

Overture to *Colas Breugnon*, op. 24

Dmitri Kabalevsky

Born in St. Petersburg, December 30, 1904; died in Moscow, February 14, 1987

At age fourteen Kabalevsky moved with his family from St. Petersburg to Moscow, where he began studying at the Skryabin Music School in 1919. He entered the Moscow Conservatory in 1925, studying composition with Nikolai Miaskovsky and piano with Alexander Goldenweiser. Shortly thereafter he joined the Conservatory faculty, becoming a full professor in 1932.

Kabalevsky is especially known for his work in the field of music education for children. Not surprisingly he wrote a considerable number of works for youth—songs, choruses, and piano pieces. He also composed several operas of which *Colas Breugnon*, produced in Leningrad on February 22, 1938, brought most recognition; his later operas failed to enter the standard repertory. In the 1950s and '60s Kabalevsky produced several works in a heightened dramatic, lamenting style—the Fourth Symphony, the Cello Sonata, and a number of songs—that continue to be performed.

Kabalevsky was never attracted by the avant-garde, so his works remained tonal, largely built on diatonic themes (lying within a prescribed scale) interspersed with what lexicographer Nicholas Slonimsky termed “euphonious dissonance.” Kabalevsky also preferred conventional forms, showing a special concern with symmetry.

Colas Breugnon, the woodcarver and practical joker from the novel by Romain Rolland, observes and reflects on life in a string of unconnected episodes. Well aware of the lack of conventional plot, Kabalevsky wrote:

The force of Rolland's book is not in the narrative, of which there is none to speak. Its vigor is in the strength of its characters, first of all in the person of its hero, Colas, in the folk spirit with which the whole book breathes, in its great life-asserting optimism. . . . Before writing the music, I applied myself to French folk songs. For nearly two years I made a close study of this rich creative heritage of the French people. . . . My aim was to convey the local color and the nature of the epoch.

The opera's Overture is one of the most witty in the repertoire. Its attention-getting opening hints at the Presto main theme that follows directly on its heels. Kabalevsky employs a most infectious device, that of displacing accents so as to shift the metric impulse—all at breakneck speed. The central portion of the Overture brings a broad theme featuring winds and violins, but which still carries an undercurrent of bustling activity. Toward the end of the piece music from the opera's insurrection scene begins with a spare texture—alternating timpani beats followed by a clarinet duet, an oboe duet, and finally detached chords—the calm before the whirlwind conclusion.

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