

PROGRAM NOTES

Written by Dr. Steven Errante

Kevin Kaska: Concerto for Harp and Orchestra (1999)

Kevin Kaska is an American composer, arranger, and conductor. Born in Seattle in 1972, he has extensive credits in film scores, having been associated with such films as *Interstellar* and *The Life of Pi*. He also has enjoyed numerous performances worldwide of his compositions, arrangements, and orchestrations.

His 1999 Concerto for Harp and Orchestra was commissioned by Boston Symphony Orchestra principal harpist Ann Hobson Pilot. Writing for harp is a specialized skill, and Kaska worked closely with Ann Hobson Pilot to refine the concerto so that it took maximum advantages of the harp's capabilities.

The work is set in three movements, the first of which is based on a lyrical melody first introduced by the harp over an undulating string accompaniment. Gradually, the rhythms become more agitated and the orchestra reached a high moment of tension punctuated by the strike of an anvil. After a passage for solo flute, the mood subsides to the tranquility of the beginning.

The second movement has a nod to composer and harpist Carlos Salzedo (1885 – 1961), who pioneered the use of creative techniques of sound production on the harp, and perhaps just as importantly, devised ways of notating them in print. In the central section of the second movement, the shimmering effects of rapidly stroking up and down the strings of the harp are heard above a sustained chord in the string section of the orchestra.

The third movement is more dance-like, but there is an expended cadenza that once again exploits extended playing techniques for the harp.

Sergei Prokofiev: Lieutenant Kije Suite (1934)

Ukrainian-born Sergei Prokofiev wrote the film score for the 1934 comedy *Lieutenant Kije*, about a fictitious military officer that owed his existence to an army clerk's slip of the pen. When the Emperor becomes aware of Kije, an entire life story has to be invented, but when the Emperor asks to meet Kije (by now promoted to General),

it turns out that Kije has unfortunately died. The Emperor gives him a state funeral (with an empty casket, of course).

Lieutenant Kije was an early example of a Soviet film with sound, and following its premiere the composer adapted the 16 film segments written for the small film studio orchestra into a fully worked-out suite for symphony orchestra. The suite has since become one of the composer's most popular works.

Several of the movement titles indicate events in Kije's life; the second movement "Song" is based on a folk tune called "The little grey dove is cooing," while the fourth movement "Troika Song" quotes an old Hussar tune. Prokofiev had heard saxophones in Paris and decided to give the tenor saxophone several prominent melodies in the suite.

Aram Khachaturian: Three Dances from *Gayene* (1943)

The ballet *Gayene* is another Soviet-era work. Khachaturian was an Armenian composer working within the constraints dictated by Josef Stalin, and the music is largely based on folk elements. The central character is an Armenian woman named Gayene, but for orchestral performances knowledge of the plot isn't essential because the same music was adapted for different scenarios over the years and redistributed into orchestral suites. Khachaturian had a gift for intense, memorable melodies clothed in colorful orchestration, and the dance element represented by rhythm is present in all three excerpts- "The Dance of the Young Maidens," "Lullaby," and the familiar "Sabre Dance."