Longwood Symphony Orchestra – May 14, 2011
Arnold, Schreker, Shostakovich & Elgar
Program Notes
By Steven Ledbetter

MALCOLM ARNOLD
***Tam O'Shanter* Overture, Op. 51**
Malcolm Arnold was born in Northampton, England, on October 21, 1921, and died in Norwich, England, on September 23, 2006. He received a knighthood in 1991. Arnold composed Tam O'Shanter *in 1955, completing it in March. He himself conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra in the first performance at a Henry Wood Promenade Concert on August 17, 1955. The score calls for two flutes (including piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and percussion, harp, and strings. Duration is about 8 minutes.*

English composer Malcolm Arnold is descended on his mother's side from William Lawes, a significant English composer of the 17th century. His musical talent showed itself early, and he studied both composition and trumpet (which he chose at the age of twelve after seeing Louis Armstrong play) at the Royal College of Music. His composition teacher was Gordon Jacob. After graduating he became principal trumpet of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. For the first few years after World War II he kept his orchestral job while also maintaining a busy composing life. He resigned from the orchestra in 1948 and concentrated on a two-fold path of composition that included writing about a half-dozen film scores a year plus a varied output of symphonies, concertos, works specifically for brasses or woodwinds, works for young performers, and works of musical humor, such as the *Grand, Grand Overture* for the first Hoffnung Festival concert (featuring organ, 3 vacuum cleaners, floor polisher, four rifles, and orchestra) or the *Grand Concerto Gastronomique* (for eater, waiter, food, and orchestra!).

He pursued a full-time composing career after 1948 and eventually gave up film work as well in order to devote himself to concert music. By the 1980s he was hospitalized for several long periods, and eventually, after completing his ninth symphony, having already also completed some 20 concertos (each conceived, as he said, as a portrait of the player for whom it was written), he retired from active composition in 1988. But he achieved connection with many leading musicians of his time, having written concertos for starry musicians on almost every possible instrument: Dennis Brain (horn), Yehudi Menuhin (violin), Leon Goossens (oboe), Benny Goodman (clarinet), Larry Adler (harmonic), Julian Lloyd Webber (cello), and Michala Petri (recorder) among them.

His experience as an orchestral player gave him a confident command of the ensemble, and his music, colorful, lively, and approachable as it is, has made him a widely popular composer in a romantic-modern style. The best known of his film scores is the forty-five minutes of music composed for *Bridge on the River Kwai* (which he had to write in just ten days!), for which he received an Academy Award. Many of the films are better known in Britain than in the United States, but film buffs are likely to remember *David Copperfield, Hobson's Choice*, *The Belles of St. Trinian's*, *I am a Camera*, *Island in the Sun*, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, *The Roots of Heaven*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Whistle Down the Wind.*

The great Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote his longest poem, *Tam o'Shanter*, a humorous epic about a merry toper who always stays too long at the pub, despite his wife's warning that some day he will be "catch'd wi' warlocks" when he passed the ruins of a church, Kirk Alloway, which is connected to legends of haunting at night.

The poem takes place on a night of violent storms. Tam has long been drinking in the pub and finally climbs aboard his gray mare Meg for the ride home. As they draw near Kirk Alloway, Tam sees that the interior of the ruined church is illuminated. Tam is full of that courage produced by an excess of whiskey:

Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!
What dangers thou canst make us scorn!

Unable to contain his curiosity, he draws up to a broken window to peer inside to observe a great orgy of witches and warlocks with shrieks and wild dancing to music played on the bagpipes by Old Nick himself. Many ghastly things are going on

Wi' mair o' horrible and awfu'
Which ev'n to name wad be unlawfu'.

A pretty young witch is wearing a revealing outfit "in longitude tho' sorely scanty"; this short chemise is called a "cutty-sark" in the native dialect. Tam is so entranced by her dancing in an undergarment much too short for decency that, unthinking, he calls out "Weel "done, cutty-sark!" Instantly everything goes dark, and the hellish legion with the pretty young witch at its head pursues the illicit observer.

Tam's mare Meg races toward the bridge over the nearby river; if he can cross it, he is safe, for the fiends cannot cross running water. He escapes narrowly – but just as he gets to the middle of the bridge, the young witch grabs Meg's tale and pulls it off, as the mare, with a last bound, carries her master to safety. The moral, embodied in the last lines of the poem is that one should remember Tam O'Shanter when tempted by thought of drink and cutty-sarks:

Now wha this tale o'truth shall read,
Ilk man and mother's son tak heed
Whene'er to drink you are inclin'd,
Or cutty-sarks run in your mind,
Think ye may buy the joys o'er dear,
Remember Tam O' Shanter's mare.

(The famous clipper ship *Cutty Sark*—built in 1869 as the last commercial sailing ship for the tea trade and now on display in drydock at Greenwich, England—has as its figurehead a carving of the bare-breasted, short-skirted witch holding a horse's tail in her hand.)

Even before Malcolm Arnold composed his score, the Boston composer George W. Chadwick had composed a symphonic poem on the same subject. Given the colorful tale, it is not surprising that both works are frankly programmatic: Characteristic sonorities like a drone fifth in the clarinets suggests bagpipes, which helps identify the location as Scotland. The orchestral outbursts accompany Tam's galloping through the violent storm. But when he sights the lighted-up haunted kirk, string tremolos shiver as he moves to the window, and watches the wild dancing. Burns tells us that these were not dignified cotillions from France, "but hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels." When Tam gets carried away with enthusiasm at the dancing, it is the solo trombone that seems to intone the words "Weel done, Cutty-sark!" (By interesting coincidence. Chadwick had handled this moment in exactly the same way 40 years earlier.) Now Tam rides for his life, with all the demonic forces behind him, and the flutes and clarinets announce the moral of the story.

FRANZ SCHREKER
Intermezzo for string orchestra, Op. 8
Franz Schreker was born in Monaco on March 23, 1878, and died in Berlin on March 21, 1934. He composed his Intermezzo for strings in 1900 and later included it in his Romantic Suite. *It was performed performed at the Vienna Konzertverein in 1902 under the direction of Franz Loewe. The score calls for orchestral strings. Duration is about N minutes.*

Composers' biographies are filled with accounts of great musicians insufficiently appreciated in their own time whose music only comes into its own years after their deaths. We are less likely to worry about the opposite case—though it is far from rare—of a composer praised highly in his own day whose music later falls into near-oblivion. Franz Schreker is one such composer who enjoyed substantial acclaim, mainly as an opera composer, and he has fallen far from public notice, though his reputation has begun to recover in recent years.

Schreker was singularly unfortunate in the timing of his life—over which, of course, he had no control. No sooner had he begun to make a considerable mark on German musical life than the First World War broke out. And a change of taste and a pursuit of new styles following the war left him less well established than comparable composers who were enough older to have gotten their careers well underway. Moreover Schreker's métier was the opera; with rare exceptions (Wagner being the most notable), Austrian and German audiences have been suspicious of composers who were not at least equally devoted to purely instrumental composition. Still, his major operas *Der ferne Klang*, *Die Gezeichneten*, and *Der Schatzgräber* are increasingly produced, and a new and substantial revival of scholarly interest in the composer may foreshadow the return of some of his music to performance.

Schreker's earliest works—like the Intermezzo, which precedes his overnight fame with *Der ferne Klang* by ten years—are imbued with the qualities of late Romantic music in a center of orchestral composition like Vienna, the center of Brahms idolatry, where balance and formal coherences were desired above all. Composed the year he graduated from the Vienna Conservatory, it became his first substantial success and won a prize sponsored by the *Neue musikalische Press* in 1901. It begins with shimmering, lush high sonorities in a slow, sustained mood, becoming gradually more passionate. The central section is more rhythmical, with a lively dancing character, returning eventually to a poignant recollection of the opening.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major, Opus 102
Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg on August 25, 1906, and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He composed his Second Piano Concerto for his son Maxim, who gave the first performance on May 10, 1957. In addition to the solo piano, the score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two each of oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, timpani, snare drum, and strings. The duration is about 20 minutes.

Dmitri Shostakovich was a fine pianist himself, and his son and daughter both naturally had early music lessons. Periodically the composer would write small pieces for them to play, carefully suited to their current level of ability. As they improved, the pieces became more challenging. Through his teens, the son, Maxim, worked diligently toward a career as a pianist (he later chose instead to become a conductor, a career that he continues to follow today). He had long asked his father for a piano concerto. The elder Shostakovich had composed one such work when he was in his twenties, but that had been nearly three decades earlier. Finally he agreed, and wrote what friends joked was a "concerto for Maxim and orchestra." Maxim Shostakovich gave the world premiere of the concert on his nineteenth birthday, May 10, 1957.

The work is filled with the joy and love that one would expect from a composer writing for his own young son. There is a wonderful physicality of youth about the score (this was recognized by the choreographer Sir Kenneth Macmillan, who used the score for a ballet entitled *Concerto* that he created for the Deutsche Oper in Berlin). The first movement is bright and assertive, mostly calling for the piano to be played in a percussive staccato with a saucy orchestral part in competition. The slow movement is as poignant and sweet as the outer movements are outgoing. The strings introduce a thoughtful melody in C minor, while the piano, when it enters, quietly affirms C major in a warm nocturne style. The finale is filled with bright humor. It is essentially a rondo pattern in 2/4, but the regularity of this plan is diverted by some passages in 7/8 time to seem "out of step," only to recover their balance at just the right time. Here, for once, Shostakovich is able to forget the clouds hanging over his head in so many scores that were analyzed by non-musical government employees for signs of "improper" political views that might have been dangerous to life and limb and could simply celebrate the musicianship of his teenaged son.

EDWARD ELGAR
Variations on an Original Theme (Enigma)
Edward Elgar was born at Broadheath, near Worcester, England, on June 2, 1857, and died in Worcester on February 23, 1934. He began the Enigma Variations in October 1898 and completed them on February 19, 1899. The score bears the dedication "To my friends pictured within." The first performance was given in London on June 19, 1899, Hans Richter conducting. The score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, side drum, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, organ (ad lib.), and strings. Duration is about 29 minutes.

In almost every respect Elgar was an outsider: largely self-taught in a day when academic training was considered essential; a resident of provincial Worcester rather than metropolitan London; the son of a shopkeeper in a class-conscious society; a Roman Catholic in a country officially Protestant; and a musician of deep feeling and commitment in a culture that viewed music as nothing more than an insignificant entertainment. Yet, ironically, the very elements that made the sensitive Elgar feel like an outsider allowed him to develop his talents as a composer of marked originality. Not until he was in his forties was he recognized in a substantial way. But as the nineteenth century was drawing to its close, his recognition as a master composer was to come with surprising suddenness.

One day, late in 1898, Elgar was idly musing at the piano, playing the theme that was to become the basis of the *Enigma* Variations. When his wife asked what it was, he said, "Nothing, but something might be made of it." Naming some of their friends, he went on: "Powell [Variation I] would have done this, or Nevinson [Variation XII] would have looked at it like this." His wife commented, "Surely you are doing something that has never been done before?" Thus encouraged, Elgar rapidly produced an entire set of variations on his original theme. Each is headed by the initials or a punning version of the name of one of his friends, and the music is "what I think they would have written—if they were asses enough to compose."

The first performance was a sensation. The musical world recognized at once that this work was the finest composition by a native-born English composer since the death of Purcell two centuries earlier. But the work raised questions because of two mysteries connected with it. The first of these was a simple one, the identification of the "friends pictured within." The second one has lasted to this day, and generated literally dozens of solutions. At some point, Elgar wrote in the manuscript, over his theme, the word "Enigma," and at the first performance he wrote the following mysterious comment:

> The Enigma I will not explain—its "dark saying" must be left unguessed and I warn you that the apparent connection between the Variations and the Theme is often of the slightest texture; further, through and over the whole set another and larger theme "goes" but is not played....So the principal theme never appears, even as in some late dramas—e.g. Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* and *Les Sept Princesses*—the chief character is never on the stage.

This has generated an entire literature of attempted "solutions" to the puzzle, some of them claiming to find a musical theme (like "Auld lang syne") that fits in counterpoint to Elgar's score, others insisting that the "theme" is an idea like "friendship" or "Britannia." The solutions are ingenious and fascinating, but they are of little significance in comparison to the sheer musical mastery of Elgar's work.

Each section is a "character variation," changing its mood, personality, and even basic shape according to the composer's perception of its subject. Elgar himself identified these people in a set of notes published in 1913. Extracts from his remarks are quoted below.

The theme is itself remarkable, going by stops and starts, broken up into little fragments, each of which has a life of its own later on. The first four notes of the tune provide a perfect setting, in pitch and rhythm, of the composer's name, as if he has thus written his signature into the whole work.

I. (*C.A.E.*) Caroline Alice Elgar, the composer's supportive wife, "really a prolongation of the theme with....romantic and delicate additions."

II. (*H.D.S.-P.*) Hew David Stewart-Powell played piano in a trio with Elgar and Basil Nevinson (Variation XII). "His characteristic diatonic run over the keys before beginning to play is here humorously travestied...but chromatic beyond H.D.S.-P.'s liking."

III. (*R.B.T.*) Richard Baxter Townsend, author of *A Tenderfoot in Colorado* and other books, a classical scholar and lovable eccentric. Elgar says that the variation refers to his performance in some amateur theatricals in which his voice occasionally "cracked" to soprano (suggested by the oboe as the leading instrument).

IV. (*W.M.B.*) William Meath Baker, a country squire with a blustery way about him; here he gives the "orders of the day" to his houseguests, who (in the middle section) tease him.

V. (*R.P.A.*) Richard Penrose Arnold, a son of novelist Matthew Arnold. "His serious conversation was continually broken up by whimsical and witty remarks."

VI. (*Ysobel*) Isabel Fitton, an amateur viola player; Elgar gives the leading line to the viola, building it on a familiar exercise in crossing the strings, "a difficulty for beginners."

VII. (*Troyte*) One of Elgar's closest friends, Arthur Troyte Griffith, an architect. The variations represents "some maladroit essays to play the pianoforte; later the strong rhythm suggests the attempts of the instructor (E.E.) to make something like order out of chaos, and the final despairing 'slam' records that the effort proved to be in vain."

VIII. (*W.N.*) Winifred Norbury, whose gracious eighteenth-century house" is depicted.

IX. (*Nimrod*) August Jaeger ("*Jaeger*" is German for "hunter," and Nimrod is the "mighty hunter" of the Old Testament) worked for Elgar's publisher, Novello, and provided early enthusiasm and

moral support for the composer. The variation recalls "a long summer talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven." The theme is arranged at the start so as hint at the slow movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata. This variation is by far the best-known excerpt of the work, noble, poignant, and deeply felt.

Elgar, writing after Jaeger's death, said, "Jaeger was for many years my dear friend, the valued adviser and the stern critic of many musicians besides the writer; his place has been occupied but never filled."

X. (*Dorabella*) Dora Penny, later Mrs. Richard Powell, who wrote an interesting memoir entitled *Memories of a Variation*. This is a lighthearted contrast to the seriousness of "Nimrod." Mrs. Powell herself only realized years later that Elgar was depicting her habit of stammering at times when she was young. But, she wrote, "he exploited his humor at my expense with such marvelous delicacy that no one could help laughing with him—if they understood it."

XI. (*G.R.S.*) Dr. George R. Sinclair, organist of Hereford Cathedral, though, according to Elgar, the variation has more to do with his bulldog Dan. whom he once saw "falling down the steep bank into the river Wye;...paddling upstream to find a landing place;...his rejoicing bark on landing. G.R.S. said, 'Set that to music." I did; here it is." All this takes place in the first five measures!

XII. (*B.G.N.*) Basil G. Nevinson, a fine amateur cellist. The variation features a cello solo as "a tribute to a very dear friend."

XIII. (***) Something of a mystery. The asterisks represent a lady on a sea journey at the time of composition (hence the clarinet's quotation of a theme from Mendelssohn's overture *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, under which the drums suggest the distant throb of an ocean liner), but there is some doubt as to whether Elgar was fully forthcoming in his commentary.

XIV. (*E.D.U.*) The initials here are purposely deceptive. They are in fact a representation of Mrs. Elgar's nickname for her husband, "Edoo." It is the composer's own assertion of his sense of calling, of a self-confidence that he had hitherto lacked. It contains passing references to the variations of the two people who were most supportive at this time (C.A.E. and Nimrod), and concludes with a triumphant presentation of the theme in the major.

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