Clef Notes

Berlioz—*Le carnaval romain*
In this richly pictorial music drawn from his debut opera, the early 19th century French composer sought to depict the colors and excitement of the Roman carnival.

Copland—*Old American Songs*
America’s first internationally celebrated composer, Copland made his name through music
like this: simple, unforgettable melodies and harmonies rooted in the folk music of his native country.

**Borodin—*Polovtsian Dances***
These scenes from the 19th century Russian composer’s grand opera *Prince Igor* depict the sensuality and patriotism of the Polovtsian people as they entertain the opera’s titular character.
Brahms—Symphony No. 2
One of the most beloved works of the German Romantic-era repertoire, Brahms’ symphony captures the pastoral beauty and warmth of the Austrian mountain resort where it was penned during the summer of 1877.

Program Notes

Hector Berlioz—Le carnaval romain
Louis-Hector Berlioz’s first major splash came in 1830 when his cantata, *La Mort de Sardanapale*, won the prestigious Prix de Rome. The prize included two years of studies at the French Academy in Rome. Alas, Berlioz’s studies in Rome ended almost as soon as they began: after three weeks he left the academy upon learning that his fiancé, Marie Moke, had broken off
their engagement. Perhaps this experience colored his experience of Rome, which he would later recall as “the most stupid and prosaic city I know; it is no place for anyone with head or heart.”

In 1838, back in Paris and recovered from his heartbreak, Berlioz penned his first opera, *Benvenuto Cellini*, inspired by the memoirs of the Florentine sculptor of the same name. The
opera, set in Rome, was poorly received at its premiere. The composer later reworked some of the opera’s music, including its carnival scene, into a standalone concert piece that has become a staple of the orchestral repertoire: *Le carnaval romain* (The Roman Carnival).

The joyful and pictorial overture begins with a hint of a dance, followed by a famous
solo for English horn that is based on a melody drawn from a first-act love scene in the opera. This sumptuous section leads into the main body of the overture, which is built in the lively form of a saltarello—a triple-meter Italian dance named for its quick, leaping steps. The music swirls and gallops ever forward, leading to an exciting climax and conclusion.
Aaron Copland—*Old American Songs* (excerpts)

Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn in 1900. As a young composer, he was anxious to write in a style “that would immediately be recognized as American in character.” At the same time, he was troubled by what he termed “an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving
public and the living composers...It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum.”

Copland therefore endeavored to write music which would appeal to a broad audience, and to reach listeners through new means. His worldwide success bore out the rightness of his vision: through works such as *Rodeo* and *Appalachian*
Spring he became America’s best-known composer of the 20th century.

In 1950, Copland was asked by the famous English composer Benjamin Britten to arrange some folk songs for performance at the Music and Art Festival in Aldeburgh, England. Copland responded with a set of five songs, each based on a traditional American tune. They were so well-
received that Copland wrote another set of five songs two years later.

We will hear four of the songs, of which at least one will be familiar to any churchgoer: “At the River,” also known as “Shall We Gather at the River,” an old hymn tune originally written by the American composer Robert Lowry. In “Long Time Ago,” Copland plumbs the nostalgic depths of a lyrical ballad that
he found in a collection of old songs at Brown University. “Zion’s Walls” is a revivalist tune originally by the 19th century Georgia farmer John G. McCurry. “Ching-A-Ring Chaw” comes from the old minstrel blackface tradition; however, for his setting Copland rewrote the lyrics to remove its racist implications.
Alexander Borodin—
*Polovtsian Dances*

Alexander Borodin’s first major work was titled, “On the Analogy between Arsenic Acid and Phosphoric Acid in Chemical and Toxological Behavior.” Like Berlioz, Borodin started his adulthood as a medical student—in his case, at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Medicine and Surgery in Russia. But unlike his French
predecessor, Borodin carried that training on to a distinguished career as a professor and research chemist.

In Borodin’s case, music was always purely a side passion. In his non-working hours he played the cello in chamber ensembles, conducted various groups, and composed a small number of works. Nevertheless, he is now heralded as one of
the towering figures of Russian classical music.

In 1869, Borodin began work on an opera, titled *Prince Igor*. Ambitious in scale and scope, the opera was built on the tale of a 12th century prince and his disastrous military campaigns against the Polovtsians, a Tatar tribe. After Borodin’s sudden death in 1887, the opera was completed by fellow composers Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov and
Alexander Glazunov. It has since become a staple of the opera repertoire in Russia, though it is staged much less often in other parts of the world.

One part of the opera is widely known, however: the ballet scenes known as the *Polovtsian Dances*. These scenes come from a section of the opera in which the Polovtsians entertain Prince Igor with music and
dance while he is held captive in the camp of Khan Kontchak, the Polovtsian leader. Exotic and sensual, the music vividly depicts the seductions of the Khan’s slave girls and the passionate patriotism of the heathen horde.

Johannes Brahms—Symphony No. 2 in D Major
It took Johannes Brahms two decades to write his First Symphony. Along the way, he sometimes expressed doubt that he would ever complete it. Despite (or perhaps because of) his reputation as the most important German composer of his time, Brahms worried that his symphony could never measure up to the standard of his nation’s greatest symphonist. “You have no idea how it feels for someone like
me always to hear such a giant as Beethoven marching along behind me,” he complained.

So the composer was more than heartened by the enthusiastic reception when he finally premiered his First Symphony in 1876. “Even the layman will immediately recognize it as one of the most distinctive and magnificent works of the symphonic literature,” wrote the
influential critic Eduard Hanslick. Perhaps even more poignantly for Brahms, the conductor Hans von Bülow proclaimed the new work “Beethoven’s Tenth.”

With the pressure off, Brahms went on a tear of large-scale compositions. His Second Symphony was finished less than a year after the premiere of his First; his Third and Fourth, as well as the Violin
Concerto and several other major works, were completed within the next decade.

Brahms’ raised spirits are everywhere evident in the Second Symphony, composed during a summer holiday on Lake Wörth in southern Austria. Whereas the First Symphony was composed on an epic scale, the Second Symphony is lyrical and pastoral. Built in four movements, the work
progresses through a classical structure, with a unique and pervading warmth. Like the First Symphony, the Second Symphony enjoyed immediate success, with critics comparing it favorably to the great works of Schubert and Haydn.

The first movement begins softly, with strings, horns and woodwinds passing a tune back and forth. The music winds its way to a climax, then quickly
makes way for the introduction of the second theme — a lilting, tender tune reminiscent of the composer’s famous lullaby, “Good Evening Good Night.” The theme is first stated by the cellos, then repeated by the woodwinds; it will return several times, interspersed between sections that explore varying moods and textures. The melody that began the movement also returns in diverse guises — here tortured,
there lilting. The interplay between these melodies forms the core of this sunny movement, which ends with pizzicato strings strumming softly against a final restatement of the introductory theme.

The second movement is markedly more solemn than the first, with passing moments of melancholic disquiet. Two stormy passages threaten the
peace; but both fade and the movement ends tranquilly. The third movement moves into sunnier territory, with a marked thinning of Brahms’ characteristically dense orchestration. The music skips along at the breezy pace of a serenade, rising in energy in the central section but never shifting far from the cheerful mood.
Brahms’ playfulness is evident in the opening bars of the finale. Strings and woodwinds play a sing-songy passage at barely a whisper, resolving with a quiet cadence that seems to be headed nowhere fast. Instead, the orchestra bursts out with an exuberant theme. As this excitement fades, a new theme is introduced by the violins. It is repeated by the winds, leading to another exciting climax. This episodic,
cascading structure continues for the rest of the movement, increasing in vigor and leading ultimately to a triumphant climax.