



## Civic Orchestra of Tucson Program Notes for December 7 and 8, 2019

*by Music Director, Charles Bontrager*

Three wonderful pieces. Two are likely unfamiliar, yet—as we will soon discover—are quite pleasing to listen to on a casual weekend afternoon.

### **VARIATIONS ON A GREGORIAN HYMN (1989) by Dr. John Cheetham**

“Pange lingua gloriosi” is attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and is the lovely Gregorian Chant chosen 700 years later by Professor John Cheetham as a vehicle upon which to compose a series of variations. Dr. Cheetham had been commissioned by the Springfield (MO) Symphony Orchestra when I was its Music Director to provide a new piece for the 1988–89 season. I have often had the wonderful privilege of breathing life into new works, and “Variations” is one of the best.

Not wishing to become overly tedious in musical narrative, suffice it to say that the original chant contains six musical phrases. At the beginning of the piece, Cheetham presents the main theme (all six phrases) in three iterations: first woodwinds with solo flute and oboe in unison; second the cellos and English Horn (adding violins later); and third, the full ensemble in a lovely and rich rendition.

Variation I introduces the first phrase of the chant in a lively and spirited rhythmic march-like (mostly 6/8 time) setting. This leads to a crisp and snappy brass presentation of the second theme of the chant (Variation II) as introduced by the trumpets, horns, and trombones. Hard to miss.

Variation III (*semplice, sostenuto e sonoro*) opens slowly with a lovely quartet of flutes and clarinets accompanied by harp, which leads to a wonderful muted and *espressivo* counter melody in the unison violins. All drifts quietly away into Variation IV (introduced by tremolo violins), which builds then fades into a sprightly little march tune (Variation V) featuring solo clarinet; there is a bit of a Renaissance dance feel in the center of the variation, which ultimately closes out with a bassoon solo echoing the opening clarinet solo, then leads directly into Variation VI and the Finale.

At this point we hear the sixth phrase of the chant, which begins with the cellos and bassoons, migrates around the ensemble, culminates with a huge flourish in the woodwinds and strings and ultimately introduces the entire chant, this time proclaimed by the trumpet section and supported by the full ensemble. To me, it is somewhat reminiscent of a magnificent and mighty Baroque organ having a delightful time with Saint Francis’s music, and no stops left unpulled.

“Variations on a Gregorian Hymn” is scored for 2 flutes and piccolo, 2 oboes and English Horn, 2 clarinets and bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, harp, timpani, percussion and of course, strings. The entire composition is performed without pause between variations.

### **FIVE VARIANTS OF “DIVES AND LAZARUS” (1939) by Ralph Vaughan Williams**

For as much as needed to be said about “Variations,” it is likely that little need be said about “Variants.” However, a few words about Vaughan Williams are warranted. And to supplement, try the Vaughan Williams Society at [www.rvwsociety.com](http://www.rvwsociety.com). (By the way, the British pronunciation of his first name is Rafe, albeit some might quibble.)

RVW had an extremely interesting life and is considered by many to have been one of the finest symphonists of the 20th century. Be that as it may, he was certainly a monumental British musician and composer and left many wonderful works that frequently occupy space in symphony orchestra concerts around the world.

“Variants” may be one of his lesser known works but as a sonic treat, it ranks high. It is interesting to hear of the piece in the composer’s own words:

“These variants are not exact replicas of traditional tunes but rather reminiscences of various versions in my own collection and those of others.” The original tune in question, called “Dives and Lazarus,” is referenced in sixteenth-century writings but could well have been written earlier than that, and is a musical depiction of the New Testament story of the rich man and the beggar. According to some, “Five Variants of ‘Dives and Lazarus’” contains superbly sumptuous string writing, with sweeping melodies stretching across the orchestra, underpinned by deep and resonant harmonies. It was first performed by the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Sir Adrian Boult at the 1939 World’s Fair in NYC.

“Variants” is scored for strings and harp, and it is a joy to feature these wonderful musicians who make up the front portion of the Civic Orchestra.

While you search online for a version of St. Thomas’s original “Pange lingua gloriosi” (YouTube has many), if you enjoy “Dives and Lazarus” you might also take a listen to the Vaughan Williams’s “Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis.” Amazing!

### **SYMPHONY NO. 5 in E minor, opus 64 (1888) by Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky**

We all love Tchaikovsky. The ballets are sublime. The early symphonies (1, 2, 3) are respected, and the primary concerti (piano, cello [variations] and violin) are adored. Of course there were other works including ten operas but the repertoire noted above, plus “1812 Overture,” are perhaps most beloved. Then there came a nearly empty decade, 1878–88, when Tchaikovsky did more traveling than composing. For a while he was obsessed with the fear that he had written himself out. “Not the slightest musical idea in my head...I am beginning to fear that my muse has flown far, far away.”

And then came the 5th symphony, followed close at hand by *Sleeping Beauty* (1889), *Queen of Spades* (1890), *Nutcracker* (1892), and the sixth symphony (1893). And then he was to be no more.

Volumes have been written about these later works and chapters about the 5th Symphony. Sources are many. For our space and purposes, suffice it to say that the Symphony’s nearly one hour is divided into four movements, the first being preceded by a lengthy solo introduction for unison clarinets accompanied by gently articulated strings before moving into the main theme, “*Allegro con anima*.”

The second movement, although opening with the famous and beautiful horn solo, has moments of extreme agitation as if good were struggling with evil. Good wins out and we move to the gentle waltz of the third movement. The twelve-minute Finale brings the symphony to a roaring triumphal close in the key of E Major leaving E minor far behind for more hopeful days.

Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 5 is scored for two each flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.