

Musical Treasure Chest #53

With the weather this week--beautiful and dry and calm juxtaposed with snow and cold rain and violent wind--I wanted to pair a musical selection that matches those vagaries. A piece popped into my head that I hadn't thought about in ages, a piece that is stormy and dark, and then delightful and bucolic: the **Suite for Orchestra No. 1 of George Enescu**. I am so happy to share this work with you and a bit of Enescu's life story, as he was one of the great musical talents of the early 20th century.

George Enescu was born in Romania in 1881. A child prodigy he was accepted as a seven year old at the Vienna Conservatory (this was unheard of, especially for a non-Austrian student). His violin professor housed him for his entire tenure at the Conservatory from which he graduated with high honors at the age of eleven, studying violin, piano and composition. Enescu went on from Vienna to the Paris Conservatory, where, once again, he studied violin, piano and composition (working with Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré). His earliest published compositions date from his years in the Conservatory. At the age of fifteen, he played the solo parts of the Beethoven Violin Concerto and the Liszt E-flat Major piano concerto on the same program.

After graduating he continued to concertize as a violinist and pianist, as well as teaching (Yehudi Menuhin was one of his students) and composing; his output includes five symphonies, chamber music, orchestral works and pieces for solo piano. Many of his works were inspired by Romanian melodies and rhythms. His first great success was the Romanian Rhapsody No 1, composed in 1901. This dance-driven composition quotes several Romanian folksongs and is extroverted and vibrant. I find I can hardly sit still when I listen to it. Unfortunately the Rhapsody has become a bit of a pops orchestra piece, which minimizes the highly creative structure and effectiveness of the musical scheme.

The Orchestral Suite No 1, op 9 dates from 1901-02. It is a four-movement work, with the first an eerie Prelude; the second a minuet; the third an interlude, and the

fourth an exciting, driving finale. I love this entire Suite, but the movement that completely captivates me is the first. Enescu makes the unusual orchestration choice to write for strings alone (with no double basses) and timpani. The melodic theme is dark and strongly eastern European, with the strings entirely in unison, just in different octaves. The listener is drawn into a glorious, rich soundscape. The instrumentation is brilliant. The melody unfolds from just snatches (incipits in official musical terminology) to a long spun-out line. When the timpani finally enters (or perhaps I should say, when you realize he is playing), the effect is hair-raising.

By the way, Enesco would go on to enjoy a career as a conductor of great renown. He was conductor of the New York Philharmonic during the 1937-38 season and was considered to succeed Toscanini for music director of the NBC Symphony. He also never stopped concertizing and was accompanist for violinists Jacques Thibaud and David Oistrakh, and cellist Pablo Casals. Casals said "Enescu was the greatest musical phenomenon since Mozart." What a shame that today he is remembered almost solely for his First Romanian Rhapsody, while the rest of his music languishes in obscurity.

I have given you a performance with Enescu conducting. The sound quality is dated, but the playing and interpretation are not. I hope this will be just the first of experiences you will have with Enescu's music!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOmWx_6Ezy0