

LEWISVILLE LAKE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Program Notes for Sept. 19, 2025 Concert

Overture to *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1858)

Mikhail Glinka (1804-1957)

The famous Russian writer Alexander Pushkin penned a poem in 1820 entitled "Ruslan and Lyudmila," which Glinka turned into an opera. The rollicking overture is an orchestral favorite, with nothing out of the ordinary musically; however, the rest of the opera incorporated Russian folk music, some chromaticism and dissonance, and the use of a whole-tone scale to represent the villain. If you played video games in the 1990's, you will recognize this overture as the title theme to Tetris Classic.

Je suis Titania la blonde, from *Mignon* (1866/1870)

Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896)

Ruoxi Peng, soprano

"Je suis Titania la blonde" ("I am Titania, the blonde"), is an aria of the second act from Ambroise Thomas's French opera, *Mignon*. It is sung by the character Philine, an actress, who is portraying Titania, the Queen of the Fairies, from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream". The aria is known for its flamboyant coloratura passages, a lively polonaise with challenging flourishes and ornamentations, and is often performed as a concert showpiece for sopranos.

Intermezzo, from *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890)

Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945)

In 1888, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (*Rustic Chivalry*) was the prize winner of a publisher's contest for a new one-act opera. The publisher then produced his opera, and Mascagni and his opera were an instant sensation for half a century. The opera takes place in a Sicilian village on an Easter Sunday. Santuzza, a peasant girl, is engaged to marry the returning soldier Turiddu, but suspects he's been unfaithful. Before Easter Mass, Santuzza stops Turiddu's mother to reveal her suspicions. Turiddu, indeed, had cheated on her with Lola, the wife of Alfio. After Mass, Alfio kills Turiddu in a duel. This "Intermezzo" occurs in the middle of the act, when all the characters are in church. The tune is based on a hymn heard earlier from within the village church and it closes the Easter ceremony. Its setting suggests the peace of country living, the intense individual feelings of the principals, and foreshadows the coming tragedy. It was used in the movies *Raging Bull* and *The Godfather, Part III*, under similar situations in the films.

Donde lieta uscì al tuo grido d'amore, from *La bohème* (1895)

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)

Gabrielle Gilliam, soprano

Puccini's great opera *La bohème* (The Bohemian) is noted for gorgeous music, for the power of the story, and the universality of its characters. Loosely based on a novel by Louis-Henri Murger, *La bohème* was also inspired by Puccini's life in Milan as a young conservatory student. The story is set in Paris around 1830 and shows the Bohemian lifestyle of a poor seamstress, Mimi, and her artist friends. The aria is sung by Mimi in Act 3, as she returns to her "lonely nest" and bids farewell to her lover, Rodolfo, because their relationship has ended due to his jealousy. The aria begins with Mimi's poignant reflection on their past happiness and her return to their shared space, the "solitary nest" (nido). The lyrics convey Mimi's sadness and resignation as she accepts the end of their love and prepares to leave. This is a beautiful and emotional moment in the opera, highlighting Mimi's vulnerability and the tragic nature of her situation.

Prelude to Act 1 from *La Traviata*

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

The *La Traviata* Prelude is a musical microcosm of the opera, foreshadowing its tragic themes and emotional journey. It begins with a delicate, high-pitched melody on the strings, representing the frail and vulnerable Violetta. This is followed by the main romantic theme, enriched by lower strings, and then lively dance tunes symbolizing the Parisian social scene. The Prelude then shifts to the tragic elements, hinting at the impending death of the main character, Violetta, and the emotional turmoil of the opera.

Ah, forse lui che l'anima ... Sempre libera, from *La Traviata* (1853/1864)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Gabrielle Gilliam, soprano

"Ah, forse lui... Sempre libera" is a famous aria from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata*. It is a two-part aria sung by the main character, Violetta, at the end of the first act. The first part, "Ah, forse lui" ("Ah, perhaps him"), reflects on her feelings for Alfredo after they have met at a party. Violetta is alone on stage, contemplating this possible love interest she recently met and questioning whether he could be the one to change her life. The music is delicate and introspective.

The second part of the aria, "Sempre libera" (".... Always free"), is a declaration of her intention to remain free and avoid love, despite her attraction to him. Following that earlier reflection, Violetta then expresses her wish to remain free and unattached to any one person, singing about the allure of a carefree life of pleasure and partying. This part features more florid vocal decorations and a faster tempo, reflecting her resolve to stay free.

Intermission

Prelude to *Rigoletto* (1851)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

The opera, a twisted tale of lust, desire, love, and deceit, would become known as one of Verdi's masterpieces, yet an opera that almost did not get produced. Censors thought the libretto was dangerous and shocking. The original opera, based on a play by Victor Hugo, *Le Roi S'amuse*, had to be withdrawn after only 2 performances. Its principal characters were real historical ones – King Francis I of France and his jester Triboulet. To appease the censors, Verdi kept the story but changed the main roles and locale. The country was changed to Italy; the King became the Duke of Mantua, the jester renamed Rigoletto. The opera tells the story of the philandering Duke of Mantua and his court jester, Rigoletto, and how seduction leads to deadly curses that become fulfilled. The Prelude is everything that *Rigoletto* will be: dark, moody, and tragic. A trumpet and trombone play a repeated note and the brass follow with a tension-filled chord progression, echoed by the full orchestra in a slow and deliberately controlled atmosphere of dread.

Caro nome, from *Rigoletto* (1851)

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Ruoxi Peng, soprano

The opera's original title, *La maledizione* (The Curse), referred to a curse placed on both the philandering Duke of Mantua and his court jester, Rigoletto, by the Count Monterone, whose daughter was seduced by the Duke with Rigoletto's encouragement. In Act 1, Scene 2, this aria is sung by Rigoletto's daughter, Gilda, after she falls in love with Gualtier Maldé, a poor student. However, her newfound love is really the philandering Duke in disguise. She is young, naïve, and full of optimism for love. Rigoletto the jester struggles in vain to keep his daughter from the Duke's relentless desires. Vowing vengeance, he takes matters into his own hands only to become the unwitting punchline of a darker force. The curse comes to fruition when Gilda sacrifices her life to save the Duke from the assassin hired by her father.

Prelude and Aragonaise, from *Carmen*, Suite No. 1 (1875)

Georges Bizet (1836-1891)

This suite of musical episodes from the opera *Carmen* was arranged by Ernest Guiraud (1837-1892) about 10 years after Bizet's death. The first number, the Prelude, serves as the overture to Act 1 of the opera, and is a short piece that sets the tone for the drama of *Carmen*. It's noted for its use of the "fate motive," a musical motif that recurs throughout the opera representing Carmen and her destiny. The strings start with a tense tremolo, setting the ominous mood, then the fate motif is presented by woodwinds, trumpet, and cello, giving it a threatening tone which suggests the tragic events to come in the opera.

The Aragonaise is an entr'acte or interlude that introduces Act 4. It is a vibrant and energetic piece, inspired by the folk dance originating from the Aragon region of northeastern Spain. The Aragonaise is a vibrant dance traditionally accompanied by guitars, castanets, and handclapping. This piece evokes the lively and festive atmosphere of the area, with its Spanish rhythms and driving triple meter. Here, it reflects the festive pre-bullfight scene in Act 4, contrasting with the more gloomy tone of the Prelude.

Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante, from *Carmen* (1875)

Georges Bizet (1836-1891)

Gabrielle Gilliam, soprano

The aria “Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante” (“I say that nothing frightens me”) from Act 3 is sung by Micaela, the young, virtuous village girl. Micaela is deeply in love with Don José, a man who was a dutiful soldier respected by society but descended into being a desperate outlaw. She is portrayed as the antithesis of Carmen, representing innocence, purity, and a traditional, domestic life, emphasizing the stark contrast between Carmen's passionate, untamed nature and the conventional values that Micaela embodies. She must bring the message of the illness of Don José's mother to him and she is brought by a guide to the rock where Don José keeps watch to protect his group of smugglers. She is afraid but sings that she doesn't want to feel her fears.

Dance of the Hours—allegro vivacissimo, from *La Gioconda* (1876)

Amilcare Ponchielli (1834-1886)

Recognizable thanks to Walt Disney's *Fantasia* movie of 1940, Ponchielli's “Dance of the Hours” was originally a short ballet inserted into his opera *La Gioconda*. Considered musical fluff, the ballet portion actually had serious elements such as murder, suicide, and lust which are usually found in a grand opera; however, thanks to Walt Disney, today we all remember instead the dancing hippos, alligators, elephants, and ostriches from *Fantasia*.

Una voce poco fa, from *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1813)

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Ruoxi Peng, soprano

is an Italian aria that translates to “A voice a little while ago” in English. It is a famous aria from Gioachino Rossini's opera *The Barber of Seville*, specifically sung by the character Rosina. In the aria, Rosina expresses her feelings for the young man who serenaded her, revealing her determination to have him despite her guardian's objections. In this coloratura aria, Rosina, the young ward of Doctor Bartolo (who wants to marry Rosina), has just heard Count Almaviva (disguised as Lindoro, a poor student) sing her a love song. She sings of being in love with Lindoro and wanting to marry him. She explains that she has all the qualities of a good wife but will turn into a shrew if crossed!

Author's note: In writing these notes and researching the various operas, overtures, and arias, I find the recurring themes of betrayal, disguise, deceit, jealousy, and murder throughout in the pursuit of love. If only our world could function without these elements! But then, from where would we get these divine pieces of music?