At age nineteen Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) was denied entrance to the Conservatory of Milan, in part because of his lack of formal training but primarily because he was “too old.” Nevertheless he persevered, studying composition privately. His first opera, *Oberto*, premiered at La Scala in Milan when he was just twenty-six. The previous year (1838) he and his wife had lost their first child (age 1½) and their second died in 1839; then his wife died just eight months later, after only four years of marriage. Yet Verdi continued to compose during these tragic years. The director of the opera house at Milan, with which he was contracted to write another opera, gave him the libretto for *Nabucco* (*Nebuchadnezzar*). The first text Verdi saw was “Va, pensiero,” and he said he immediately could hear the words being sung. Also known in English as the “Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves,” it is sung by the Jewish exiles in Babylon following the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem. The opera premiered in 1842 and Verdi said in retrospect, “This is the opera with which my artistic career really begins. And though I had many difficulties to fight against, it is certain that *Nabucco* was born under a lucky star.” At the first rehearsal “the stagehands shouted their approval, then beat on the floor and the sets with their tools to create an even noisier demonstration.” The Overture to *Nabucco*, hurriedly completed after the rest of the music was already written, incorporates several themes heard later in the opera. These themes, including the noble hymn played by trombones at the beginning, recur throughout the overture. Full orchestra rudely interrupts the somber trombones momentarily, the first of many extreme contrasts in dynamics and mood. The Overture’s dramatic musical effects foreshadow the upcoming action onstage. *Pizzicato* strings accompany the oboe and clarinet duet that introduces the most famous episode from the chorus “Va pensiero.”

From the time of *Nabucco*, Verdi was a revered figure in Italy. Tight security reigned at rehearsals prior to his opera premieres, lest someone get a sneak peak at a theme that would instantly become the pop tune of the day, sung by every gondolier in Venice. His personal life also improved after the losses in his twenties; he eventually married the soprano who had premiered *Nabucco*. After achieving success with *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (1853), *La traviata* (1853), *Don Carlos* (1867) and *Aida* (1871), Verdi completed his Requiem in 1874, intending it to be his last composition. However, when he was seventy-three, *Otello*, with libretto by Arrigo Boito premiered at La Scala (1887). And in the summer of 1889, he decided to compose the music for Boito’s libretto for *Falstaff*. The composer was at first concerned about being able to complete the project at his age, but the work premiered in February 1893, with Verdi writing, “What joy to be able to say to the public: HERE WE ARE AGAIN!!! COME AND SEE US!” [upper case in the original] When Verdi died, people lined the streets of Milan for his funeral cortège, often spontaneously singing choruses of “Va, pensiero.” A month later Verdi and his wife were reinterred at Casa di Riposo per Musicisti, and an estimated 300,000 assembled to watch the procession. An 800-voice choir conducted by Arturo Toscanini sang “Va, pensiero” as the carriage left the cemetery.
MILAN, Jan. 30.—The funeral of Giuseppe Verdi took place this morning. The ceremony was most simple, owing to the silent homage of the populace, who were present in immense numbers.

The body of Verdi was borne from his residence at 7 o'clock and placed in a very modest funeral car, which, followed by a few intimate friends, proceeded to the Church of St. Francis, the façade of which bore the inscription, “Peace to the Soul of Giuseppe Verdi.”

The religious ceremony lasted only five minutes. Then a procession was formed, headed by priests and with firemen marching beside the car, which was followed by friends of the dead composer, the local authorities, and leading citizens, bareheaded. A vast concourse lined the route, and people even climbed the trees to get a glimpse of the cortège. Several houses were draped with mourning.

On the arrival of the body at the cemetery the crowd was so large that two squadrons of Carbineers were unable to keep open a space around the graveside. The body was interred without ceremony and there were no speeches.

Born in Spain, Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999) was only three when he contracted diphtheria and became permanently blind. He revealed that he might not have become a composer except for this tragic experience. “I believe my blindness gave me more insight with the inner world. . . While sitting on this wicker chair I am thinking that the illness, the loss of vision, was the vehicle that took me down the road to music. Otherwise, I would surely have followed in the footsteps of my family and become a merchant (even though my first wishes were very different. I was set on being a streetcar conductor).” In his twenties, he studied in Paris with Paul Dukas and Manuel de Falla. He lived in France and Germany during the Spanish Civil War, and Concierto de Aranjuez was composed in Paris in 1939.

Following Rodrigo’s return to his native Spain, the concerto premiered in Barcelona in 1940. The composition was well received and gave the composer widespread acclaim. Rodrigo subsequently composed ten additional concertos, but none achieved the success of this one. In 1992, on Rodrigo’s ninetieth birthday, King Juan Carlos of Spain made him the honorary Marqués de los jardines de Aranjuez (Marquis of the gardens of Aranjuez).

Aranjuez, near Madrid, was the summer home of the Spanish kings. Rodrigo’s music captures the essence of the Spanish countryside with its folk music and guitar traditions. Concierto de Aranjuez begins with rhythmic strumming by the soloist who then deftly plucks out the melody while the orchestra continues the rhythmic accompaniment. Instead of fragmenting and developing themes, Rodrigo creates variety through ornamentation, by changing the register (octave), the instrumentation, and/or the volume. The guitarist is the focal point, but a cameo for cello provides a pleasant change of timbre in this opening movement. The Allegro con spirito remains colorful and “spirited” throughout. The second movement is the best known of the three and is often played alone. Introduced by English horn with gentle accompaniment in the guitar and strings, the Adagio, melancholic in the minor mode, is slow and nostalgic. The simple melody appears in the guitar and becomes gradually more ornamented. Brief imitative dialogues occur between the soloist and the English horn, bassoon, and oboe. After a long guitar cadenza and a climactic middle section, the Adagio resolves quietly, with an unexpected change to the major mode. The final movement presents a repetitive folk tune whose irregular meter creates a sense of being off-balance. Rodrigo never
allowed the solo instrument to be overshadowed, as illustrated in the dialogues between the guitar and various sections of the orchestra. This concerto takes the listener to another culture, perhaps to another era, in which there was time to sit under the shade tree, ruminate, and improvise on the guitar.

DID YOU KNOW?? Michelle Kwan chose Rodrigo’s *Concierto de Aranjuez* for her free skate program at the 2003 World Figure Skating Championship.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-75) was thirteen when he entered the Petrograd (later Leningrad, then St. Petersburg) Conservatory to study piano and composition. When he was sixteen, his father died and Dmitri helped support his mother and two sisters by playing piano for silent films. His First Symphony, written for his 1926 graduation, was well received at home as well as in the United States and Germany. At twenty-eight Shostakovich produced his opera *Lady MacBeth of the Mtsensk District*, which garnered much success around the world for two years before Stalin abruptly walked out of a performance in 1936. The work was subsequently attacked as “Chaos instead of Music” in the Soviet-controlled newspaper *Pravda*. The opera closed and Shostakovich withdrew several works, supposedly repenting of his decadent ways. He deliberately set about composing the Fifth Symphony in a style acceptable to Socialist Realism. According to this philosophy of the totalitarian government, music was expected to have singable tunes, be accessible to the masses, and avoid “bourgeois formalism” and other disturbing influences from the West (especially jazz). Shostakovich regained favor with *Symphony No. 5 in D minor*, “A Soviet artist’s practical, creative reply to just criticism.” An ovation following the work’s November 1937 premiere lasted half an hour. Nevertheless, throughout the rest of his life, Shostakovich was alternately praised and chastised by the Soviet regime. Such a rollercoaster of favor/disfavor surely affected his emotional, physical, and artistic health.

*Symphony No. 5 in D minor* begins with a jagged figure in dotted rhythms in the lower strings, imitated by the upper strings, which is quickly followed by an eerie theme played by first violins. The tension at times seems unbearable, but there is a respite in the middle of the movement when pulsations in the lower strings provide a backdrop for a disjunct melody of sustained pitches in the violins. The piano introduces a new section that continually accelerates as horns play an ominous theme. One feels inexorably propelled against one’s will. Themes overlap canonically and seem to spin out of control before an exaggerated march takes over. But the frenetic pace returns as themes are squeezed into increasingly tighter spaces before the timpani announces the return of the declamatory theme, played by strings in unison. Flute and French horn play a sweet duet with lower strings returning to the pulsing theme. After all the dramatic changes of instrumentation and mood, the first movement eerily fades away.

Moments of humor in the *Allegretto* contrast the darkness of the first movement. “Sneaky” *pizzicato* strings, a parody of a Russian marching band, a violin solo (a clown pantomime perhaps?), and the imitation of the “clown theme” by various woodwinds all illustrate Shostakovich’s command of instrumental scoring. Then the second movement is abruptly silenced by an angry orchestra. In the *Largo*, long-breathed phrases in the strings, plaintive themes for woodwinds (scored for solos, duets, trios) and numerous countermelodies resurrect the tension and angst of the first movement. Note the absence of brass instruments. The brass section returns in the *Allegro non troppo*, but rather than discuss this last movement and how it relates to the previous three, I am sharing a quote attributed to the composer. Four years after Shostakovich died, Solomon Volkov published *Testimony: the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, which he claims to have translated directly from the composer’s own memoirs. Scholars are divided about the veracity of some of the “testimony,” especially given its political ramifications, but musicologists agree that Shostakovich’s music is infused with irony and perhaps parodies of demonstrations of military might and pompous authority figures. Here is Volkov’s translation:

“Awaiting execution is a theme that has tormented me all my life. Many pages of my music are devoted to it. Sometimes I wanted to explain that fact to the performers, I thought that they would have a greater understanding of the work’s meaning. But then I thought better of it. You can’t explain anything to a bad performer and a talented person should sense it himself. . . . I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. It’s as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, ‘Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,’ and
you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, ‘our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.’ What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that.”

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