ecause opera unites the arts, it has always been the most ravishing and extravagant entertainment. And from the very beginning of operatic theater, which is rooted in the choral dances of the Greeks, the spectacle of dance has commanded a significant place in the opera house, whether integrated into the drama or offered as a casual diversion.

Ballet, the older art of the two, has played its role in opera ever since nymphs and shepherds cavorted on the Baroque stage. Conditioned by Jean Baptiste Lully, the guiding spirit of the dance at the Court of Louis XIV, and later by Rameau, operagoers in France expected dance as a matter of course. In the following century, the Paris Opéra observed an unwritten law that the second act of an opera must feature a ballet episode. Even Wagner was forced to obey this stricture. The fusion of opera and dance peaked in the nineteenth century, whose repertoire has generated this collection of exotic pieces—both familiar and obscure—but each capable of standing alone as an orchestral experience.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

(1844-1908)

Dance of the Tumblers from *The Snow Maiden*

In the summer of 1880, Rimsky-Korsakov, a master of both the Russian idiom and coloristic orientalisms, retreated to the heart of the countryside, near Stelevo. There, surrounded by forests and fields, and sensitive to the palpitating forms of life around him, he composed a folklore opera based on a fantastic interpretation of nature. As soon as he read *The Snow Maiden*, Rimsky-Korsakov "fell deeply in love" with Ostrovsky's fantasy play, for which Tchaikovsky had already provided incidental music in 1873. Set in prehistoric times, it includes as principal characters the Bonny Spring and Grandfather Frost, and their love-child, the Snow Maiden (Snegurochka), who, in the Prologue, is granted her deep wish to live among humans. She suffers because of the cold heart she has inherited from her father. After offering a reward to anyone who can make the Snow Maiden fall in love, the Czar, in a forest clearing, calls upon his minstrels for a merry dance—the popular *Dance of the Tumblers*, whose tune was derived from a popular collection of folksongs.

By the fourth and final act, Spring at last grants the Snow Maiden the gift of love. Suddenly nature explodes into life, and the Snow Maiden weds Mizgir', who had been hopelessly smitten by her already in the opening act. Composed in verse, with copious songs and dances, the opera (first produced by the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1882) was judged beautiful, but too long. Even after preparing an abridged version in 1895, Rimsky-Korsakov proposed further cuts. Nevertheless, he was always partial to this magical fairy-tale work, addressing his wife in 1893: "Anyone who does not like *The Snow Maiden* has understood nothing of my music, nor of me."

Richard Strauss

(1864-1949)

Dance of the Seven Veils from *Salome*

Nothing offers a better jolt to a composer's fame and fortune than a scandalous premiere. Denounced from the pulpit—and nowhere with more fire than in America—*Salome* was a box office smash. Soon produced by opera houses all over the world, it has been going strong ever since, and its lurid *Dance of the Seven Veils* remains as seductive at the end of this century as it was in 1905. Richard Strauss's one-act music drama was based on a German translation of Oscar Wilde's play, originally written in French, and a failure in Paris; in an English translation it was banned by London's Lord Chamberlain. But the music drama in a single continuous act—his first major success as an opera composer—made the composer a very rich man, and the highly domesticated and bourgeois Strauss thrived on his notoriety and surging income.

Abundant with orchestral commentary that is richer than the vocalism, the score employs a vast orchestral palette, colored by multiple woodwinds and exotic

percussion. The steamiest moment of the drama focuses on the seductress—Strauss envisioned her as "a 16-year-old princess with the voice of an Isolde"—as she tantalizes the lustful King Herod with her salacious dance on the moonlit terrace of his palace. Leaving the dance until he'd finished the rest of the score, Strauss incorporated striking motifs from the opera, such as the snarl of trumpets and trombones on a figure identified with the head of Jochanaan. A gently rocking rhythm evokes the swaying of Salome's hips. The intensity mounts, so that at the climax of her display, she is justified in making her outrageous demand for the head of John the Baptist on a silver salver.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(1840-1893)

Hopak from *Mazeppa*

Tchaikovsky, in his own words, was Russian through and through. The folksongs he absorbed in the mining town of his early childhood resurfaced in his seventh opera, *Mazeppa,* inspired by the historical character Ivan Mazeppa. By entering into an alliance with Charles XII of Sweden, this notorious cossack attempted to set up a Ukrainian state independent from Russia. The melodramatic tale stems from Pushkin's poem *Poltava*, and already a decade before Tchaikovsky, an obscure composer named Adam Minhejmer composed a *Mazeppa,* which did not see the stage before 1900. Meanwhile, in February 1884, Tchaikovsky's opera was given two nearly simultaneous productions, the first by the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, and the other opening three days later at the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg.

As the guest of the Minister of Justice, whose young daughter is enamored of the distinguished visitor, Mazeppa is entertained in the opening act with a lively Hopak, a robust Ukrainian dance in duple meter. Danced by a group using the same steps, the springing, stamping number seems authentically Ukrainian rather than original with Tchaikovsky, especially as it builds to a whirlwind finish. Both its athleticism and supple grace are hallmarks of the great ballet composer. But this Hopak is one of the few colorful episodes in the gloomy historical spectacle. The notorious separatist demands the daughter's hand and then quarrels with the Minister, who is beheaded in a conspiracy. By the close, the Ophelia-like heroine plays out a mad scene, while the conniving Mazeppa—himself betrayed by the Swedish king—coldly hurries away.

Modest Mussorgsky

(1839-1881)

Dance of the Persian Slaves from *Khovanshchina*

In a career plagued by alcoholism and cut short by an early death, Mussorgsky confronted the challenge of producing a national music. The result was his most stirring work, *Boris Godunov*, an icon of Russian operatic theater. But as soon as he was done with *Boris*, he immersed himself in another turbulent period in his nation's history, the change from the "old" to the "new" Russia following the accession of Peter the Great in 1682. Inspired by the chronicles of the Old Believers, the Rasskolniki, who violently opposed the reforms introduced into the Russian Orthodox Church, Mussorgsky worked simultaneously on both his complex libretto and the music for *Khovanshchina,* which he left unfinished at his death. He had spread the cluttered action across six dramatic scenes, but these were recast into five conventional acts by Rimsky-Korsakov, who completed the portions that Mussorgsky had been hastily revising, and prepared a brilliant orchestration.

In a preface to the score published three years before *Khovanschina*'s 1886 premiere, Rimsky-Korsakov emphasized: "... the Persian Dances were orchestrated by me during the composer's life with his full assent." His colorful scoring spotlights numerous solos, focusing initially on the English horn, which introduces one of two principal ideas, a sad but sensuous strain whose contours could only be Eastern, and which serves as high contrast to the vivacious dance subject. This number, which quickly won a regular place in the concert hall, appears in the opening scene of Act IV, where the aging Prince Khovansky, leader of the crack Moscow militia and nemesis of the Czar, calls for his slave girls to entertain him as he dines in his lavish banquet hall. The sensuous music is the last diversion of his life, for he is assassinated before the act is over.

Henri Rabaud

(1873-1949)

Dances from *Marouf, Cobbler of Cairo*

The name Henri Rabaud is the least familiar on this disc, but he was a noted Parisian conductor and composer, thoroughly at home in the opera house. Between 1908 and 1918, he led the pit orchestras of both the Paris Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, after which he spent a season conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Named director of the Paris Conservatoire in 1922, he held this post until 1941.

Of his dozen operas (which include a Shakespeare-based *Antoine et Cléopatra*) the madcap five-act comedy, *Marouf, Cobbler of Cairo* (1914), was the most successful, and it is the only one to survive. There is no mistaking its heavily perfumed Arabian Nights atmosphere, for *The Thousand and One Nights* was its source. Marouf, cobbler of Cairo, lives out the wildest dreams of any man who ever endured a fat and nagging wife. He runs away from home, only to find himself shipwrecked and penniless on a foreign shore. Then his luck turns: first he is rescued by a friendly beachcomber who turns out to be

an old schoolmate, and subsequently he wins the hand of a lovely princess, whose sire assumes that Marouf is a wealthy businessman, awaiting his delayed caravan. Thanks to a genie, the caravan materializes, and all ends without a hitch.

Rich with picturesque orientalisms well beyond the inevitable shaking of the tambourine, these Dances evoke memories of early film scores, even though they antedate the age of the sound cinema for which Rabaud also wrote. Tuneful, luxuriantly harmonized and full of striking instrumental solos—plus a hint of Bolero rhythm—the Dances mount orgiastically to a big climax.

Anton Rubinstein

(1830-1894)

Ballet music from *The Demon*

Anton Rubinstein is recognized as one of the great piano virtuosos of the last century, but he was also a teacher at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he served as director for many years. Besides composing a handful each of concertos and symphonies, he produced an astonishing number of operas—19 in all, some to German texts. The only one that hasn't been forgotten is *The Demon,* based on a popular narrative poem by Lermontov, who referred to it as his "oriental tale," from which Rubinstein took his cue for some of the music.

Initially denounced as sacrilegious, the story deals with the love of a fallen angel—a gloomy, Faustian character—for the Caucasian Princess Tamara. The Demon arranges to have Prince Sinodel killed so that he might himself possess her. To escape his passion, she flees to a cloister. But he pursues her, and their only encounter, which elicits an aria of triumph, culminates in the kiss by which he takes possession of her mortal soul. She falls dead.

Like many Russian operas, *The Demon* is studded with orientalisms, especially at the close of the first act, in which Tamara's husband still figures prominently. The markedly chromatic idiom of the Dance No. 1 evokes an exoticism confirmed by later sinuous strains and percussive accents. Focusing on a female dancer, the number proceeds mostly in short repeated sections.

In a four-hand transcription, dances from *The Demon* were a staple of the parlor piano a hundred years ago.

Antonín Dvorák

(1841-1904)

Polonaise from *Rusalka*

Based on the legend of Undine, the water sprite who marries a mortal and receives a soul, *Rusalka* is Dvorák's most enduring opera. The libretto, derived in part from Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, gave the great Czech nationalist an opportunity to sketch a magical fairy tale atmosphere in the colorful orchestral language at which he was so adept. Premiered in Prague in 1901, *Rusalka* continues to enjoy numerous revivals.

The nymph who yearns to be human is permitted to walk on the land, but in her human form she cannot speak. Finding her in a meadow by the lake, a Prince is captivated by her beauty. But her silence, even after he pledges to marry her, confounds him. The arrival of guests for a gala entertainment at his castle is signaled by gleaming trumpet fanfares announcing a splendiferous Polonaise in the tradition of the stately Polish dance that had evolved from court ceremonies. The tempo is moderate, the triple rhythm strongly accentuated, and the manner majestic, as befits the second act's royal scene. Led off by expressive strings, a contrasting episode proceeds to deliver some of Dvorák's most mellifluous scoring for woodwinds.

The opera is not destined to have a happy ending, for although the Prince desires to reunite with Rusalka after scorning her, a kiss from her now would be his death. Resigned to her fate, the water nymph sadly disappears again into the lake.

Camille Saint-Saëns

(1835-1921)

Bacchanale from *Samson and Delilah*

Camille Saint-Saëns, a master organist and admirer of the choral music of Handel and Mendelssohn, first thought to write an oratorio on this tale from the Book of Judges, but the young poet he chose as collaborator, Ferdinand Lemaire, urged him to compose an opera instead. The result is the operatic masterpiece of this brilliant and versatile French composer, who had been a prodigy of Mozartean expectations. But in those days there were qualms about portraying a sacrosanct biblical subject on the musical stage. No French theater would touch the opera, whereupon Franz Liszt, then Kapellmeister at Weimar, had a production mounted there in 1877. After a gap of more than a dozen years, *Samson* was at last unveiled in the composer's homeland, at Rouen in 1890, spurring a Paris Opéra presentation two years later.

The priestess Delilah ranks high among the most irresistible seductresses of the operatic stage. Samson, a hero charged with leading the Hebrews to victory over her people, the Philistines, succumbs to her voluptuous entreaties and reveals the source of his strength. In the third and final act, the blinded Samson, his hair shorn, is bound to a millwheel. Inside the temple, the barbarous Philistines celebrate their triumph with a wild bacchanale in the tradition of the *divertissement* that had long been integral to French opera. The music is heavy with near-Eastern atmosphere, struck especially by tints of percussion—tambourine and castanets, for instance—that turn up frequently in this program of exotic dances. A sinuous recitative unfolded by a solo oboe, the prime woodwind for oriental coloration,heralds the famous *Bacchanale,* a spectacle both voluptuous and savage.

– **Mary Ann Feldman**

THE MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

The Minnesota Orchestra, founded in 1903 as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, has long been recognized as one of America's leading smphony orchestras. Since 1995 the Minnesota Orchestra has been guided by Eiji Oue, who carries on the tradition embodied in the ensemble's roster of celebrated music directors: Edo de Waart (1986-95), Sir Neville Marriner (1979-86), Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (1960-79), Antal Dorati (1949-60), Dimitri Mitropoulos (1937-49), Eugene Ormandy (1931-36), Henri Verbrugghen (1923-31) and Emil Oberhoffer (1903-22).

The Minnesota Orchestra's radio history began in 1923 with a national broadcast under guest conductor Bruno Walter and continues today with a broadcast series produced by Minnesota Public Radio for the Public Radio International network and carried on 160 stations in the United States as well as on the cable system of WFMT, Chicago's commercial fine arts radio station. Historic recordings of this orchestra, which date back to 1924, include releases for RCA Victor, Columbia, Mercury "Living Presence" and Vox Records. In recent seasons they have been augmented by discs on the Telarc, EMI/Angel, CBS, Philips and Virgin Classics labels.

EIJI OUE

Eiji Oue (AY-jee OH-way) became the ninth music director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 1995. This disc along with a Stravinsky collection (RR-70) marked the recording debut of this gifted conductor. Before joining the Minnesota Orchestra, Oue served as music director of Pennsylvania's Erie Philharmonic from 1991 to 1995. For four years prior to the Erie post, Oue was associate conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic. He has guest conducted widely throughout the United States, Europe and Japan, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the National Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra.

A native of Hiroshima, Japan, Eiji Oue studied at the Toho School of Music, where he began his conducting studies with Hideo Saito, who had been the teacher of Seiji Ozawa. Oue first came to the United States in 1978 when Ozawa invited him to spend the summer studying at the Tanglewood Music Center. He subsequently studied at the New England Conservatory of Music where he was awarded an artist diploma in conducting. While at Tanglewood, Oue became a protégé of Leonard Bernstein. During the summer of 1990, Oue assisted Bernstein in the creation of the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan, serving as resident conductor for the Festival Orchestra.

Eiji Oue has won numerous honors and awards, among them the Koussevitsky Prize at Tanglewood in 1980 and both first prize and the Hans Haring Gold Medal in the 1981 conducting competition at the Salzburg Mozarteum. And some honors are unofficial: the family of Leonard Bernstein presented Oue with the baton and concert jacket from the maestro's last concert.

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