

Classical Dogs

Many of the great composers kept dogs, and some put them into their music

By Dennis Bartel

Listen closely and you may hear, perhaps coming from the back of the timpani, the sound of dogs in classical music.



Mozarteum, Salzburg

Top: Anonymous, possibly by Pietro Antonio Lorenzoni (Italian, 1721–1782)
The Boy Mozart, 1763
Oil on canvas

Bottom: Philip Reinagle, R.A. (British, 1749–1833)
Portrait of an Extraordinary Musical Dog, 1805
Oil on canvas
28.25 in. x 36.5 in.

The Mozart family dog, a Fox Terrier, was named Bimbles, though the prodigy Wolfie changed her name to the southern German diminutive Bimberl. So pleased was he with this clever dog-eared ornamentation that he similarly rechristened his sister, Maria Anna, as Nannerl.

Correspondence by the Mozart family is tracked with mentions of Bimberl. When traveling, Wolfie seldom failed to send Bimberl “a thousand kisses.” At 21, Mozart went with his mother to Paris, where the young genius hoped to land a job. But his was a long, dark stay in the City of Lights, turning tragic when Frau Mozart died.

Back in Salzburg, Nannerl kept her brother informed as to his dear Bimberl, describing how the old dog stationed herself at the door each day and waited mournfully for Mozart *mère* and *filz* to come home.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Paul Mellon Collection. Photo: Katherine Wetzel © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

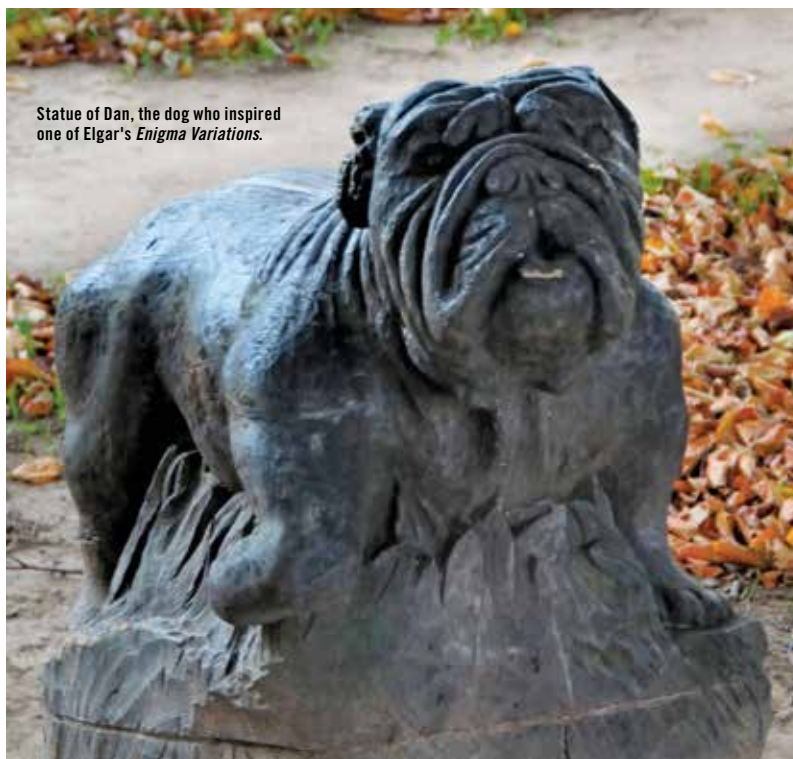


While Mozart never enshrined Bimberl in music, more than a century later, another composer, Sir Edward Elgar, most certainly put the hound in his harmony.

Elgar kept a succession of dogs until he was 29, when he married Caroline Alice Roberts, love of his life, who could not abide “the filthy creatures!” Thereafter, Elgar loved the dogs of friends, particularly the Sinclairs’ Dan, a white-faced English Bulldog from the Midlands. With each visit to the Sinclairs, Elgar sought out Dan, if Dan did not seek out Elgar first. Come the end of the visit, upon taking his leave, Elgar sometimes jotted in the visitors’ book a musical picture of the dog that day, such as “He sleeps,” “Dan uneasy” and “He fidgets and . . . fffz Barks.” On occasion, these Moods of Dan made their way into some of Elgar’s noblest music.

The mood “Dan triumphant (after a fight)” was turned into the leaping opening chords of the overture *In the South*. The five adagio bars “Dan wistful (outside the cathedral)” were included in “For the Fallen,” the last number of the patriotic choral work *The Spirit of England*. “The sinful youth of Dan” became the festive opening of the imperial masque *The Crown of India*, composed for the coronation in India of King George V and Queen Mary.

But beyond these works, Dan is best remembered for achieving dogkind’s greatest musical minute of praise and favor: Variation XI “G.R.S.” from *Enigma Variations*. (The initials belonged to Dan’s



Statue of Dan, the dog who inspired one of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*.



Edward Elgar with his dogs Marco, Mina and Meg at Napleton Grange.

owner, George Robertson Sinclair.)

Elgar said of this 60-second allegro, “The first few bars were suggested by his great Bulldog Dan (a well-known character) falling down the steep bank in the River Wye; his paddling upstream to find a landing place; and his rejoicing bark on landing. G.R.S. said ‘Set that to music? I did; here it is.’”

One more of Dan’s moods, “He muses (on the muzzling order),” was transfigured into the prayer theme that plays a central part in *The Dream of Gerontius*, the oratorio regarded by many as the Elgarian masterpiece. As such, the Worcester Cathedral later made *The Dream of Gerontius* the subject of a stained-glass window

MUSIC



World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Top: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
(French, 1864–1901)
The Motograph Moving Picture Book
Wood engraving with color printed in lithography
1898
11.44 in. x 9.06 in.

Bottom Left:
The Motograph Moving Picture Book
cover

Bottom Right:
Erik Satie
(French, 1866–1925)



Marc Autenrieth



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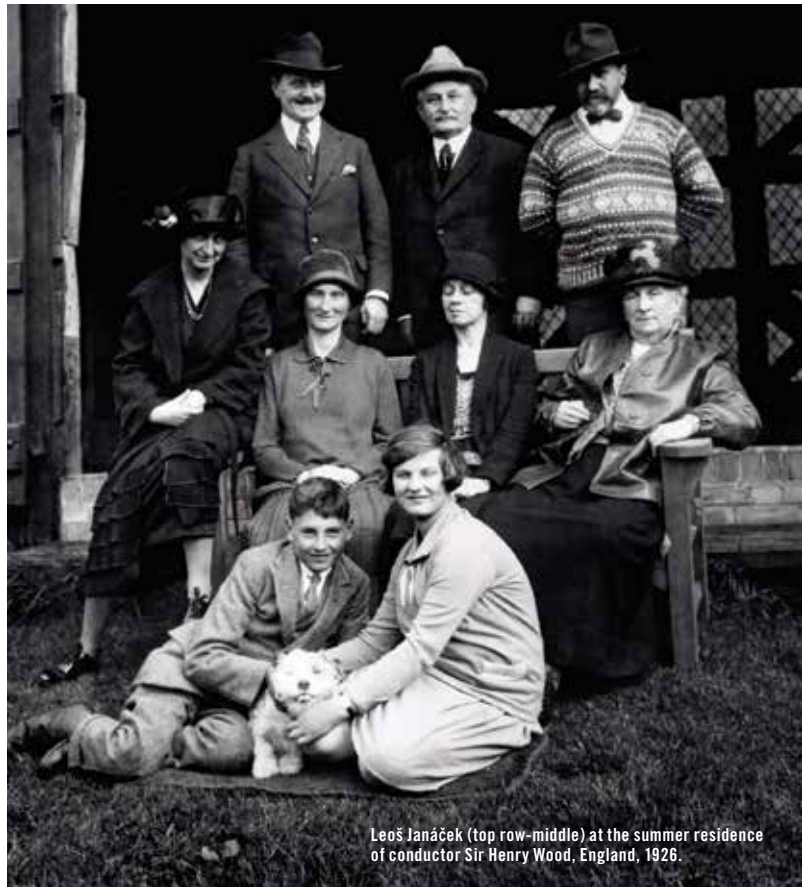
commemorating the town's native son, Sir Edward, Master of the King's Musick (and by extension, the dog he loved).

In July 1903, G.R.S. wrote to Elgar, "Poor dear old Dan died an hour ago. He was my best friend." Dan was given a little grave in a quiet, shady spot beneath a big apple tree.

Though he kept no dogs in his tiny apartment, what a laugh to see such craft from the French composer Erik Satie in his *Trois Véritables Preludes Flasques (pour un chien)*, Three Veritable Flabby Preludes (for a dog). The name is silly (a spoof of Claude Debussy's quaintly cat-like Preludes), but Satie's artistic intent was no less serious than that of, say, his drinking buddy at Le Chat Noir, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

The similarities between these two artists' most famous dogs suggest they are of like breed. Toulouse-Lautrec's 1899 cover for *The Motograph Moving Picture Book* depicts a domestic scene in which appears an apparent Belgian Tervuren—a mahogany-haired, perky-eared Shepherd—growling across the room at a black cat, which glares back from its perch on a three-legged stool. The two animals are drawn in blue crayon and India ink, with Toulouse-Lautrec's distinctive deft, nervous line and delicious wit. The room is bathed in harsh light. The scene is at once brutal and alluring.

So it is with the Flabby Preludes, written a few years later, after the 40ish Satie finished three years at a high-tone music school, the



Leoš Janáček (top row-middle) at the summer residence of conductor Sir Henry Wood, England, 1926.

© Moravian Museum

Schola Cantorum de Paris, earning a diploma in counterpoint.

There is nothing flabby about these pooch pieces. Rather, they are contrapuntally correct in an obedient sort of way—linear and sharp.

The first, *Sévère réprimande*, is an insistent toccata, barking with bass chords.

The second, *Seul à la maison*, is a serene two-part invention (à la Bach) which, without much help from our imagination, may depict Toulouse-Lautrec's Belgian Tervuren momentarily at rest on the floor, showing the cat dog-indifference.

In the last Flabby Prelude, *On*

joué, the Tervuren is suddenly up and bounds across the room on fourths and fifths. The cat hisses minor sevenths and scats up the keyboard. Out the door they go! Into the scattering leaves on the Montmartre sidewalks.

One of music's most humane veterinary operations was performed by Czech composer Dr. Leoš Janáček, a keeper of dogs in his old age. A favorite was a large mongrel whose deep black coat won from Janáček the name *Cert* (Devil). Janáček notated *Cert*'s varied vocalizations and included some in a local Brno exhibit of his writings and music.

During this time, Janáček also held a keen interest in the folk rhymes he read regularly in the Children's Supplement of a Brno newspaper. In 1925–26, he set 19 in a cycle of couplets for nine voices, *Ríkadle* (Nonsense Rhymes). Number eight, “*Nás pes nás pes,*” laments: “Our dog, our dog’s/ broken his tail./For his own good, his mate/Trapped it in the garden gate.”

The verse describes a once-common rural method of amputation. A broken vertebra in a dog’s tail will not heal easily, and can be extremely painful whenever the dog wags its tail. Better to cut it off.

“Just imagine a human with the character of a dog!” said Fritz Kreisler, violin virtuoso and writer of delightful scraps of faux baroque musical doggerel. “He would be loving, thankful, true, strong, graceful, a true demigod.”

In 60 years, the childless Fritz and Harriet Kreisler were rarely dogless. There were about a dozen dogs in all, usually in pairs, living on the Kreislers’ wooded estate in western Berlin and later, in their Manhattan apartment not far from Central Park. No Kreisler dog was more beloved than a Wirehaired Fox Terrier named Rexie, whom the violinist called “my best pal.”

Kreisler, whose playing was famous for its ease of perfection, was so dog-conscious that he likened his aesthetic instincts to those of Rexie. “There is only one critical judgment I can rely upon—the verdict of the spine. If I feel

a thrill down my spine, I know that it is good. See,” he added, motioning to Rexie who lay on the floor, his tail wagging with a French vibrato, “he is most excited when he sways his tail. He gets his thrill through his spine!”

Alas, one of music’s most charming pets is lost. Here’s the sad story. It was the summer of 1892. The gentle Frenchman Gabriel Fauré had reached middle age and the ninth year of an arranged marriage that had always lacked the tender sensuality of his music. While visiting his parents-in-law in the Seine valley resort town of Prunay, Fauré met a witty and elegant *femme du monde*, an amateur soprano, Mme. Sigismond Bardac (Emma), and entered into *une passion infidele*.

Emma Bardac and her banker husband led lives of mutual independence. Thus, Fauré made frequent visits to the Bardacs’



Prokofiev, *Peter and the Wolf* album cover, 1941
Alex Steinweiss, illustrator

© Columbia Records

Parisian home, where he was a favorite with the two Bardac children, Raoul and Dolly, and the family dog, Ketty.

Scholarship has made a dog’s breakfast of the identity of Ketty’s breed; even a leading Fauré authority (Jean-Michel Nectoux) identifies Ketty merely as “a dog.” That this essential bit of dog-tagging has been left undone is woeful.

During four years as an intimate of the Bardac family, Fauré composed a suite of six pieces for



Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers
in film still from *Shall We Dance* (1937)

piano duet as gifts for the petite, blonde-haired Dolly. One piece, “Ketty-Valse,” (“Ketty Waltz”) was a portrait of the family pup. From the delicate, whirling music we may surmise that Ketty was a Maltese. The Maltese possesses the unpretentious sophistication characteristic of Emma Bardac. The breed’s easy affection for children and even temper would have appealed to Fauré. And like the “Ketty-Valse,” the Maltese is compact and enjoys a good romp.

Years later, when the Dolly suite was being published, a careless editor missed a typo on the manuscript and “Ketty-Valse” became “Kitty-Valse,” the name by which it has been known ever since. Hence, not only has Ketty gone without scholarly pedigree validation, but posterity has actually turned the poor hound into a cat!

What’s more, Fauré’s *chère amie* Emma later divorced her husband to marry that most feline of great composers, Claude Debussy, consigning Fauré to love’s doghouse.

George Gershwin participated in the dog-and-pony show *Shall We Dance* with “Walking the Dog,” his miniature for chamber orchestra. This 1937 film musical stars Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers and a West Highland Terrier, who plays the role of My Little Darling.

The scene is aboard the ocean liner *Queen Anne*, en route to New York one blue rhapsodic evening. The two Americans, Astaire and Rogers, are leaving Paris. He is doggedly pursuing her. Seeing



George Gershwin
Tony playing with a ball
Photostrip, ca. late 1920s–early 1930s
Ira and Leonore Trust Archive, Music Division,
Library of Congress

Rogers walking her little white dog on the promenade deck, Astaire borrows a Great Dane and joins them. Gershwin’s sprightly score accompanies the doggie constitutional, which leads to a tête-à-tête at the ship’s railing—just the four of them.

Rogers fends off Astaire’s verbal advances with a dog eye, and when

he asks her to give him a chance, “as one Yankee to another,” she replies icily, “I’m from the South.”

Astaire now addresses My Little Darling in a mock southern accent: “Maybe you all’s from the North.”

The Terrier, in a key speaking part, snaps at Astaire with an angry, high-pitched bark.

“It’s funny,” Rogers says, echoing Sir Walter Scott’s immortal sentiment that dogs are incapable of deceit, “dogs have an instinct for the right people.”

“Walking the Dog” is reprised the next night as Astaire and Rogers, formally dogged out, stroll together, the sweated Terrier in sync with their syncopated step... the three of them putting on the dog, one might say. My Little Darling stops in his tracks and watches quizzically as the two humans carry out their strange mating ritual.

Finally, we should allow in our Classical Kennel a canine of less domestication, Sergei Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*, if only to shelter it from PC attacks. (Witness the incident of a cellist in a regional symphony orchestra who resigned in protest rather than perform Prokofiev’s classic for children. She objected to the work’s portrayal of a threatened species as a menacing predator.)

We should allow it in, but we won’t. The wolf and the dog are simply different creatures, like different forms of art. To put them together would be like crossbreeding drama and music. And we know the result of such a doggo admixture: Opera! 🐕