

Felix Slatkin (December 22, 1915 - February 8, 1963)

Slatkin was born in St. Louis, Missouri to a Jewish family originally named Zlotkin (though it is not certain) from areas of the Russian Empire now in Ukraine. He began studying the violin at the age of nine with Isadore Grossman. He began working professionally at the age of ten and won a scholarship to the Curtis Institute, where he studied violin with Efrem Zimbalist and conducting with Fritz Reiner.

At age 17 he joined the St. Louis Symphony and formed a chamber orchestra of young musicians. In 1935 he won a competition which included a solo appearance with the Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra and Jose Iturbi. Around this time he met cellist Eleanor Aller, also of Russian Jewish extraction, whom he later married. During the Second World War, he served his country as a musician at the Santa Ana Air Force Base and as a conductor of the Army Air Force Tactical Command Orchestra, an organization that raised over 100 million dollars in war bonds.



He settled in Los Angeles and accepted the post of Concertmaster for Twentieth Century Fox Studios, performing numerous violin solos in motion pictures such as *How Green Was My Valley* and *How to Marry a Millionaire*. In 1939 he founded the highly-acclaimed Hollywood String Quartet, which produced over 21 albums for Capitol Records and toured the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, including a special appearance in 1957 for the Edinburgh Festival. In 1958, the quartet won a Grammy Award for Best Classical Performance-Orchestra from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences for its performance of the Beethoven Late String Quartets.

His conducting career included his founding of the Concert Arts Orchestra and appearances with the Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra. He was Frank Sinatra's concertmaster and conductor of choice during the Capitol years of the 1950s. He made over 25 recordings with these orchestras, also on the Capitol label, including a recording of Offenbach's *Gaité Parisienne* (a ballet arranged by Manuel Rosenthal), which won a Grammy Award in 1958. He also made over a dozen recordings for Liberty Records establishing "The Fantastic Strings, Fantastic Fiddles, Fantastic Percussion, and Fantastic Brass of Felix Slatkin." In 1962, his recording entitled *Hoedown* won a Grammy nomination. Felix Slatkin died from a heart attack at the age of 47.



HIGH DEFINITION TAPE TRANSFERS

Young Persons' Guide to the Orchestra -Variations and Fugue on a theme by Purcell Op. 34

by Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

One of the most well-known orchestral works written especially for the young listener is English composer Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. Based on a theme from Purcell's *Abdelazer* (*The Moor's Revenge*), it begins and ends with an overview of the whole orchestra, interspersed with demonstrations of the capabilities of each instrument.

It was originally written for a documentary in 1946, entitled 'The Instruments of the Orchestra', in which the narrator described the roles and characteristics of each orchestral section with the aid of the variations composed by Britten. Although the composer had no children of his own, due to reasons which are now known, he was fond of them and wrote this piece with them in mind. In fact, the *Young Person's Guide* is 'affectionately inscribed to the children of John and Jean Maud - Humphrey, Pamela, Caroline and Virginia - for their edification and entertainment.'

The *Young Person's Guide* was written so that each instrument could be verbally presented. However, Britten also foresaw the possibility that the piece would be performed with no narration, and he made allowances for this in his written score. Nevertheless, the *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* remains a piece enjoyed by both young and the young at heart.

The Variations on a Nursery Tune, Op. 25, is probably Ernő Dohnányi's best-known work. It is subtitled *For the enjoyment of humorous people and for the annoyance of others*.

Written in 1914 for piano and orchestra, it captures the spirit of Romanticism, and manages to

delight and enthrall in its sparkling piano writing and lush orchestral textures, and its wit in the treatment of the theme - the French nursery song *Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman*, otherwise known as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. Like Dohnányi, Mozart also wrote variations on this nursery tune (K. 265/300e).

The *Variations on a Nursery Tune* consists of an Introduction and Theme, 13 Variations and a Coda. The Introduction is firmly Wagnerian in its writing, dripping with faux pathos, brasses blaring and strings thick and dense; too Wagnerian to be true. The outline of the theme appears indistinctly but unmistakably in the horns, a hint of what is to come. After a long drawn-out conclusion which grows ever quieter while continually building the tension, we have a belch from the orchestra and a pregnant pause, followed by a quiet restatement of the theme on the piano accompanied by pizzicato strings.

What follows is a delightfully witty, artful set of variations ranging from the innocent first variation to the romantic third variation, the scurrying 6th variation, the boisterous, overcooked waltz in the 7th variation and the pathos-laden 10th variation which alludes to the Wagnerian opening. Fascinatingly, Dohnányi treats the piano and orchestra as equals - every instrument is given its chance to shine. Perhaps what makes this work so enduring is Dohnányi's skill in transforming his theme into totally different creatures for so many variations.

The piece is particularly rewarding for the knowledgeable music lover, too. Dohnányi alludes to many different works, or composers, in this gem of a piece. For instance, variation 8 suggests the march from the second movement of Tchaikovsky's "Little Russian" Symphony. Debussy is alluded to, with the ethereal harmonies of the 11th variation. Dohnányi ruthlessly pokes fun at nearly every composer his audience of 1914 would have been familiar with.

Benjamin Britten - Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra

Ernst von Dohnanyi - Variations On A Nursery Tune

Concert Arts Symphony Orchestra conducted by Felix Slatkin

1. Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra
Composed By - Benjamin Britten
2. Variations On A Nursery Tune
Composed By - Ernst von Dohnányi

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