

Firebird! – May 14, 2017

Overture to *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), K. 620

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
1756-1791

Public taste is fickle.

By the late 1780s, Mozart's star in Vienna was dimming rapidly. The change in popular musical taste, general economic decline and his own inability to manage his finances combined to make him emotionally frantic and scrambling for commissions.

Since there was no more demand for Mozart's *Akademien* (self-promoting subscription concerts), and his most successful librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, had left Vienna, he turned for a joint operatic venture to one of the most colorful (and successful) dramatists and theater directors of the era, Emanuel Schikaneder. Mozart and Schikaneder knew each other both professionally and as fellow Freemasons. Schikaneder's libretto contains many elements of the Freemason philosophy and ritual in its emphasis on human enlightenment. It promotes its high-minded ideology through a fairytale plot and characters, in addition to moments of incredible silliness.

The Magic Flute is a dramatization of the battle between the forces of good (light) and evil (darkness), symbolized by the high priest of Isis, Sarastro, and the Queen of the Night. In order to win the hand of the Queen's daughter, Pamina, whom Sarastro has abducted and detained for her own good, Prince Tamino must undergo trials by fire and water. He succeeds with the aid of a magic flute, while his companion, the comic bird-catcher Papageno, bumbles through lower level trials to win himself a wife, Papagena.

Most operatic overtures of this period contain no themes from the operas themselves. The important exception here is the three solemn chords that open the overture. These chords reappear later as the fanfare before Tamino's trial and purification. The slow, dignified opening is followed by a sprightly fugal allegro whose initial rapid repeated notes have a pecking quality – perhaps presenting Papageno the comic bird catcher.

blue cathedral

Jennifer Higdon
b.1962

While grief can paralyze ordinary individuals, it can inspire great artists to create their finest works. We owe many masterpieces in classical music to the ability – in fact, sometimes the emotional need – of their creators to embark on the disciplined outpouring of emotion that constitutes great art. Dvořák's Cello Concerto and Brahms's Horn Trio, for example, were composed in response to the death of a loved one; Schubert's final works, the Quintet in C major, the song cycle *Die Winterreise* and his last piano sonatas sustained him as he approached his own death. Jennifer Higdon composed *blue cathedral* as a memorial to her brother.

Higdon composed *blue cathedral* in 1999 on commission from the Curtis Institute to commemorate its 75th anniversary. It premiered the following year and has become one of the most performed contemporary orchestral works in the United States, receiving more than 50 performances in the 2004-'05 season alone.

Higdon expressed some of her thoughts about the creation of this programmatic work: "When I began *blue cathedral*, it was the one-year anniversary of my (younger) brother's death, so I was pondering a lot of things about the journey we make after death. I was imagining a traveler on a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky (therefore making it a blue color). I wanted the music to sound like it was progressing into this constantly opening space, feeling more and more celebratory...As the journey progresses, the individual would float higher and higher above the floor, soaring towards an expanded ceiling where the heart would feel full and joyful."

The sound of high-pitched bells and percussion throughout *blue cathedral* creates an ethereal ambience, while Higdon's own instrument, the flute, and her brother's, the clarinet, give an intimate personal dimension to the piece. The work opens quietly, with whispered cellos and the delicate striking of glockenspiel and piano in groups of the three. The solo flute introduces the main theme of the work and is joined by the clarinet. The two instruments expand on the theme together, which gradually builds in volume and orchestration. Additional instruments enter one by one as the tempo picks up, reaching a dance-like climax for brass, percussion and bells.

The piece ends quietly, returning to the main theme again with flute, clarinet and English horn over gently muted strings. As the clarinet fades, a prepared piano, with two screws added to change the timbre, gives thirty-three strikes in groups of three, representing the age of her brother when he passed away.

Jennifer Higdon holds a Ph.D. and a M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in composition, a B.M. in flute performance from Bowling Green State University, and an Artist Diploma from The Curtis Institute of Music and is currently on the music composition faculty of the Curtis Institute. She has received many national awards and grants, and her list of commissioners is a veritable who's who of American music. Her music is extensively performed and also recorded.

Overture To
The Flying Dutchman
1883

Richard Wagner
1813-

In 1840 Richard Wagner left his post at the Opera of Riga and headed to Paris to seek his fortune. Crossing the North Sea his ship was caught in a violent storm that reminded him of a picturesque Nordic legend in poet Heinrich Heine's *Memorien*. It is the tale of a Dutch sailor who tried to round the Cape of Good Hope in a gale, swearing in his rage that he would fight against Hell itself to reach his destination. For this blasphemy he is condemned to fight continual storms, making landfall only once every seven years until the end of time unless released from the curse by the love of a faithful woman. He is finally rescued from this ordeal by Senta, who is unfortunately already betrothed to someone else. The complications end in the death and apotheosis of the lovers.

One of Wagner's early music dramas (he refused to call them operas) *The Flying Dutchman* inaugurated the string of nine music dramas based on medieval legends or themes. It also introduces the motif of redemption through love that pervades the composer's entire oeuvre.

The overture comprises all the important themes from the opera: the harmonically hollow horn and bassoon theme of the tortured Dutchman accompanied by the howling winds and undulating waves; a rousing village sailors' chorus; and the refrain from the ballad of the Dutchman that has captured Senta's imagination and becomes identified with her love for him.

In his early music dramas, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*, Wagner began to develop a system of melodic motives, or *Leitmotiven*, to musically represent people, events and even abstract ideas. The culmination of his work occurs in the tetralogy, *The Ring of the Nibelungen*, which contains nearly 100 such themes.

Suite from *The Firebird*

Igor Stravinsky
1882-1971

“He is a man on the eve of fame,” said Sergey Diaghilev, impresario of the famed *Ballets Russes* in Paris, during the rehearsals for Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*.

In 1909 Stravinsky, viewed as a budding composer just emerging from the tutelage of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, got what can be called his big break, thanks to the laziness of the composer Anatoly Lyadov. Early in the year Diaghilev had written Lyadov: “I am sending you a proposal. I need a ballet and a Russian one, since there is no such thing. There is Russian opera, Russian dance, Russian rhythm – but no Russian ballet. And that is precisely what I need to perform in May of the coming year in the Paris Grand Opera and in the huge Royal Drury Lane Theater in London. The libretto is ready. It was dreamed up by us all collectively. It is *The Firebird* – a ballet in one act and perhaps two scenes.” When Diaghilev heard that after three months Lyadov had only progressed so far as buying music manuscript paper, he withdrew the commission and offered it to Aleksander Glazunov and Nikolay Tcherepnin, who both turned him down. In desperation he turned to the unknown Stravinsky.

Stravinsky finished the score in May 1910, in time for the premiere on June 25. It was an instant success and has remained Stravinsky's most frequently performed work. Its romantic tone, lush orchestral colors, imaginative use of instruments and exciting rhythms outdid even Stravinsky's teacher, the Russian master of orchestration. It required an immense orchestra and the first suite Stravinsky extracted from the ballet in 1911 strained symphony orchestras' resources. He made two subsequent revisions, with modified orchestration, the final one in 1945.

The ballet, taking its plot from bits of numerous Russian folk tales, tells the story of the heroic Tsarevich Ivan who, while wandering in an enchanted forest, encounters the magic firebird as it picks golden fruit from a silver tree. He traps the bird but, as a token of goodwill, frees it. As a reward, the bird gives Ivan a flaming magic feather. At dawn the Tsarevich finds himself in a park near the castle of the evil magician Kashchey. Thirteen beautiful maidens, captives of Kashchey, come out of the castle to play in the garden but one of them in particular, the beautiful Tsarevna, captures Ivan's heart. As the sun rises, the maidens have to return to their prison and the Tsarevna warns Ivan not to come near the castle lest he fall under the magician's spell as well. In spite of the warning, the Tsarevich follows and opens the gate of the castle. With a huge crash Kashchey and his retinue of monsters erupts from the castle in a wild dance, whose drive and clashing harmonies foreshadow *The Rite of Spring*. With the help of the magic feather the Tsarevich calls the Firebird who overcomes Kashchey and tames the

monsters by lulling them to sleep. In the end the captives are freed from the spell and Tsarevich Ivan and the Tsarevna are married in a grand ceremony culminating in an apotheosis of the Firebird.

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