As Jean Sibelius came to maturity as man and musician, his country lived under the growing threat of absorption into the Russian Empire. Finland had been a Grand Duchy of Russia since 1809, but it enjoyed a great degree of autonomous freedom, with its own parliament and court system. Starting during the reign of Czar Alexander III and continuing with Nicolas II, Russia began to limit the rights of Finns, curtailing the authority of parliament, mandating military service and eventually dissolving the Finnish army.

Rather than taking up arms, the Finns fought back with their culture against the encroachment on their rights from the Russian Bear. Like Verdi in Italy during the rise of the risorgimenti, Sibelius and his music served as the spearhead of Finnish resistance. Premiering less than two months after the Czarist decree dissolving the Finnish parliament, Sibelius’ tone poem Finlandia served as the rallying cry for the Finnish patriotism.

Yet Sibelius was not a political composer, but one steeped in the history and folklore of his native land. His great dramatic symphony Kullervo, and works like the Four Legends from the Kalevala, Pohjola’s Daughter, En Saga and Luonnotar gave musical voice to the mythical past and to the national pride of the Finns in a way that no political statement could possibly match. Yet beyond any political or social considerations, Sibelius distilled the late-Romantic style into his own musical language that would become more organic, more concentrated and more concise throughout his compositional career.

The Swan of Tuonela began life as the prelude to The Building of the Boat, a grand opera that Sibelius intended to rival the scale and scope of Wagnerian music dramas. Sibelius soured on Wagner’s compositional methods soon thereafter, and The Swan of Tuonela was published with three other short symphonic poems as the suite Four Legends from the Kalevala, Op. 22. Each of the four works depicts an adventure from the life of the mythic Finnish hero Lemminkäinen, the central figure of the Kalevala, the national epic of Finland.

Sibelius inscribed the following words on the score: “Tuonela, the land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a large river of black waters and a rapid current, in which The Swan of Tuonela glides majestically, singing.”

Sibelius scores the work for solo English horn, oboe, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, harp and muted strings – an ensemble of dark orchestral colors suitable for depicting the desolation of Tuonela. The English horn is the voice of the swan, singing her dark lament over a lush string texture, divided into as many as thirteen separate parts. While a brief shaft of sunlight pierces the gloom (harp arpeggios over a rich string chord in C major), the horrors of Tuonela soon return, and the swan swims off into the fog, her final utterance heard over ominous timpani strokes and the eerie sonority of tremolo col legno strings (playing with the wood of the bow).

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Fantasia para un Gentilhombre (Fantasia for a Nobleman)

JOAQUÍN RODRIGO (1901 - 1999)

It would be next to impossible to overestimate the influence of Andrés Segovia on the history of the classical guitar. To say that he nearly single-handedly returned the guitar to respectability on the concert stage would not be an exaggeration. As a performer, teacher, commissioner of new works and a composer,
his influence on guitar playing and repertoire has encompassed the globe. The list of composers who wrote and dedicated works to Segovia reads like a Who’s Who of the twentieth century: Manuel Ponce, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Alexandre Tansman, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco and many others. Likewise, he taught many of the greatest guitarists of the following generation, including Julian Bream, Christopher Parkening, John Williams and Sharon Isbin.

From the start of his career, Segovia was eager to find new repertoire for the guitar, but his tastes were largely conservative. He was most comfortable collaborating with Spanish composers who had tapped into the roots of Spain’s folk and popular music in their music. In 1951, Segovia approached Joaquín Rodrigo, asking for a new concerto to build upon the success of the composer’s popular Concierto de Aranjuez, a work Segovia had helped to popularize. While Rodrigo initially refused the commission, he changed his mind after examining a collection of works by the 17th-century Spanish priest and composer, Gaspar Sanz. In Sanz, Rodrigo felt he had found the perfect musical counterpart to the beauty and elegance of Segovia’s playing. He later wrote:

“I thought that the only thing worthy of Segovia would be to place him together with another great guitarist and composer, born in the 17th century, a gentleman in the court of Philip IV, Gaspar Sanz. I consulted Segovia himself, who approved the plan, but not without first warning me of the difficulties of its realization, saying that I would have to work with themes that were very short.”

Rodrigo solved the difficulty of working with short themes by crafting them into a suite of movements, rather than trying to shape them into the extended symphonic discourse of a concerto. The result is a twentieth century reflection upon the Baroque dance suite, much in the manner of Respighi’s suites of Ancient Airs and Dances or Peter Warlock’s Capriol Suite. While neither a direct transcription nor an entirely new work, it pays homage to a bygone musical age in contemporary musical language. Rodrigo himself said of the Fantasia, “My aim was that, if Gaspar Sanz were to hear my work, he would exclaim, ‘That is not exactly me, but I can find myself in it.’”

The work is in four movements and scored for a string orchestra with the addition of only piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and trumpet. The Villano e Ricercare opens with a dignified and stately melody passed back and forth between guitar and orchestra. Solemn and elegant counterpoint characterizes the ricercare that follows, with the guitar weaving its lines around the orchestral textures. La españoleta is in the manner of a slow minuet, with the guitar creating more elaborate counterpoint with each repetition of the melody. The central section of the movement, Fanfare De La Caballeria De Napoles (Fanfare for the Cavalry of Naples), dances its bewitching fandango over a dissonant ostinato punctuated by strummed guitar chords before returning to the wistful La españoleta. The brief Danza de las haches (Axe Dance) struts proudly, with lusty strings answered by guitar, woodwinds and trumpet. The concluding Canario dances ecstatically, dispelling the solemnity of the first two movements, and fully exploring the shifting rhythmic possibilities of this dance from the Canary Islands. After a brief cadenza, the work cavorts happily to the final chord, ending with a joyous flourish.

Carnival of the Animals
CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835 - 1921)

One wonders what the great 20th-century poet T. S. Eliot would have thought if he had lived long enough to see his lighthearted gift to his godchildren, Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats, transformed and revamped by Andrew Lloyd-Webber.
into the international hit musical *Cats*. While I’m sure Eliot would have been more than happy to collect whatever royalties were due to him, he might have sadly mused that for all of his groundbreaking poetry – *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *The Wasteland*, *Four Quartets* – it was this innocuous and charming trifle that would become his best-known work, albeit in a form that would have provoked a headshake and a melancholy smirk from Prufrock.

If Camille Saint-Saëns had also survived to our own time, he would have been Eliot’s sympathetic commiserator. Despite his successes in the opera house (*Samson et Delilah*) and in the concert hall (his *Organ Symphony*, his concertos for cello, violin, piano, his symphonic poems), for most of the listening public his name remains a household word based on a mere shaving from his musical workbench known as *Carnival of the Animals*.

As with Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, Saint-Saëns wrote the *Carnival* as a gift, in his case for the cellist Charles Lebouc, a friend from Saint-Saëns’ days of teaching at the Ecole Niedermeyer. Lebouc hosted a musical soirée every year on the night of Mardi Gras, and in 1886 Saint-Saëns contributed *Carnival of the Animals* to the party. While his “Grande Fantasie Zoölogique” was a big hit that evening, Saint-Saëns restricted the performances to a few subsequent private gatherings (including one attended by Franz Liszt). After much wheedling and prodding from friends and colleagues, Saint-Saëns gave grudging permission for “The Swan” to be performed publicly (mostly as a favor to Lebouc), and permitted publication of the work, but only after his own death.

The fourteen movements of *Carnival of the Animals* are a deft mixture of elegance and parody, scored for an ensemble of two pianos, flute, clarinet, xylophone, glass harmonica and strings.

I. *Introduction and Royal March of the Lion* opens with anticipatory trills in the pianos over unison strings. An exotic march follows, interrupted occasionally by the pianists’ low chromatic scales, depicting the roar of lions.

II. *Hens and Roosters* repeats a “clucking” figure (possibly taken from one of Rameau’s harpsichord suites) that is brought to a halt by the “crowing” of the pianos.

III. *Wild Donkeys* (swift animals) features the pianos stampeding up and down the keyboard in imitation of Tibetan wild donkeys.

IV. *Tortoises* includes one of the work’s slyest bits of musical parody: the stately string theme is really a glacially slow version of the famous “Can-Can” from Jacques Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

V. *L’Élephant* is given voice by the double bass. Here, too, there are musical “Easter eggs” to discover: Saint-Saëns includes small fragments from both Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music and Berlioz’s “Dance of the Sylphs” from *The Damnation of Faust* – unlikely dance music for a lumbering elephant.

VI. Saint-Saëns’s *Kangaroos* amuse themselves by hopping on the two keyboards – their leaps are heard in the arpeggios that bound up and down the two instruments.

VII. The *Aquarium’s* fish swim through the Impressionist texture of string chords colored by piano arpeggios and the glass harmonica, an instrument beloved of Mozart and Benjamin Franklin. In most modern performances, this part is often played on glockenspiel or celesta.

VIII. *Persons with Long Ears* must be donkeys, judging from the “hee-haws” heard from the violins. There is some suggestion that Saint-Saëns was trying to portray other creatures who bray mindlessly: music critics.

IX. *Cuckoo in the Depths of the Woods* creates the impression of the forest bird with just two notes, heard throughout in the clarinet over soft piano chords.
X. Voilè shows us in the middle of a lively aviary, where the solo flute flits and warbles through the forest of tremolo strings, answered by bird calls from the pianos.

XI. Pianists get no mercy from Saint-Saëns – he shows them at their pedantic worst, mindlessly trudging up and down repetitive scale patterns.

XII. Fossils returns us to the world of the composer’s Dance macabre, but there is a smile under the skull’s grimace. In addition to quoting himself, Saint-Saëns slips in numerous allusions to “fossilized” (i.e., old) music: Twinkle, twinkle, little star, a number of French folk songs and even a snippet of Rossini’s “Una voce poco fa” from The Barber of Seville are all mixed into the pre-Cambrian musical stew.

XIII. The Swan swims serenely on a pond of undulating ostinatos from the two pianos.

XIV. In the Finale, Saint-Saëns brings all of his animals back for a final bow in a vigorous ‘can-can,’ much like the end of a vaudeville performance. It seems to be the donkeys/critics who get the last laugh in the high-spirited coda.

La boutique fantasque (After Rossini)
(The Fantastic Toy Shop): Suite
OTTORINO RESPIGHI (1879 - 1936)

We’ve all seen the ads, whether on television or the Internet: “Retire at 50! Sign up now for our latest investment newsletter! Limited spots available for our real estate seminar in your area! You must act immediately! Call this number NOW!” As with most schemes of this type there’s always some sort of catch (or some sort of scam), so most of us either click to close the window, scroll down to the next page or flip to another channel. And for those in the performing arts, who would ever be able to amass enough wealth to retire that early?

Gioacchino Rossini managed to live the dream. In fact, he surpassed the dream: he didn’t retire at 50, he retired at 37. In the previous 21 years, he had written and produced a whopping 39 new operas for the stages of Europe. While not every opera was a smash hit, enough of them were successful that after William Tell (1829), he gave up the hectic life of dealing with singers, impresarios and cranky opera orchestras, and lived off his savings and royalties for the rest of his life. After nearly two decades traveling through Italy and France, he finally settled in Paris in 1856. His weekly Saturday soirées became a focal point for the artistic vanguard of Paris, and invitations to attend were greatly prized. If you were invited to perform, you did have to be careful not to fall afoul of the host’s rapier wit. One unfortunate soprano sang a Rossini aria for the maestro with so many intrusive vocal embellishments that at the conclusion Rossini quietly said, “That was very nice. Who is the composer?”

The downside for musical posterity is that between his retirement in 1829 and his death in 1868, Rossini wrote almost no music, apart from the Petite Messe Solennelle and a number of piano works and art songs. Yet late in life he compiled nearly 180 of these brief works, written simply for his own enjoyment, into a collection self-deprecatingly entitled Péchés de ma vieillesse – “Sins of My Old Age.” With a few exceptions, most of them were composed with tongue planted firmly in cheek – two of the more amusing titles are “A Little Castor Oil Waltz” and “Hygenic Prelude for Morning Use.” Rossini refused to allow their publication, but the manuscripts eventually were sent to his native town of Pesaro where they were preserved in an archive of his works.

Fast forward to 1919 when Ottorino Respighi, after discovering Rossini’s Sins in the archive in Pesaro, approached Léonide Massine, choreographer for Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, with the idea for a ballet based on these short works. Massine took the idea to Diaghilev, who gave his approval. Respighi orchestrated eight pieces from Rossini’s collection for
the ballet, revealing his own deft touch in preserving the lightness, wit and humor of the original music.

The ballet takes place in a toy shop in a resort town on the Mediterranean. Two vacationing families enter looking for mechanical dancing dolls as souvenirs, and are treated to demonstration by the shop’s many dolls. Unfortunately, both families decide they want the same pair of dolls – two can-can dancers, the pride and joy of the shop’s owner. A compromise is reached where each family will buy one of the dolls, and they leave the shop planning to pick up their purchases the following day. When the shop closes and the dolls come to life, there is heartbreak at the impending separation of the can-can couple. The other dolls hide the two dancers so they cannot be easily found. When the families return for their purchases, they furiously tear up the toy store in search of the dolls, but they are repulsed by an attack from the rest of the toy shop, led by scimitar-wielding Cossack dolls. The foreign invaders are put to flight, the can-can dancers are reunited and the dolls dance triumphantly throughout the shop to conclude the ballet.

Dr. David C. Cole, the program annotator for the Flint Symphony Orchestra, has had a distinguished career as a conductor, violinist, music educator and writer. He served as the conductor of the Southwest Florida Symphony’s Youth Symphony, the top ensemble of the three orchestras in the Southwest Florida Symphony Youth Orchestra program, from 2012 - 2017. He also served as the conductor for the Symphony’s Young People’s Concerts and Majors for Minors programs, and he has also served as the Symphony’s Education Director and Youth Orchestra Manager.

In his tenure with the Southwest Florida Symphony’s Youth Symphony, he led them in appearances at Carnegie Hall in New York City in April of 2014, and at the Capital Orchestra Festival at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. in February of 2016. Dr. Cole’s recent guest conducting appearances include concerts with the Marquette Symphony (Michigan), the Colombian National Conservatory Orchestra, the Pleven Philharmonic (Bulgaria), the Orquestra de Camera de Bellas Artes (Mexico City), the Baylor Symphony Orchestra, the El Alto Municipal Youth Orchestra (Bolivia) and the Cincinnati Metropolitan Orchestra.