

ESO, Feb. 2, 2025 WINTER CONCERT PROGRAM NOTES

Overture to *The Magic Flute* K. 620

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

The Magic Flute was a runaway hit from the get-go. It was all thanks to a highly unusual collaboration between Mozart and his long-standing friend Emanuel Schikaneder—something of an institution in the musical theater world of the time. He was not only Mozart’s Masonic lodge brother but was also widely known as a singer, actor, writer, impresario and theater owner. In fact, the opening run of the show took place at Schikaneder’s Theater auf der Wieden in one of Vienna’s suburbs. It was there that Mozart conducted the premiere on September 30, 1791. And in a letter of October 7, he was positively euphoric, writing, “I have this moment returned from the opera which was as full as ever.” He then proceeded to list the numbers that had to be encored.

With its lyrics in the German vernacular, *The Magic Flute* is made up of a rich variety of musical numbers with spoken dialogue interspersed; for this reason, it is a type of opera classified as a *singspiel*. The solemnity of Masonic ritual is juxtaposed with catchy folk-like tunes and slapstick comedy, much of it suffused with a fairy-tale quality. Schikaneder himself played the lead—Papageno the bird-catcher on a quest to find himself a wife. Rather revealing, too, is the fact that the playbill of the first performances lists him in larger font than Mozart, whose name appears in smaller type after a listing of cast members.

The music of the Overture itself is a study in vivid contrasts. In broad outline, it is a fugal sonata form akin to the finale of Mozart’s “Jupiter” Symphony, which takes up the second half of today’s concert. Parenthetically, it should be noted that in Western music the ultimate test of “serious” compositional skill and learning has traditionally been defined by the perceived excellence of the fugal writing. The Overture’s slow introduction opens with three solemn chords reinforced by the heft of three trombones signifying Masonic ritual. They reappear at the Overture’s midpoint, punctuating the end of the exposition and the following development and recapitulation sections. The scintillating Allegro main sections are driven in large part by a fugue subject in duple rhythm, noteworthy for elements exemplifying Mozart’s capacity for mischievous humor; he draws attention to what are normally weak beats—a repeated sixteenth-note turn and consecutive upward-leaping perfect fourths. And not to be missed is also the touch of fairy-tale color in a transitional passage leading us to the recapitulation where flute and bassoon, played two octaves apart, work their magic.

PIECES FOR BRASS ENSEMBLE

Fanfare to *La Péri*

Paul Dukas (1865-1935)

Dukas has suffered the fate of being remembered by most of the musical world for only one work, his spectacular 1897 orchestral tone poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Revered during his lifetime as critic and teacher, he enjoyed a distinguished career serving on the faculties of both the Paris Conservatoire and École Normale de Musique. But as a composer, he was severely self-critical to the point of publishing relatively few works and even destroyed quite a few of his manuscripts shortly before his death. But there remain several works of his that richly deserve more exposure, among them the 1912 ballet score *La Péri*, his last large-scale work.

This one-act ballet draws upon a fable from ancient Persian mythology telling the story of the eponymous *Péri*, a sleeping fairy possessing the flower of immortality, the lotus, which is the object of the quest of hero Iskender (Alexander the Great). As for the Fanfare, Dukas wrote it last, just before the premiere, reportedly to give his noisy audience just enough time to settle down. Scored for large brass choir, it falls neatly into an A-B-A pattern with the outer portions grandiose and assertive, and a midsection gentler and more reflective.

Suite for Brass - Grieg/Erickson

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

This Suite consists of three piano pieces by Grieg which were arranged for brass ensemble in the 1960's by the American composer, conductor, and trumpet player Frank Erickson. They are fine examples of Grieg's gifts as a master miniaturist known for his exquisite lyric pieces that give such distinctive voice to his Norwegian sensibility. The three pieces are: "Folk Song" (Op. 17, No. 9), "Grandmother's Minuet" (Op. 68, No. 2), and "Sailor's Song" (Op. 68, No. 1).

Three Canzoni for Brass

Giovanni Gabrieli (ca. 1555-1612)

These Three Canzoni for Brass are instrumental adaptations of pre-existing chansons. They are the work of a celebrated organist, composer and teacher who spent most of his life in his birthplace, Venice. Gabrieli was an epochal figure straddling the worlds of the late Renaissance and early Baroque. Among his many contributions, one can cite his role in helping develop the basic harmonic and tonal vocabulary upon which subsequent generations could build, not to mention creating procedures for combining instrumental ensembles with choral groups, writing for brass ensembles, and specifying dynamics in his scores. A case in point is his widely anthologized "Sonata Pian' e Forte"—literally a "sounded" piece defined by contrasts between soft and loud. But perhaps most striking of all was his skill in deploying antiphonal concertante and polychoral effects. In doing so, he took full advantage of the architecture of the Church of San Marco, his base for much of his career.

Contrapunctus I from *The Art of the Fugue* - Bach/Eckfeld

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

The Art of the Fugue is a work that Bach left unfinished at the time of his death. It is an astounding compendium demonstrating the many contrapuntal possibilities, all in the same key of D minor, that can be generated by variants of the same fugue subject—something to involve endless hours of study. Given that no instrumentation was ever specified, there are various performances to be heard involving both standard acoustic instruments and electronic ones.

This afternoon we proudly present the brass arrangement that Bill Eckfeld has made of the first fugue in the series.

INTERMISSION

Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551 (“Jupiter”)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

When it comes to this work, Mozart revealed something mind-boggling about his creative energy. His manuscripts indicate that he completed his Symphonies nos. 40 and 41 on July 25 and August 10, 1788 respectively, that is, barely two weeks apart. In fact, during that remarkable summer all three of his final symphonies were composed within six weeks.

Earlier commentary sought to explain this phenomenal creative surge in romantic terms—an alienated artist beset by financial burdens and with no prospect of any performance of these works withdrawing into an inner world in an act of self-preservation. More recent scholarship, however, has brought to light a lot more granular detail about his inherently practical nature: his entrepreneurial spirit, his social networks and rational view of the world. Even though few of them materialized, there were some exciting plans Mozart was pursuing around that time. Included was not only the possibility of seeking his fortune in London, with the three symphonies constituting a kind of portfolio. There was also the prospect of concerts at the Trattnerhof, an upscale residential building with a concert hall and at a new casino opening in a fashionable part of Vienna. Factored into the mix was also his novel idea of offering subscription concerts juxtaposing his latest chamber and symphonic works.

The first movement of the “Jupiter,” marked *allegro vivace*, is a richly varied sonata form. Its opening ceremonial tone with its martial rhythms underscored by trumpets and tympani contrasts with the witty ditty that serves as his second theme. First heard as what sounds like a piece of melodic fluff, it becomes the source material for a dramatic development section. For the record, the tune was part of a comic aria that Mozart composed for someone else’s *opera buffa*.

The slow second movement is an F major Andante cantabile. Trumpets and tympani are silent. With its muted strings – specifically violins and violas -- and gentle washes of woodwind color, the movement’s outer sections convey a special warmth and intimacy. There is, however, considerable agitation in the movement’s developmental syncopated and richly chromatic Midsection. That said, something especially memorable about this whole movement is how the opening three notes — F down to C and up to A – become the source of a unifying motif, now rising, now falling, as if whispering the word “Jupiter” — even though the moniker was attached posthumously.

Following the Minuet and Trio, we come to the remarkable finale marked molto allegro. This is a stunning example of Mozart’s deploying a rich vocabulary of fugal devices within the context of an expanded sonata form. It is something he undertook on a smaller scale in the case of the finale of his String Quartet, K. 387, the first of his six quartets dedicated to Franz Joseph Haydn. Often singled out for special mention is the climactic coda of the “Jupiter” finale for the sheer compositional virtuosity of the quintuple counterpoint.

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