

## **Program Notes - Spring Concert**

### **Franz Lehár**

**(1870–1948)**

#### ***Overture, The Merry Widow***

Like many artists who found fame in Vienna, such as Beethoven and Mahler, Franz Lehár was not Austrian. He was born in Hungary, the son of a bandmaster in the Austro-Hungarian Army, retained Hungarian as his primary language, and continued to sign his name in Hungarian fashion (last name first, as Lehár Ferenc) all his life.

Lehár's musical studies began in earnest at the Prague Conservatory, where he was encouraged by no less than Antonin Dvorak to pursue a composing career. In 1899, after graduation, Lehár embarked for Vienna, where he joined his father's band as assistant bandmaster. Just three years later, he was appointed conductor at the legendary Theater an der Wien, which also saw the premiere of his first operetta later that year.

Although Lehár wrote “serious” works such as sonatas and symphonic poems, he is remembered almost exclusively for his operettas, a form of musical theater that helped lay the foundation for musical comedy. Next to Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*, Lehár's *The Merry Widow* (*Die lustige Witwe*), is probably the most famous, and both are regularly performed today.

The plot of *The Merry Widow* is typical operetta: a touch of farce, a healthy helping of romance, a happy ending, and a wealth of great tunes. It is set in the fictional country of Pontevedro, whose well-being depends on Hanna, the “merry widow” of the title, who has inherited a fortune from a wealthy old husband. With rumors abounding that Hanna plans to marry a Frenchman, the Pontevedro embassy in Paris persuades Danilo, one of her former suitors, to rekindle their old flame. No fool herself, Hanna suspects that everyone's interest in her is motivated by her fortune. Complications ensue, but in the end true love prevails, and Hanna and Danilo live happily ever after.

### **Antonin Dvorak**

**(1841-1904)**

#### ***Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 53***

By the mid-1870s, Dvorak was just beginning to make his mark as a composer. His first big break was in 1874, when he entered and won the competition for an Austrian State Music Prize in composition. The real fruit of this achievement, however, was not the prize itself, but the fact that one of the panelists who heard his music was none other than Johannes Brahms. Impressed with the younger man's talents, Brahms encouraged Dvorak to pursue a composing career, and helped to convince his own publisher to print

Dvorak's first set of *Slavonic Dances*. The music became widely popular, and helped establish Dvorak as a major composer.

While Dvorak was rising to prominence, the Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim was already a star of the first magnitude, and acknowledged as one of the great virtuosos of the day. In 1879, Brahms introduced Dvorak to Joachim, who had just given the premiere performance of Brahms' monumental violin concerto.

At Joachim's request, Dvorak began work on a violin concerto of his own. He completed the work in the summer of the same year, and sent it off to Joachim for suggestions. Joachim, who had a habit of finding fault with compositions dedicated to him (he never performed the concerto that Schumann wrote for him and played the Brahms only five more times in his life), was anything but enthusiastic. As he had done with Max Bruch's concerto, Joachim asked for substantial changes not just in the violin part, but in the orchestration and musical structure as well. Dvorak revised the concerto and sent it back to Joachim. Two years went by before Dvorak heard from Joachim, who then wanted even more changes. Exasperated, Dvorak looked for someone else to premiere the concerto. In 1883, the concerto was finally performed by a Czech violinist, Frantisek Ondricek, in Prague. Even though the concerto was immediately popular, and enjoyed frequent performances, Joachim never played it.

The work is in the traditional three movements. What is less conventional is how Dvorak handles the structure. Instead of an extended orchestral introduction, Dvorak brings in the soloist after a brief, fanfare-like phrase. Then, rather than the usual emphatic conclusion to the first movement, a cadenza-like passage for solo violin leads gently into the rhapsodic slow movement. After a stormy and passionate episode, the movement draws to a calm and lyrical close. The spirited finale, with its infectious main melody, is in the style of a *furiant*, a Czech dance form that appears often in Dvorak's music.

**Wilhelm Richard Wagner  
(1813-1883)**

***Overture, The Mastersingers***

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1813, the ninth child of Carl Friedrich Wagner. The elder Wagner, a clerk at the local police station, died of typhus when his last child was only six months old. Shortly after his father's death, Wagner's mother married playwright Ludwig Geyer, and the family moved to Dresden. As a young child, Wagner spent a great deal of time with his stepfather at the theater. It was there that Wagner's love of the theater blossomed. Sadly, Wagner's stepfather died when the boy was eight, but the boy's love of live performance, playwriting, and all things dramatic would inform the rest of his life.

After his stepfather's death, the family moved back to Leipzig, where he continued to visit the theater as much as possible. However, it was not until 1828 that Wagner began to envision a career there, and began studying composition with Christian Gottlieb

Müller. The following year, Wagner attended a performance by prominent soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, and was indelibly affected. “If I look back on my life as a whole, I can find no event that produced so profound an impression upon me,” Wagner wrote later.

Wagner’s music, especially his operas, was likely informed by the early tragedies in his young life, as well as by the dramatic twists, turns and controversies of his adult life. However, while most of his work tends to be quite somber and seemingly “heavy,” his *Meistersingers of Nuremberg*, in comparison, is very nearly light-hearted. *Meistersingers* was completed in 1867, and unlike Wagner’s earlier work, is the only opera set in an actual place and based upon real events and people. It also is Wagner’s only “comic” opera.

Tonight’s piece, the Overture, is one of Wagner’s most beloved and long-lived works. Like the composer’s life, it deftly combines elements of the serene and the celebratory. Indeed, the overture’s dramatic, stirring processional, sweeping elements of the romantic, the raucous dance tunes, and the spectacular ending could inspire all of us to cast off our worries and enjoy, even for a few moments, the gift of music.

## **John Williams**

(1932 -- )

### ***Overture, The Cowboys***

John Williams composed the score for *The Cowboys* in 1972, a year before he began winning what now is an historic number of awards. *The Cowboys* starred John Wayne, and was among the last films Wayne made before he died in 1979. It also was among his most popular.

Wayne, Williams said, was “Hollywood’s quintessential cowboy,” and the composer’s love of the genre and the man are evident in this beautiful score. The emblematic overture, however, wasn’t written until years later.

“The movie required a vigorous musical score to accompany virtuoso horseback riding and calf roping,” Williams explained. “When my friend André Previn heard fragments of the score, he suggested that a concert overture lay hidden within the film’s music. Several years slipped by, and each time I saw the indefatigable Previn he would ask, ‘Have you made an overture of Cowboys yet?’ He kept this up until 1980, when I finally worked out the piece and played it at a Boston Pops concert.”

While the overture contains elements that are reminiscent of Copland, it is Williams’ unique signature that has made the piece an almost-overnight favorite of orchestras throughout the world.

## **Harold Arlen**

**(1905-1986)**

***Overture, The Wizard of Oz***

Harold Arlen is one of the most prolific composers of the twentieth century, and most widely known for his score for *The Wizard of Oz*. His song, "Over the Rainbow," sung in the film by the incomparable Judy Garland, was voted the number one song of the twentieth century by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Arlen was born Chiam Arlook in Buffalo, New York, the son of a Jewish cantor. Arlen took piano lessons as a child and, as a teen and young man, worked as a local singer and pianist. Arlen left Buffalo to try his luck in New York City when he was in his early twenties, and appeared in a number of popular bands of the day, including that of the legendary Red Nichols. After scraping by for his first few years in New York, Arlen achieved his first real taste of success when he composed the music for "Get Happy," his first real hit, along with lyricist Ted Koehler. Arlen and Koehler went on to write a number of popular songs during early to mid-1930s, including such standards as "Stormy Weather" and "Let's Fall in Love," earning him a permanent place in the Great American Songbook.

Arlen spent increasing amounts of time in California throughout the mid-to-late 1930s. In 1938, he was hired by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to write songs for a ground-breaking new movie, one starring his long-time friend and former roommate, Ray Bolger. The rest, as they say in the movies, is history.

Tonight's performance of the overture from *The Wizard of Oz* is dedicated to all those who never stop dreaming.

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