

First Parish Church of Watertown, Massachusetts

Submitted by Linda Vieira

“From Tundra to West Texas: Folksongs in Piano Literature”

Presenter: Joseph Smith

Through performances, recordings, broadcasts, lectures and magazine articles, Mr. Smith has brought many little-known pieces to the attention of the public. He has been called a “walking encyclopedia of the piano” and NEPTA members were treated to an informative and enjoyable presentation with performances of many pieces. (Apologies for the long summary but Mr. Smith’s talk was very detailed and interesting and covered over 10 composers.)

Mr. Smith began his presentation by commenting on the vastness and richness of the piano literature, even for a niche like pieces based on folk songs. Composers have turned to folk sources for a variety of reasons:

- to celebrate a composer’s native country
- to preserve musical folklore from being lost
- to study traditions that differ from Western art music
- to pay tribute to other cultures

He remarked that it is easy to assimilate folk tunes as a basis for teaching pieces and he proceeded to play examples from three centuries to illustrate the range of styles and levels of difficulty.

His talk began with **Grieg, Grainger and Bartok**, grouped together because they were all great composers, we have recordings of all of them and they made field trips to collect folk songs rather than just getting them from published collections. All three resisted the Germanic tradition. Grainger shunned the traditional forms for his compositions, Grieg complained about his education in Leipzig and Bartok chose to study in Budapest instead of the traditional places of Germany or Austria. Grainger and Bartok were pioneers in using the newly invented phonograph. To these three composers, folk music represented a tradition to draw upon and an alternative to the classical forms, enabling them to

expand the language of music while retaining a connection to the music of the people.

**Edvard Grieg** is an important composer who based many significant works on folk music including:

***Norwegian Dances and Symphonic Dances***, both for 4 hands

***Ballade***, variations on a Norwegian folksong is his most ambitious piece. He was inspired to bolder harmonies by the Norwegian landscape, culture, traditions and legends embodied in them as illustrated in ***Nineteen Previously Unpublished Norwegian Folksongs Op. 66***, which are harmonically denser than Grieg's previous piano music. Mr. Smith played ***Gjendine's Cradle Song*** from this collection, based on a girl singing this song to her infant in the moonlight by a rushing river.

Grieg's familiar ***Lyric Pieces*** offer a wealth of colorful pieces of moderate difficulty but many of Grieg's folkloric pieces in his ***Op. 17, Op. 66***, and ***Six Mountain Melodies*** are shorter and easier. Mr. Smith felt it important to mention Grieg's ***Slatter Opus 72***: transcriptions of dances for the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle. This work is not just 20th century chronologically but also by virtue of its percussiveness.

Next to **Bela Bartok**. He was deeply involved in folk songs throughout his life. He collected songs, wrote down songs preserved in recordings by others and wrote any number of essays on folk songs of many countries, not just Hungary. His ***Dance Suite*** is a celebration of several different national styles. His music is folkloric but he only used folk songs in works designated as such: ***Rumanian Folk Dances, Three Rondos on Folksongs, Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs***.

In Bartok's ***For Children***, the first part is based on Hungarian folk songs and the second on Slovakian songs. This collection is an important pedagogical one with 84 pieces; the title ought to have been "***For Anyone Interested in Folklore***" Mr. Smith said "It is only when you read through the whole thing...that you fully appreciate the resourcefulness Bartok brings to these little pieces." His harmonic distinction and use of modes is evident throughout and his accompaniments are not just accompaniments: they are filled with contrapuntal interest, even in the simplest of them. He uses variety of forms: No. 5 is a variation set, No. 6 is rondo

and No.31 is a canon. No. 39 is a ballad written in variations but arranged in a different tempos and textures that suggest a continuous narrative. He uses exactly the same approach in Ballade from the **15 Hungarian Peasant Songs**.

Mr. Smith chose **Rhapsody (Nos. 40 and 41 from: For Children** , one of Bartok's larger works to perform an excerpt from. Similar to **Hungarian Rhapsodies** of Liszt, it is Bartok's only piece to include two different folk songs. It is a more modest and sober piece than Liszt but it preserves the basic Lisztian shape, opposing improvisational, parlando (speaking) sections with rhythmic dance-like sections.

Bartok's greatest contribution to the pedagogical literature is, of course, the **Mikrokosmos**. Not only does it move progressively from easiest to the very difficult but it also introduces a comprehensive array of modernist compositional techniques.

**Percy Grainger** not only loved folk tunes but they suited his philosophy of composition as well. He professed to "hate the classic forms," though he did perform sonatas and concertos. In taking down a folk song, he believed that no detail of the singing should be dismissed as incidental or trivial: *everything* had to be notated. Grainger composed an orchestral **Suite on Danish** Folksongs based on folksongs from the 1920s. In 1949, he composed a piano setting of one of the movement from this suite based on two songs, "'**The Nightingale**' and '**The Two Sisters**'" (performed by Mr. Smith and included in his anthology). Most of Grainger's piano music is brutally difficult and he professed to despise the piano. Most of his piano pieces were not conceived for the piano: they are very literal transcription of his music for other media. He "pretty much just crams the music onto the grand staff without arranging it for piano". One exception, **Three Scottish Folksongs**, published posthumous by Peters, are short, relatively easy and beautiful pieces.

When Dover commissioned Mr. Smith's anthology **American Piano Classics**, their only requirement was that it must include a piece by **Amy Beach**. Some background first. In 1883, Franz Boas, a German anthropologist, wrote about his

experience living with Eskimos for a year in *The Central Eskimo* (1888). This book contains fifteen songs notated by Boas, who was also an amateur pianist.

In 1907, Ms. Beach used tunes collected by Boas for her suite, *Eskimos*. With *Eskimos*, she used the folk tunes to create relatively easy pieces suitable for teaching. She also included them on her concert programs. Mr. Smith performed *The Returning Hunter from: Eskimos*: the folk song is heard note-for-note in the first fourteen bars. Ms. Beach did not specialize in folkloric materials but her *Variations on Balkan Themes, Op. 60*, (1904) remains her most ambitious work for solo piano. Mr. Smith did not find Ms. Beach's works interesting at first but after some research, her pieces won him over. He played Beach's *Scottish Legend* at a gala in Carnegie Hall.

**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** lived in Sierra Leone and was the son of an African father and an English mother. His success began with his *Ballade* for orchestra. He then composed an oratorio on Longfellow's *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* followed by two more Hiawatha oratorios to form a trilogy that was often performed in England. Taylor's palpable enthusiasm for the subject is felt in his music which represents "a sort of indirect nationalism: if it does not celebrate blacks, it does celebrate a non-white culture either"

The huge success by an Anglo-African excited the interest of the African American intelligentsia. In 1901, an all-black choral society in Washington D. C. was named in honor of the composer. Taylor came to the U.S. several times for concert tours, strengthening his sense of racial identity. He went on to produce a number of large works on Black subjects. One of these was the collection of **24 Negro Melodies** set for piano (Mr. Smith noted that "Negro" was once the standard term and was in no way pejorative). Published in 1905, this collection includes are not only spirituals, but African themes. Mr. Smith played *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* from this collection. He also noted that he is fond of Taylor's clarinet quintet, the violin concerto, and, for piano, the charming waltz suite, *Three-Fours*,

Mr. Smith also mentioned **Harry T. Burleigh** who is remembered for his settings of spirituals for voice and piano. It was these pioneering arrangements

that first enabled spirituals to enter the standard recital repertoire. Burleigh also composed ***From the Southland***, a suite for solo piano. Several movements are founded on spirituals: “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” “A New Hiding Place” and “My Lord, What a Morning.” In the U.S., Burleigh sang the role of Taylor’s Hiawatha under the composer and he subsequently dedicated ***From the Southland*** to Taylor. Both this and Taylor’s waltz suite are in Mr. Smith’s anthology, ***Four Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Piano Suites by Black Composers***.

**Paul Bowles** had professional success in two fields, music and writing. As a composer, Bowles tends to be light and ingratiating whereas his fiction is violent, cold, and pessimistic. He abandoned music for writing and once said, “It seemed to me there were a great many things I wanted to say that were too precise to express in musical terms.”

In the Lincoln Center library, Mr. Smith had “the thrill of stumbling on the original publication of Bowles folk song settings for piano” (it shouldn’t have been on an open shelf, but it was!) The cover says, “New York City/ Music Project/ Work Projects Administration/ Art Program/ Music Education Division/ American Folk Songs arranged for Piano Solo by Paul Bowles” probably from the late 30s or early 40’s. The Great Depression was a great period for the arts due to the Work Projects Administration (WPA). Many artists were now provided with a regular income and the dignity of seeing their endeavors treated as “work.” In music, the WPA supported projects ranging from a group of madrigal singers to regional folksong collecting. Bowles’ WPA projects included Orson Welles’ *Dr. Faustus*, which established Bowles as a leading theater composer.

These seven folksong settings are now published under the title ***Folk Preludes***. Mr. Smith chose ***Ole Tare River from: American Folk Songs [also called Folk Preludes]*** to perform: a nonsense song from 1840 about a fight between an opossum and raccoon but Bowles gives this simple setting tonal variety by adding a prelude and postlude in Dorian mode.

**David Guion** was a composer and bronco-rider (not too common!) He grew up on a ranch in Texas, where he soaked up both cowboy and African-American music before studying in Vienna. His complicated piano settings of such tunes as

*Turkey in the Straw* and *Arkansas Traveler* offer a distinctive kind of cowboy counterpoint. Guion's most famous work "*Home on the Range*" is a subject of dispute and confusion with people from Texas and Kansas. The original poem was published in 1873 by someone in Kansas and set to music by someone else. The song moved to Texas where Guion heard it as a youngster. When he prepared his version, he tinkered with the words, but instead of the original tune (a more lively one), he composed his own original melody, the one we all know. The American folk song collector, John Lomax, heard the Guion version and he knew nothing of the song's tangled history. Believing it to be anonymous, he included it in a collection with no attribution, thus producing the false impression that Guion had simply claimed folk material as his own.

Problems with Guion: The era in which he composed (1920's) and his personal background allowed him to use racial stereotypes as subjects for his music. His writing is also complicated, but Mr. Smith felt there is value in his folkloric pieces. Mr. Smith played "*Sheep and Goat Walkin' to the Pasture,*" with a little snatch here and there of other old familiar cowboy breakdowns and a few 'side-kicks' his own.

**Ferruccio Busoni** had a special genius for adapting, re-thinking, and amplifying the musical ideas of others. His Bach transcriptions are valued as creative works in their own right as well as his many transcriptions ranging from Offenbach to Schoenberg. Earlier American composers searching for an authentic national idiom turned to Native American sources but the greatest examples of art music based on American Indian materials were by an Italian **Busoni**. (Mr. Smith noted that the term "Indian appears in titles and was the standard term at that time and not necessarily pejorative).

.A former student of Busoni, Natalie Curtis, introduced him to the Native American songs. During the time she began collecting these songs (early 20<sup>th</sup> century), government officials discouraged or even forbade the singing of Indian songs. With special permission from President Theodore Roosevelt, she collected songs from 19 tribes which she published in 1907 as *The Indians' Book*. Curtis realized that the songs were not just music, but a part of the Native American

spiritual life. Busoni was drawn to Indians because they represented a spiritual and poetic view of the world, the opposite of white America's materialism and literalism. In a letter he wrote in 1910, Busoni said "I spoke to a Red Indian woman. She told me how her brother (a talented violinist) came to New York to try and make his way. But he could not associate his ideas with the question of daily bread. "

In 1915, Busoni composed his *Indian Diary*, a suite of four piano pieces. Mr. Smith performed the **No. 3 Pima tribe** based on a melody from that tribe: a bluebird's lament for a lost song. He turns the short-breathed original into a long arching melody. The texture is so delicate that Busoni can give the pentatonic melody a bitonal setting without any sense of clashing. He seems less interested in the melody than in expressing the Indian spirituality which he so admired. Busoni also produced two other Indian works: a second book of the *Indian Diary* for orchestra, and the *Indian Fantasy* for piano and orchestra.

Variation form has inspired some of the most intellectually challenging works in music, yet it can be worthless as well. The trivial kind decorates. The serious kind poses questions: What is the basic overall shape of the theme? What features are essential? Can the bass line be used without reference to the melody? Must the *character* of the theme be preserved in the variations? Like the famous themes by Paganini and Diabelli and the Russian Kamarinskaya, **La Folia** was born to be varied by virtue of its clear, recognizable harmonic shape and bass line. Originally, it was a fast Portuguese dance tune meaning madness and folly but the version we know is the later Spanish one which is slow and dignified. So many have composed variations on this tune: Corelli's violin variations from the 1700's, Alessandro Scarlatti's keyboard variations in 1750, Liszt included it in his *Spanish Rhapsody*, Rachmaninoff called his set **Variations on a Theme by Corelli** mistaking thinking Corelli composed the theme.

**Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach** or Emmanuel (as his friends called him) pioneered a willful, capricious style, featuring wild juxtapositions of motif, tonality and mood. Of course, his best known piece is C minor Solfeggio. (Yes, that is the title—there seems no good reason why it should be referred to as Solfeggietto, though it often is!) This piece is quite characteristic of his style, in using

distribution between the hands as an expressive element and in its restless, agitated mood. We recognize these elements in the variations as well. The fact that Emmanuel lies in between the baroque and the classical gives the variations a wonderful variety of texture.

Mr. Smith played Emmanuel's **12 Variations on the Folie d'Espagne**, composed in 1778. It is clearly a set of transformative, rather than decorative variations. The first variation chops the theme to little bits of various lengths. and the third variation is one of those patterns that succeed in turning the two hands into one great big hand. The Baroque lives on in two canonic variations. and although the keyboard of Emmanuel's time may be small compared with ours, the way he sweeps boldly up and down to its extremes makes it seem vast.

Now to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and **Felix Mendelssohn**. The 19th century popularity of Irish folk songs due Thomas Moore. He was a poet who took songs collected by others and put his own words to them. His publications spread the songs throughout the world and popularized the idea of a mythic, poetic Ireland. Mendelssohn's **Fantasy on an Irish Song, Op. 15** is based on "The Last Rose of Summer" and was probably taken from Moore's publications. The improvisatory nature and the overall loose form is may not seem typical of Mendelssohn but in the Romantic era, pianists would improvise, not just for an intimate circle, but publically. Mendelssohn was renowned for the sophistication and coherence of his improvisations. While the fantasy may be untypical of his finished, published compositions, it may in fact be typical of what he would have played in a performance.

This fantasy could describe as being "inspired by" rather than "on" the folksong. After a prelude, the song appears in an unadorned setting. Its only other appearance is a nostalgic quotation of the first two phrases much later. And yet, one feels that the song generates the fantasy. It's like a ballade or a musical narrative with the folksong playing a leading role. The passages of the recitative add to the feeling that it is telling a story. The piece closes with a consoling, songful episode. There are obvious parallels with the melody: rhythm, contour and form. Before the return of the opening phrase, the folk song pauses on the

relative minor. Mendelssohn also pauses on the minor but substitutes the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree for the 6<sup>th</sup> or the median for the submediant. It is as though, Mendelssohn composes his own Irish folksong. His talent for invented folklore served him well when he composed his beloved Italian and Scotch Symphonies.

Among the many publications Mr. Smith has written or edited, he referred frequently to:

- Simply Romantic Piano (easier repertoire from the Romantic era)
- Rare Finds; includes CD and an essay for each piece

His complete list of publications and a wealth of information can be found at Mr. Smith's website [josephsmithpianist.com](http://josephsmithpianist.com)

The following is a list of pieces that he discussed and played for NEPTA

- Carl Philip Emanuel Bach: ***12 Variations on the Folie d'Espagne***
  - Bela Bartok: ***Rhapsody (Nos. 40 and 41 from: For Children)*** [Slovakian folksongs]
  - Amy Beach: ***The Returning Hunter (from: Eskimos)***
  - Paul Bowles: ***Ole Tare River (from: American Folk Songs) [also called Folk Preludes]***
  - Ferruccio Busoni: ***Indian Diary, No. 3 [Pima tribe]***
  - Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: ***Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child (from: Twenty-Four Negro Melodies)***
  - Percy Grainger: ***"The Nightingale" and "The Two Sisters"*** [Danish folksongs]
  - Edvard Grieg: ***Gjendine's Cradle Song (from: Nineteen Previously Unpublished Norwegian Folksongs, Op. 66)***
  - David Guion: ***Sheep and Goat Walkin' to the Pasture: Cowboys' and Old Fiddlers' Breakdown***
- Mendelssohn: ***Fantasy on an Irish Song, Op. 15*** ["The Last Rose of Summer"]