatea*. He wrote nearly fifty operettas in all and is credited with establishing the genre of Viennese operetta, placing him on par with what Jacques Offenbach did for French and Gilbert and Sullivan did for English operettas. He died a very rich man.

Suppé wrote *Poet and Peasant* to accompany a production that he called a “comedy with songs.” It tells of the escapades of a broken-hearted poet as he vacations amongst the “country-folk” in the mountains. The brass play a solemn chorale to begin the overture. A solo cello gets an extended melody accompanied by the harp. The orchestra intrudes with a fiery section that dissolves into a waltz and then revs up for the required “flash-and-dash” ending.

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Selected Songs from "Des Knaben Wunderhorn"

Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)

Written: 1892–1899

Movements: XX **Please Confirm in your program**

Style: Romantic

Duration: XX minutes **Please Confirm in your program**

Gustav Mahler labeled himself a “holiday composer,” referring to his extraordinarily hectic conducting schedule that left him precious little time to write. In this and many other ways, Mahler was the epitome of the turn-of-the-century European artist—a jumbled mass of nerves and false expectations, a reluctant pioneer, seeking to extend the sphere of musical experience without disregarding its past. He is the last of the great Viennese symphonists, a direct musical descendant of Haydn and Beethoven. His life was full of pain and paradox. Born in Bohemia of Jewish parents, he lived most of his life in Vienna and eventually converted to Catholicism. Regarded as one of the foremost opera conductors of his day, he never completed an opera of his own. He made a particular impression on Brahms, but composed in the tradition of Liszt and Wagner. Traces of anxiety and pain are everywhere in Mahler’s music. It often focuses on the subject of death, or children, or even the death of children.

In 1887, Mahler was in the living room of the grandson of Carl Maria von Weber, the “father of German romantic opera.” He stumbled upon a book called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth’s Magic Horn). It is a collection of 723 German folk poems compiled in 1805. He spent the next twenty years writing music to accompany those poems. He wrote: “I have devoted myself heart and soul to that poetry (which is essentially different from any other kind of ‘literary poetry’ and might almost be called something more like Nature and Life—in other words, the sources of all poetry—than art) in full awareness of its character and tone.” Katarina Markovic describes the subject of the songs as “soldiers, children, animals, fishermen,

and saints all equally [partaking] in the relativity of sorrow, joy, humanity, humor, love, and cruelty.” Mahler’s protégé Bruno Walter explained the impact *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* had on Mahler:

When he finally read the Wunderhorn, he must have felt as though he was finding his home. Everything that moved him was there—nature, piety, longing, love, parting, night, the world of spirits, the tale of the mercenaries, the joy of youth, childhood, jokes, quirks of humor all pour out as in his songs.

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Overture to “The Gypsy Baron”
Voices of Spring, Op. 410
Pleasure Train Polka, Op. 281
On the Beautiful Blue Danube, Op. 314
Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825–1899)

Written: 1885, 1882, 1864, 1866

Style: Romantic

Duration: nine, six, three, and nine minutes

In *A Nervous Splendour*, Frederic Morton’s captivating history of late nineteenth-century Vienna, he describes Johann Strauss, Jr. as

the world's first pop celebrity, a composer-performer who set vast crowds pulsing, from Bosnia where peasants imitated his mustaches, to Boston where he had directed a choir of twenty thousand to celebrate the American republic's centennial. The continents waltzed to his fiddle.

Johann Strauss, Jr. was a prodigious composer, writing over 500 waltzes, polkas, quadrilles, and other types of dance music.

Strauss also wrote for the theater, completing nearly twenty operettas. With *The Gypsy Baron*, he hoped people might finally recognize him as something beyond a composer of “light” music. It never fulfilled that role. However, it was an immediate success at its premiere and with its succession of exotic gypsy melodies—and the requisite waltzes—it spawned many imitations. It also made Strauss a lot of money.

Strauss wrote his *Voices of Spring* to showcase the brilliant coloratura soprano Bianca Bianchi (a.k.a. Bertha Schwarz), who was a singer for the Vienna Court Opera. It was first performed at a charity ball for the “Emperor Franz Josef and Empress Elisabeth Foundation for Indigent Austro-Hungarian subjects in Leipzig.” It is a set of four waltzes with a very brief introduction. Instead of a coda, there is a return to the first waltz. A press review of the

premiere stated that “The composition, an almost uninterrupted sequence of coloratura, staccati and trills, is less a dance than a concert piece, which the coloratura singers of all languages will immediately take into their repertoire.” In fact, the waltz is often inserted into the famous party scene in act II of Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus*, and Bianchi inserted it as an additional aria in Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* and Delibe’s *Le Roi l’adit*.

Strauss wrote many of his shorter works for specific occasions. He wrote his *Pleasure Train Polka*—a *polka schnell* (fast polka)—for the Ball of the Association of Industrial Societies, which was held at the Imperial Palace. The *Südbahn*, the Austrian Southern Railway had just opened and offered “pleasure” trips into the countryside. Strauss’s music depicts ringing bells, the rattle of the rails, screeching brakes and, in the middle section, the conductor’s horn.

Strauss’s most popular set of waltzes by far is his *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*. He wrote it on commission from the Vienna Men's Choral Association—but how many have ever heard these waltzes sung? Strauss turned it into a purely orchestral work for the 1867 Paris Exhibition. Since then it has become Austria’s unofficial second national anthem and it has invaded popular culture. No New Year’s concert would be complete without it.

Perhaps Strauss did attain the status of a “serious” composer. That old curmudgeon Eduard Hanslick, perhaps one of the most influential music critics of the 19th century (he was famously conservative in his tastes—music history for him began with Mozart and culminated at Beethoven) called Strauss “Vienna’s most original genius . . . His melodic invention was inexhaustible. His rhythms were forever alive and changing.”