

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Song of the Volga Boatmen

BORN: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia

DIED: April 6, 1971, in New York

WORK COMPOSED: 1917

WORLD PREMIERE: April 9, 1917, in Rome, conducted by Ernest Ansermet

Stravinsky's arrangement emphasizes the rough character of the boatmen to whom this famous song is attributed. The harmonies have a primitive quality, percussion add an element of brute strength.

Stravinsky's deep connection with his native Russia is manifest in several major compositions. Especially notable are his three early ballets on Russian themes — *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* — and his Russian wedding celebration *Les noces*, performed later in this concert. It is evident also in the brief piece that opens our program.

Stravinsky arranged the *Song of the Volga Boatmen* in the spring of 1917 at the request of Serge Diaghilev, director of the Paris-based *Ballets russes* (the "Russian Ballet"), for whom the composer wrote many important works. The *Ballets russes* was then in Rome for a gala performance. Normally this would commence with the Russian national anthem, whose verses began "God save the Czar." But revolution had overthrown the Russian monarchy two months earlier and replaced the imperial anthem with the "Workers Marseillaise," a variant of the French national anthem fitted with words denouncing wealthy rulers and extolling rebellion.

Both Diaghilev and Stravinsky were politically conservative and appalled by the Russian Revolution. The old Czarist anthem was no longer relevant, but they found the new one distasteful. What to do? Diaghilev hit upon the idea of using the Volga Boatmen's song, a widely recognized emblem of Russian soulfulness. Stravinsky arranged it for winds and percussion in a single night, just in time for the performance.

Scored for flute and piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 3 bassoons; 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani and percussion.

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