

Sergei Prokofiev, Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 25 “Classical”

Eric Jones, *The Seafarer*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Piano Concerto No. 21 in C, K.467 “Elvira Madigan”
and Symphony No. 35 in D, K.385, “Haffner”

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) grew up a pampered and privileged boy in rural Ukraine. At the age of four, his mother began giving him piano lessons, and by the age of five, he began composing. He ventured into writing his first opera at 10 years old, which he completed and performed—with the help of some playmates—for his family. As a teenager, Prokofiev received formal lessons in theory and composition from the Russian composer Reinhold Gliere, and soon after began studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he completed his artist diploma at the age of 19.

In 1917, there were riots in St. Petersburg against Tsar Nicholas II, with the Russian army eventually joining the rebels and removing him from power. Prokofiev seems to have been generally unphased by these events, as he turned his attention to composing a small symphony. “I thought that if Haydn were alive today, he would compose just as he did before, but at the same time would include something new in his manner of composition. I wanted to compose such a symphony: a symphony in the classical style.”

Prokofiev’s “Classical Symphony” is certainly a look back to the charm, style, and simplicity of 18th-century music. It follows the four-movement structure of a traditional symphony while employing the contrasting themes of sonata-allegro form. It has clear melodic lines that reflect the elegance of Mozart and Haydn. The orchestration is light and colorful, and there is straightforward use of phrasing and meter. But don’t be fooled: Prokofiev’s “Classical” Symphony is still a modern work, with unexpected dissonances, harmonic shifts, angular melodic twists, and a sense of irony, all of which remove the music from the 18th century and place it squarely into the 20th.

Eric Jones of Moultrie, Georgia started playing the piano by ear at the age of five. At 11, he began studying trumpet. He went on to complete a B.A. in Music (piano) from Armstrong Atlantic State University, and a master’s in music (composition) from Georgia Southern University. In 2019, he released his debut album *Azubuike* (which is translated in Igbo “the past is our strength”) featuring the trio of Marc Chesanow on bass and Robert Saunders on drums. Jones is immersed in the Savannah jazz scene, has been a member of the Savannah Jazz Orchestra for five years, and was inducted into the Savannah Jazz Hall of Fame. He currently teaches at Savannah State while maintaining an active performance schedule with various ensembles in the southeast region.

Regarding tonight’s world premiere performance, in Jones’ own words: “*The Seafarer* is a music composition that evokes the spirit of oceanic adventure and the vast, untamed sea. With sweeping melodies and rhythmic swells, the piece captures the essence of a seafarer’s

journey—both the excitement of exploration and the reflective solitude of life on the open waters."

Why is Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 nicknamed "Elvira Madigan?" In 1967, the Swedish film director Bo Widerberg released his film *Elvira Madigan*, about a 19th-century tightrope walker and an AWOL army lieutenant who run away together. I haven't seen this movie, but according to the internet, it's a forbidden romance that [SPOILER ALERT!] tragically ends with an off-camera murder-suicide...and it features the slow movement of Mozart's 21st piano concerto as its soundtrack. Hence the nickname.

In 1785, the 29-year-old Mozart was on a productive hot streak of piano concertos while in Vienna: he completed piano concertos nos. 14-25 all within three years! Piano concertos were a valuable vehicle for Mozart to showcase his skills as both composer and performer for Viennese audiences.

In the first movement of Mozart's 21st concerto, he unspools graceful melody after melody, with the occasional conversational interplay between piano soloist and orchestra. The gorgeous second movement uses four distinct themes, each evoking a sense of calm, beauty, and emotional depth as the music journeys through many different key areas—you'll no doubt agree that this could be fitting music for a romantic movie soundtrack. The third *rondo* movement brings a bouncy and cheery energy to its main ritornello theme, with orchestral punctuations that heighten the festive atmosphere.

Flashback a few years to 1782, and 26-year-old Mozart had a bit too much on his plate. The success of his opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* had catapulted him to a new level of fame, and now he had more composing work than he could handle; his new mother-in-law had just arm-twisted him into getting married; and his disapproving father was furious that Mozart wasn't making better life choices. To smooth things over with dad, Mozart planned a trip back to his hometown of Salzburg with his new wife, where as luck would have it, his buddy Sigmund Haffner would be officially recognized in the nobility. For this ennoblement, the Haffner family commissioned Mozart to compose music that could be used for the ceremony, of which would later become Mozart's "Haffner" Symphony.

The "Haffner" Symphony is a grand work and an important milestone in the quality of Mozart's symphonic writing. The first movement, *Allegro con spirito*, opens with a bold unison, then quickly unleashes a whirlwind of running scales and powerful chords. The second *Andante* movement, in contrast, is refined, graceful, and delicate. The third *Menuetto* movement creates a simple but courtly air, while the final *Presto* movement brings a heroically animated energy. You will no doubt agree with Mozart, who upon later reflection of his completed work, wrote to his father, "My new Haffner symphony has positively amazed me...it must surely produce a good effect!"

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.