

From the Old Country – Program Notes

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If you're fortunate enough to have known ancestors from the "old country," part of your childhood memories may be old folk tales and superstitions related over dinner or late at night. Here are a collection of rich tales told by three composers from various "old countries"—Russia, Germany, and Austria—based on folk tales and mythology. We open with Liadov's *Kikimora*, his musical depiction of a malevolent spirit of out of Russian folk tradition. For his part, Brahms set a text inspired by Classical mythology to pay tribute to a beloved friend in his choral *Nänie*. The Telluride Choral Society and Durango Choral Society join the San Juan Symphony for this lyrical work. Three fine vocal soloists—soprano Gemma Kavanagh, tenor Christopher Bengochea, and bass-baritone Steven Meredith—join us for the final piece, Mahler's rarely-heard *Forest Legend*. This powerful work, completed when Mahler was only 19, tells a dark fairy tale of murder done deep in the woods.

Anatoly Liadov (1855-1914) **Kikimora, Op. 63**

Liadov composed this work in 1909. Alexander Siloti conducted its premiere in St. Petersburg in December 1910. Duration 9:00.

A century ago, Liadov was widely known in Russia as a composer, but primarily as a writer of piano miniatures and songs. His relatively slim catalog of orchestral works includes works on themes from Russian folklore, and he was very much part of the Russian nationalist aesthetic of his time. But he seems to have been hampered in part by almost pathological self-criticism and self-doubt: one of his students remembered that when his works were performed in public, he would cower out of sight at the back of the hall, and would be nowhere to be found when it was time to take a bow. At one point, the impresario Serge Diaghilev offered Liadov a commission to write a score for a new ballet for Paris, *The Firebird*, but the composer agonized for months before turning Diaghilev down. (Diaghilev promptly offered the job to the relatively unknown young Igor Stravinsky, Stravinsky's career-making big break.) According to his biographers, he also had problems staying on task—Liadov's dedication to the hard work of composition never seems to have matched his talent. As a student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, was expelled by his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov for skipping classes—though he was later reinstated, and in fact spent most of his career as an instructor at the Conservatory.

Despite all this, Liadov produced some fine musical works, and his three best orchestral pieces are a trio of symphonic poems based on Russian fairy tales: *Baba-Yaga* (about the same ghastly child-eating character that shows up in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*), *The Enchanted Lake*, and *Kikimora*. Liadov seems to have had a special affinity for these tales—at one point he wrote "Give me fairies and dragons, mermaids and goblins, and I'm thoroughly happy." *The Enchanted Lake* and *Kikimora* were written the same year, and they were originally part of a large-scale fairy-tale opera that he never finished. *Kikimora* is based upon a piece of Russian folklore: a kidnapped child warped into a little gremlin-like spirit who does mischief in the kitchens of innocent families. She can be even more dangerous and malicious if she is seen by her victims—particularly if she is seen at work on her tiny spinning wheel, which is death to the witness. (The only cure is to wash every pot and pan in the house with fern tea!) Liadov included a short description of *Kikimora* from a popular collection of Russian folk tales as a preface to his score:

"Kikimora lived and grew at the home of a magician in the craggy mountains. All day long a wise cat told her fantastic stories from faraway lands. From sunset to dawn she was rocked in a crystal cradle. Within seven years Kikimora was all grown up. Slender and darkly colored is Kikimora; her tiny head is the size of a thimble, and her body is like a blade of straw. Kikimora blusters and crashes about from morning to evening. Kikimora whistles and hisses from evening till midnight; and from midnight till dawn she spins at a spinning wheel, winds yarn, and snips silk at the loom. As she sits and spins, Kikimora wishes ill

towards all mankind...”

Liadov spins colorful and atmospheric music from this legend in a simple two-part form. The opening is a series of rather spooky melodies laid out above a hazy background. The mood shifts suddenly in the second section: agitated music that is a picture of Kikimora’s tiny but dangerous fury.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) **Nänie, Op.82**

Brahms composed this work in 1880-1881. The first performance was in Zürich, on December 6, 1881. Duration 13:00.

If Stravinsky’s “big break” was *The Firebird*, the career-making moment for Brahms was the premiere of his *German Requiem* in 1869. This profound choral work was this first of his large-scale compositions to enjoy tremendous success—a carefully-selected group of texts from the German Bible that project consolation and salvation without being specifically Christian. (He had been inspired by the death of his mother, but the *Requiem* also seems to be in part a tribute to his beloved mentor Robert Schumann.) He followed this with a few more large choral works—notably the *Schicksalslied* (“Song of Destiny” - 1871) and the *Triumphlied* (“Song of Triumph” - 1872), but then put choral music aside for most of the next decade. This was an amazingly productive period in which he focused on other large forms, completing the *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*, his first two symphonies, the violin concerto, and his *Tragic* and *Academic Festival* overtures. But by 1880, he was thinking again of choral music again, and wrote half-jokingly to his friend Elisabet von Herzogenberg:

“I am quite willing to write motets or anything else for chorus (I am heartily sick of anything else!); but won’t you try to find me some words? One can’t have them made to order unless one begins before good reading has spoilt one. They are not heathenish enough for me in the Bible. I have bought the Koran but can find nothing there either.”

As with the *Requiem*, the direct inspiration for his next large choral work was the death of someone close to Brahms: his friend, the neoclassical painter Anselm Feuerbach, who died in Venice in 1880. As a tribute, Brahms set a 1799 poem, *Nänie* by Friedrich Schiller—the same poet who wrote the *Ode to Joy* set in Beethoven’s ninth symphony. The title is the German version of the Latin *noenia*—a song of lamentation sung at ancient Roman funerals. Schiller’s poem includes references to several Classical myths, but is also true to the spirit of fatalism found in so much of Classical Greek and Roman poetry.

What attracted Brahms to this text, beyond the obvious references to death and mourning? The Classical references in Schiller’s poem would have been perfectly appropriate, as Feuerbach was profoundly influenced by Greek and Roman art, and most of his paintings dealt with Classical subjects. But shortly after Feuerbach’s death, Brahms also heard a setting of Schiller’s poem by Hermann Goetz. Goetz, now almost completely unknown, had a short career as a composer before his death in 1876, just a few days before his 36th birthday. His version of *Nänie* was apparently a fairly gloomy and dark piece—nothing at all like the luminous *Nänie* Brahms composed a few months later—but Brahms seems to have been impressed by the possibility of this as a tribute to his beloved friend Feuerbach.

Brahms’s *Nänie* is almost never dark, and the overall mood is exalted. It begins with a gorgeous prelude dominated by a long oboe solo. The chorus picks up this melody with Schiller’s opening words: “The beautiful, too, must die!” There are a few moments of musical characterization: sweet glowing music and harp arpeggios for Aphrodite, and suddenly warlike music for Achilles. The emotional heart of this piece is the sudden change of mood at Schiller’s second reminder “that the beautiful perish.” There is a short return of the opening orchestral music before a glorious choral coda. Brahms chose not to end with Schiller’s fatalistic last line, but with the more uplifting one that precedes it: “Even to be a song of lament on loved ones’ lips is splendid.”

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Forest Legend

Mahler completed Waldmärchen (“Forest Legend”) as the first part of a three-part cantata, Das klagende Lied (“The Song of Lamentation”) in 1878-79. This movement was left out of the version of the cantata Mahler published in 1899, but it was revived after Mahler’s death, and performed for the first time on a radio broadcast from Brno in 1934. Duration 31:00.

For the Romantics, fairy tales were not just “kid stuff.” Fantastic and sometimes gruesome tales written and collected from folk legends by Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm were part of popular literature for adults. And, like the Russian *Kikimora*, some of these were grim fairy tales indeed: stories that featured murder, dismemberment, and sexual undercurrents that were far from the Bowdlerized or Disneyfied versions we know today. *The Singing Bone*, published by the Brothers Grimm, is just such a dark story. Two brothers go off in search of a dangerous boar. The younger kills the boar and as he is bringing it back, he is met by his older brother. The elder brother kills the younger in a drunken, jealous rage, buries his body, and then takes the boar back to the king, who gives him his daughter’s hand in marriage. Years later a shepherd finds the younger brother’s bones, and when he fashions one into a horn, the bone begins to sing on its own, revealing the older brother’s guilt.

When Mahler, a 17-year-old student at the Vienna Conservatory, decided to compete for the prestigious Beethoven Prize, he turned to *The Singing Bone* as the inspiration for a large-scale cantata. He wrote his own text, based upon the Grimm fairy tale and version of the story published by Ludwig Bechstein. In Part I of Mahler’s version—the *Forest Legend* heard here—the two brothers are searching for a beautiful red flower instead of a boar: a vain queen has agreed to marry the knight who finds the flower and returns it to the palace. The younger brother, a “gracious and gentle soul” finds the flower and gleefully sticks it into the brim of his hat before settling down for a nap. The elder brother finds him sleeping, and though Mahler never explicitly describes the murder, it is obvious that he stabs his brother to death and takes the flower. In Part II, *The Minstrel*, a travelling musician finds one of the younger brother’s bones while wandering in the forest, and fashions it into a flute, which magically reveals the murder. In Part III, *Wedding Piece*, the minstrel arrives at the palace just as the wedding of the older brother and the queen is about to begin. When he plays the flute, the truth is revealed, and everyone flees in terror as the castle walls begin to collapse.

Mahler completed Part I by 1879, and the entire cantata the next year. The result was as enormous as some of his later symphonies: a 70-minute work for a huge orchestra, including a large offstage band, six vocal soloists, including two boys, and chorus. It was rejected by the prize committee, and Mahler then sent it to Franz Liszt, hoping for help in securing a performance, but received only another polite rejection. Undaunted, Mahler seems to have believed in the piece—he later referred to *Das klagende Lied* as “the first work in which I found myself as Mahler”—and continued to revise it, eventually publishing a version that omitted the lengthy *Forest Legend*. This two-part version was premiered in Vienna in 1901, and though it was never a real success, it is obvious that Mahler retained some affection for his youthful effort, and he programmed it on a couple of later concerts. Mahler’s sister Justine inherited the original score of *Forest Legend*, and it was her son, the conductor and composer Alfred Rosé who later resurrected the piece, 25 years after Mahler’s death. Rosé led a performance of *Forest Legend* (sung in Czech) on a radio broadcast in 1934 and, soon afterwards in Vienna, paired this piece in its original German with the two published movements for the first complete version of *Das klagende Lied*—a version Mahler never heard performed during his lifetime.

Though this is very early work by a teenager, it is clearly Mahler: many of the stylistic features of his later songs and symphonies are already here, and he was already adept at using orchestral and vocal colors on a large scale. It begins with a long orchestral introduction that sets the stage—pastoral horn-calls above a troubled background that explodes into a storm and culminates in a grand passage for full orchestra. This subsides into a quiet march, before the tenor begins the tale. The choir—very much like a Greek chorus—enters to comment on the action throughout. Mahler uses various combinations of voices to tell the tale, but the music is always appropriate to the events being told, as in the fanfare figures that accompany the introduction of the two brothers, or the lovely Wagnerian interlude that accompanies their search. The

soprano's "nightingale song" leads to a stormy passage that suggests the murder. Two lengthy vocal solos and an intensely sad orchestral interlude serve as a kind of epilogue before the final solemn choral statement.

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