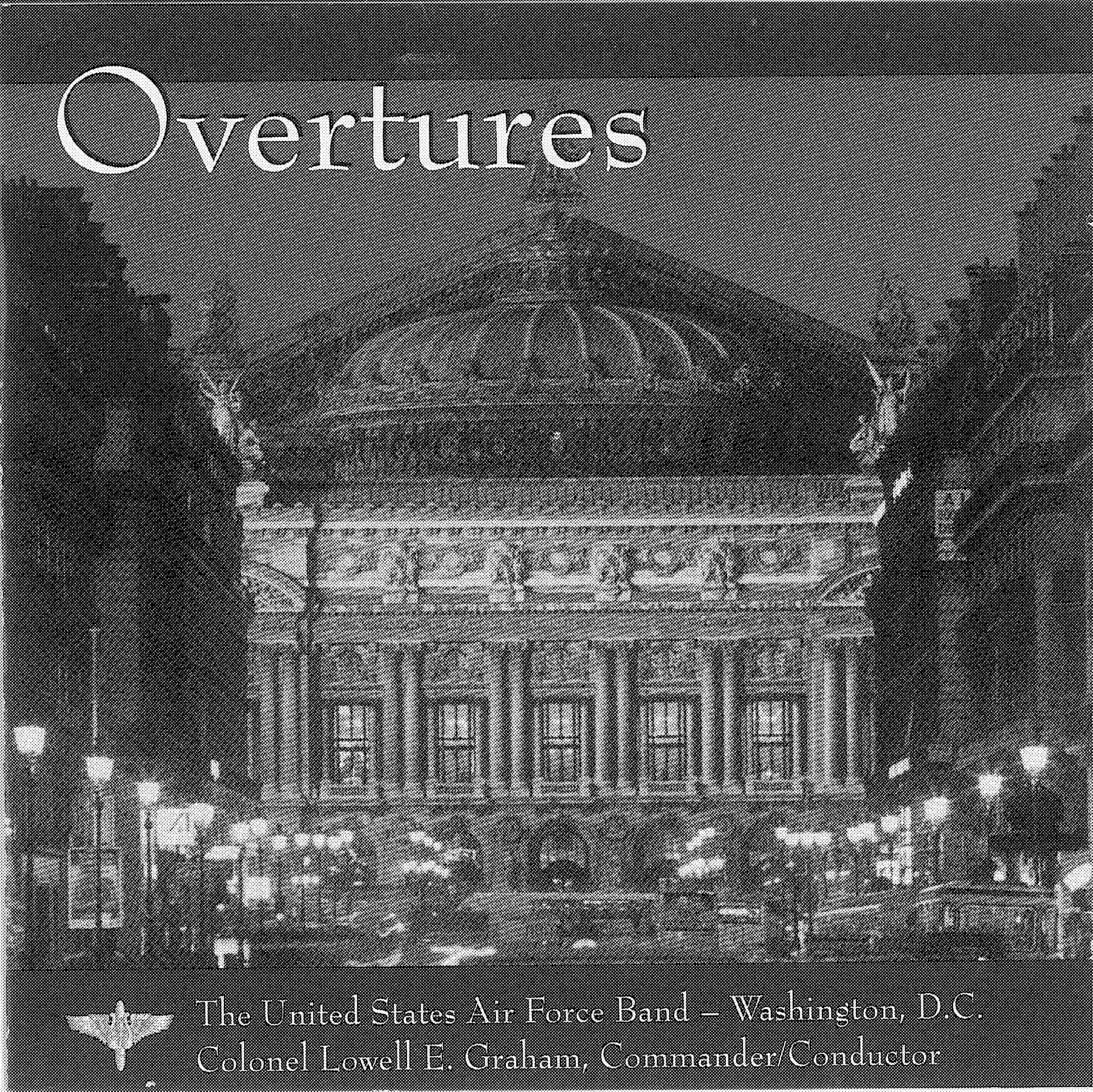
Overtures



The United States Air Force Band – Washington, D.C.
Colonel Lowell E. Graham, Commander/Conductor

Modern concertgoers are accustomed to hearing an overture performed as the first selection on a band or orchestra program. Likewise, few operas commence without an instrumental prelude in front of the closed curtain. For a few moments, the darkened theater reveals only the sounds of the orchestra: a musical preview of the next few hours in the magical world of opera.

Overtures fall into several categories; the most popular is the opera overture. In its 400-year history, the opera overture has developed from simple instrumental flourishes to preludes preceding theatrical productions, and finally evolving into autonomous compositions performed in the concert hall.

This collection of overture transcriptions embodies the magnificent orchestral writing of the 19th century. The 1800s saw tremendous growth in the area of wind instrument development, and the great European composers employed full "families" of wind instruments when writing for large orchestras. This open-handed scoring for wind instruments has yielded outstanding transcriptions for band. **The United States Air Force Band** proudly presents this recording of 19th century overtures as part of a continuing series of great transcriptions. Several of the works on this recording were transcribed by The Band's own master arrangers, CMSgt (ret.) Lawrence Odom and CMSgt (ret.) Leigh Steiger; these selections are indicated by an asterisk (*) following their titles.

Carnival, Op. 92*

Originally titled *Life,* Czech composer Antonín Dvorák's (1841-1904) **Carnival** was composed as the second in a series of three overtures to be performed as a concert sequence (the other two titled respectively, *Nature* and *Love*). In an effort to convey through the works' titles what he already had communicated in the music, Dvorák eventually renamed his overture trilogy, *In Nature's Realm*, **Carnival** and *Othello.*

With the composer on the podium, the orchestra of the National Theater of Prague premiered the trilogy on April 28, 1892, as part of a farewell concert. Dvorák had just accepted a position as the first director of the newly established National Conservatory of Music of America in New York City, and was to set sail for the United States the following September. The American premiere of **Carnival** took place on October 21, 1892, with Dvorák conducting once again. The occasion was a concert honoring Dvorák's arrival in America, and the venue was New York City's Music Hall, known today as Carnegie Hall.

La Fille du Tambour-Major*

Born in Cologne, Germany, Jacques Offenbach (b. Jacob Offenbach 1819-1880) went to Paris at the age of 14 to study cello at the Paris Conservatory, a privilege usually afforded exclusively to French citizens. His virtuoso cello playing led to his first job in the orchestra at the Opéra-Comique, a venue that would be Offenbach's professional home for most of his life. Offenbach was the darling of Paris' social elite, known to them as "the little Mozart of the Champs Élysées," and his career as a composer/impresario yielded many comic operas.

Although Offenbach universally is recognized as the creator of French operetta, the birth of this important genre actually can be traced to another composer's production. In 1840, the Opéra-Comique (Paris) premiered Gaetano Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment* (The Daughter of the Regiment). This trend-setting operetta is full of humor and good melodies. Its satirical view of the political climate and military life set the standard for much of the light opera fare that followed in the 19th century. Arguably, it served as the model for one of Offenbach's last compositions, the comic opera, **La Fille du Tambour-Major** (The Drum Major's Daughter). This tremendously successful opera premiered at Les Folies Dramatiques in Paris on December 13, 1879. Its American premiere took place in New York on September 13, 1880, just three weeks before the composer's death.

I Vespri Siciliani

The 1282 incident of "The Sicilian Vespers," a revolt led by Michael VIII Palaeologus against controlling French forces in Sicily, was the basis for Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi's (1813-1901) opera of the same name. Composed in 1855 and premiered at the Paris Opera house on June 13 of that year, **I Vespri Siciliani** reflects the influence of French grand opera on Verdi's compositional style. By the late 1840s, the wealthy, world-famous composer had begun to enjoy the life of a country gentleman. Verdi purchased an estate and eventually was named a deputy in Turin's parliament. After the Unification of 1861, **I Vespri Siciliani** could no longer be staged under its original title. Censorship laws dictated that the opera's plot be relocated to 17th century Portugal, and the opera itself was temporarily titled *Giovanna da Guzman*. **I Vespri Siciliani** premiered in the United States at the Academy of Music, New York, on November 7, 1859.

Fra Diavolo*

French composer Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (1782-1871) found his greatest success in the genre of comic opera. A student of Luigi Cherubini, the visionary pedagogue who broke the rules and admitted Offenbach to the Paris Conservatory, Auber eventually succeeded Cherubini as director of this school.

Auber devoted 60 years of his long life to operatic enterprises and enjoyed his first success in 1813, a one-act comedy titled *Le Séjour Militaire*, which premiered at the Opéra-Comique. His most successful comedy, however, was **Fra Diavolo**, which premiered on January 28, 1830. Drawing from his early success, Auber once again used the comical aspects of military life in the plot. The story centers on an historical Italian bandit, Michele Pezza, who masqueraded as a marquis and robbed tourists around Naples. The martial music at the beginning of the overture represents Lorenzo, a penniless soldier tasked to catch the bandit. **Fra Diavolo** received its American premiere on October 17, 1831, in New York. The "dashing bandit" was a winning idea: Hollywood adapted two characters from the story to produce the Laurel and Hardy film, *Fra Diavolo*, in 1933.

Béatrice et Bénédict

Although best remembered as a symphonist, French composer Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) had a tremendous flair for the dramatic. During his lifetime, Berlioz completed at least four operas, and historians assert that he always was contemplating new subjects. He was not in demand as an opera composer in his native France; however, Berlioz was favored by Edouard Bénazet, the manager of a casino in the fashionable spa town of Baden-Baden, Germany. Beginning in the mid-1850s, Bénazet contracted Berlioz to organize annual gala concerts at the height of the season, and in 1858, commissioned an opera from him. The resulting **Béatrice et Bénédict** is based on Shakespeare's comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*.

The story focuses on Bénédict, an army officer who gets involved in many escapades in order to win the hand of the fair Béatrice. According to his memoirs, Berlioz discovered Shakespeare's work in 1927, when an English acting troupe first performed *Hamlet* in a French theater. Berlioz was completely smitten with the actress who played Ophelia, Miss Harriet Constance Smithson. Five years later, the two were married. **Béatrice et Bénédict** premiered in Baden-Baden on August 9, 1862, and the production received its American premiere in Washington, D.C., on June 3, 1964.

Mignon*

French composer Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896) was firmly rooted in the traditions of the French school. In 1871, he succeeded Daniel Auber to the directorship of the Paris Conservatory. During his lifetime, Thomas composed more than 20 operas, the most important of which is **Mignon**. An overnight success, **Mignon** premiered on November 17, 1866, at the Opéra-Comique, and became one of the most popular of all French operas. The story centers on the title character, Mignon, who as a young child was kidnapped from her Italian estate and put into the service of a band of gypsies. The overture's opening pastoral music is from the first act, in which Mignon vaguely remembers a better life. Mignon is eventually reunited with her true family, and the production concludes with much rejoicing. The American premiere of **Mignon** took place at the French Opera House in New Orleans on May 9, 1871.

Donna Diana*

Vienna-born composer Emil Nikolaus von Reznicek (1860-1945) earned his law degree from the University of Graz and went on to study music at the Leipzig Conservatory. Equipped with a law degree and a love of music, Reznicek embarked on a career as a theater-orchestra conductor in Germany and Switzerland. In 1888, he began a 7-year tour of duty as a military bandmaster in Prague, and while there, he composed his comic opera **Donna Diana**. The production received its premiere performance in Prague on December 16, 1894; there is no record of an American staging of the work.

Donna Diana is set in 17th century Barcelona, and the action centers around the governor's daughter, who is eligible to be married. The problem: she would rather not be wed. Of the three princely suitors tasked to win her hand, the one who employs reverse psychology eventually captures Diana's heart. The overture to **Donna Diana** has been popular for over a century, and the listener may recognize the music as the theme song to a popular American television series from the 1950s called *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon*.

Morning, Noon and Night in Vienna

As a young man, Austrian composer Franz von Suppé (1819-1895) was sent to Italy to study law. More often than not, the young student neglected his studies and spent his days at La Scala Opera House in Milan, where he met and heard the music of the great Italian opera composers, Donizetti, Rossini and Verdi.

It should come as no surprise that the records show no evidence of von Suppé having ever graduated from law school. In fact, his first "job" was at Vienna's Josefstadt Theater, where he worked as an unpaid flutist and conductor. In order to make ends meet, the young composer supported himself writing scores and incidental music for local theater productions. Among those was a play with songs titled, **Morning, Noon and Night in Vienna**, which played for the first time in Josefstadt Theater on February 26, 1844.

SELECTIONS

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*trans. by CMSgt (ret.) Leigh Steiger**

2. **La Fille du Tambour-Major**[1] (6:53) — Jacques Offenbach
(The Drum Major's Daughter) — *trans. by CMSgt (ret.) Lawrence Odom**

3. **I Vespri Siciliani** (10:16) — Giuseppe Verdi
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5. **Béatrice et Bénédict**[2] (8:12) — Hector Berlioz
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trans. by Henry Fillmore

Total Time (66:59)

* Former member, The United States Air Force Band

Publishers

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[2] Released with permission of Carl Fischer, Inc.

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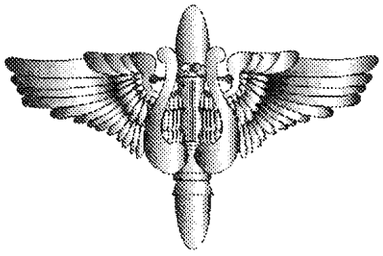

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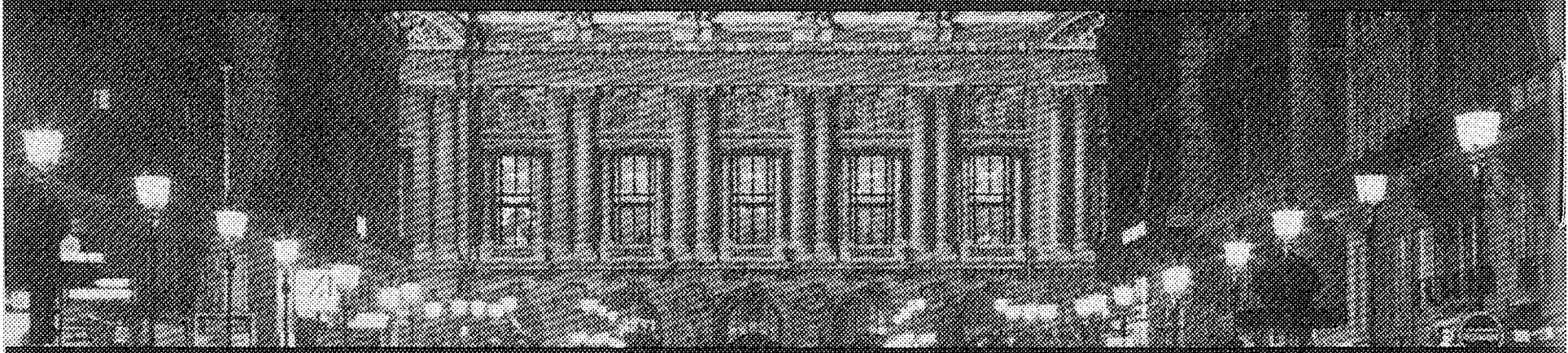
Overtures

The United States Air Force Band – Washington, D.C.



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