

## Concert 2

October 28, 2017

### *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor*—J.S. Bach/Stokowski

The marvelous resources of the nineteenth-century symphony orchestra serve the broadest musical imaginative purposes with amazing facility. Although the twentieth century added a broad array of percussion instruments, the fundamental sound resources of the orchestra were in place by around 1850. During the 1800s the instrumental colors available in the orchestra grew tremendously as a result of the influence of the opera orchestra. Composers of opera were studiously incorporating new instruments into their works to heighten the dramatic atmosphere on the stage. French composers such as Meyerbeer led the way, followed by Wagner and others. A short list of newly-introduced instruments includes the tuba, trumpets and horns with valves, the bass clarinet, English horn, keyboard instruments, multiple harps, thunder sheets—the list goes on. At the same time, imaginative orchestrators were assiduously exploring the deep resources of the string family by pushing the limits of the higher register, developing a variety of figurations, using special effects such as multiple stops, playing with the wood of the bow (rather than the strings), pizzicato, harmonics, and novel combinations of divided strings. And these are just a few of the deep well of possibilities that serve composers and orchestrators. What is more, and perhaps most important, is that these resources were varied and rich enough to serve not only nineteenth-century art, as well as the radical changes of musical style of the twentieth century, but still seem without limits of possibility in our new century.

With this as background, why should we listen to a twentieth-century arrangement for orchestra of an eighteenth-century masterpiece for organ: Bach's venerable *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor*? The short answer, of course, is that Leopold Stokowski, flamboyant showman and longtime conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, ran a cottage industry in the last century making splashy arrangements for symphony orchestra of music from other media that showcased his "Fabulous Philadelphia Sound." Among them were several of J. S. Bach's organ works, arrangements of which he thought would better acquaint the public with these masterpieces; today, of course, long after the Baroque revival, this is superfluous. But, these arrangements were all the rage earlier on—they were a hit in the movie, "The Big Broadcast of 1937," where Stokowski, flowing mane and all, played himself (of course). Later we are familiar with the *Toccatà's* appearance in Walt Disney's motion picture, *Fantasia*.

So, finally, why do we still perform this hoary warhorse, of dubious artistic origin? Well, the answer is simple—it is a sonic feast, and just plainly a lot of innocent fun. The music's drama is enhanced immeasurably by the deep resources of the symphony orchestra. Clearly, Stokowski did a magnificent job in showing us another dimension of Bach's timeless music.

### *Night on Bald Mountain*—Modest Musorgsky

Musorgsky is, of course, familiar to concertgoers for his ever-popular work for solo piano, *Pictures from an Exhibition*—made even more well known in Ravel's masterful orchestration. Opera lovers occasionally are afforded the opportunity to attend

a performance of his stunning opera, *Boris Godunov*, but for most, that's it. For the great preponderance of his work is encountered through his many songs, well known to singers and teachers of voice. The single exception to this is manifestly his evergreen tone poem, *Night on Bald Mountain*—except that he didn't compose it. Well, not in the conventional sense of a complete, polished composition. For it has a checkered history, to be sure.

A tone poem is a single movement for orchestra that, in the best romantic tradition, is about something other than its straightforward musical elements. Composers of the eighteenth century were quite satisfied with music that stood on its own: first theme, second theme, etc. But, our passionate romantics of the nineteenth century were also interested in composing music that took as its inspiration a picture, a story, a poem--anything that could stimulate the imagination. So, by the late 1840s this trend was in full swing, led by the inimitable Franz Liszt. Our young Modest Musorgsky was quick to pick up on the trend, and so was inspired around 1858 to compose a work partly drawn from recycled elements of an opera abandoned earlier that definitely had a romantic focus: witchcraft and devilry, tentatively entitled, *St. John's Night on Bald Mountain*. Some years later, twenty-eight years old, and spending the summer of 1867 on his brother's farm, he further developed the idea into an orchestral work, now called "The Witches." He offered it to his colleague, Balakirev, for performance on a concert of the Russian Music Society. The latter was severely critical of the work, and the composer withdrew it. That was the practical end of the matter for Musorgsky, for he never worked on or edited the work, although he did attempt to include elements in two subsequent operas. But, he never heard it performed as he had conceived it—an orchestral work. Fast-forward to years later, after the composer's death, when distinguished composers and music scholars were assiduously—but misguided, to be sure—busily working over Musorgsky life's work, "correcting" his supposed crudities and fundamental compositional mistakes. The eminent Russian composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, was chief among these do-gooders, and he took it upon himself to more or less re-compose Musorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*. The result was a work that was as much Rimsky-Korsakov's as that of Musorgsky. Given its première in 1886, it became the version heard almost exclusively ever since. Well, it may be mostly by Rimsky-Korsakov, based upon Musorgsky's themes, but it's a corker, nevertheless, and justly beloved.

The story is simple. For those not familiar with the details of the Christian ecclesiastical calendar, the feast day of St. John the Baptist is exactly six months before Christmas, thus (generally) occurring on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. Throughout the Christian world, for many, many centuries, the eve of the holiday was popularly thought of as the province of the Devil and his minions, but other traditions simply invoke old, Summer Solstice observations. Every country in greater Europe still has its own version of traditions, many of which invoke various nefarious characters and their evil deeds on that night. There are various rocky promontories—mostly Slavic--upon which these "black" celebrations occur, the most famous being the Lysa Hora in Kiev, Ukraine. Rimsky-Korsakov included a brief description of the "story" in his score. Following it, the work begins with "subterranean sounds of non-human voices, followed by the appearance of the spirits of darkness." Thereupon an evil "black god," traditional in Slavic countries, materializes, and presides over a "Black Mass." The ringing of a church bell in the

distance breaks up this infernal ritual, and the evil spirits disperse. Morning has come, God's on his throne, and all's right with the world.

*Danse Macabre*, Op. 40—Camille Saint-Saëns

Camille Saint-Saëns lived a long life, and was remarkable for his wide-ranging intellectual interests and abilities. As a child he was, of course, a precocious musical talent, but even then he evinced a strong natural interest in almost every academic subject—including, but certainly not restricted to, astronomy, archaeology, mathematics, religion, Latin, and Greek. In addition to a life of musical composition and virtuoso keyboard performance, he also enjoyed success as a music journalist, champion of early music (Handel and Bach), and leadership in encouraging French musical tradition. His father died when he was an infant, and he grew into middle age extraordinarily devoted to his mother—his marriage at the age of forty to a nineteen-year old did not last long. He simply left the house one day in 1881 and chose never to see her again; she died in 1950 at the age of ninety-five. Saint-Saëns went on to live an active life, filling an important rôle in the musical life of France—as performer, composer, author, spokesman, and scholar. He was peripatetic—researching Handel manuscripts in London, conducting concerts in Chicago and Philadelphia, visiting Uruguay and writing a hymn for their national holiday, and vacationing in the Canary Islands. He celebrated seventy-five years of concertizing in August of 1921 in his eighty-sixth year, and died a few months later.

The *danse macabre*, or “dance of death,” is one of the most common themes in European art, literature, and music since the Middle Ages. The fourteenth century was an especially rough one, the “Black Death” alone killing perhaps two hundred million souls in Europe—not to mention the Hundred Year's War and various famines. In the face of almost certain, widespread, and early death, there arose the allegory of death dancing with everyone, regardless of station. The allegory appears in countless frescos, murals, and paintings in churches, is a common theme in drama, and the subject of woodcuts in early publications. The ubiquity of death is matched by an almost obsessive preoccupation in artistic representation. The most common imagery is that of death as a skeleton, dancing with a procession of souls that represent all of society: the Pope, emperors, the rich, the poor, beggars, children—everyone leveled by their common end. An end that was certain, probably soon, and thus should be prepared for. That allegory is still with us as a common cultural artifact, and surfaces everywhere in the art of our time.

The Romantics of the nineteenth century could not resist the historical, gloomy allusion, and composers from Berlioz, Liszt, and a host of others wove it into their compositions. Saint-Saëns, while perhaps most comfortable with more abstract music, nevertheless was an equal master of telling “stories” in music. So, in the 1870s, influenced by the early innovator in “tone poems,” Franz Liszt, he composed four of his own. His *Danse macabre* from 1874 for orchestra is a re-working of a song that he had composed two years earlier with a text that vividly describes the figure of death scraping on his violin at midnight, cold winds blowing, as dancers leap, their bones “cracking.”

He recast the vocal part as a solo violin, accompanied by an orchestra that includes the xylophone—a perfect allusion to rattling bones. The solo harp opens with twelve sonorous notes depicting the stroke of midnight, followed by the entrance of the

solo “fiddle” of death. Saint-Saëns masterfully evokes the “scratchy,” sinister fiddle by calling for the instrument to be retuned by lowering the top E string to an E<sup>b</sup>—thus giving the famous *diabolus in musica* (devil in music), or tritone, the fundamental dissonance in both harmony and melody. Two themes are heard: one in the solo flute, and the second a descending scale in the solo violin. They furnish the basic ideas of the piece. After a short fugal section, the famous *Dies iræ* (day of wrath) from the chant in the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass is heard *staccato* in the woodwinds. This ominous theme appears in a wealth of compositions, perhaps most famously in Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique*, but everywhere, from Haydn to John Williams’ *Star Wars*. The ghastly dance continues, but eventually ends at dawn, heralded by a solo oboe depicting the cock’s crow. The solo violin, now less ominous, and more consoling plays a short elegy, and the skeletons return to their graves--the rest live for another day. Halloween is over.

“Curse of the Black Pearl” from *Pirates of the Caribbean*—Klaus Badelt/Ricketts

“This is Halloween” from *A Nightmare Before Christmas*—Danny Elfman/Wasson

Music from *Spider Man*-Elfman/Wasson

Music for films, whether by a pianist improvising for silent films, or those scored for full romantic-era orchestras, has always been an essential element in the medium. And film composers, and their individual paths to success, have varied remarkably over the years. From so-called “classical” composers such as Aaron Copland, Virgil Thompson, and a host of others, to those who were practically self-taught, with simple roots—it doesn’t seem to matter. All that essentially counts is musical talent, creative imagination, a capability for artistic growth, and the ability to work within the demanding, cost and deadline-driven requirements of Hollywood. The music from the recent film hits, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *A Nightmare Before Christmas*, and *Spider Man* are cogent examples of different ways of achieving success in the industry. The composers behind the films, Klaus Badelt and Danny Elfman are illustrative.

Badelt is a native German who worked in record production, as well as music for films and commercials, in Europe before coming to the US and famously just walking into the office of the distinguished composer, Hans Zimmer, and asking for a job. His talent was obvious, and he quickly became a Hollywood regular beginning around 1998. He looks upon himself as a complete film artist; as a child he produced little films with his friends as the actors. So his approach is one of complete immersion in the product. He claims not to be very familiar with the work of the great film scorers of the past, other than a few things by Korngold, for example. But, as a European, it should be expected that he is quite familiar with the “classics.” He claims that his constant model is Gustav Mahler’s second symphony, the “Resurrection.” His statement that “Everything you need to know about scoring is in that symphony” tells us much about his artistic bent and method. Just a few of his successes are: *Gladiator*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *The Time Machine*. His versatility is illustrated by his invitation from the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to be the only Western composer to write music for the closing ceremonies.

Elfman, on the other hand entered the business more or less through the backdoor. Composer for almost one hundred films, over a dozen TV shows, and other associated activities, he began in the seventies as a member of the new wave band, Oingo Boingo—early on a ska-influenced group, and later a guitar-based rock band. Some may remember their performance of “Dead Man’s Party” in the Rodney Dangerfield movie, *Back to School*. Others may not. But in any case, from this background the essentially self-taught Elfman soon became a Hollywood insider, known for his creative scores. To name only a few: *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Men in Black*, *Batman*, *Goodwill Hunting*, *Fifty Shades of Gray*, and *The Girl on the Train*. His style varies widely with the nature of the films, with clear influences from such eminent composers as Bartók, Stravinsky, Philip Glass, Prokofiev, and Satie.

*Death and Transfiguration*, Op. 24—Richard Strauss

It is difficult, indeed, to think of a composer more possessed of an overweening ego than that of Richard Strauss (other than that of Wagner, that is). Thankfully, his was not malicious, and was to some degree justified. Strauss is almost unique in that his long life (unlike that of, say, Verdi) spanned remarkable changes in musical style, not to speak of world history. He is known both as a master of late romantic symphonic style in his large tone poems for orchestra, composed mostly in the late 1880's and 90's, and also for his modern, often strikingly dissonant operas of the twentieth century. On the one hand his operas can still seem jarringly challenging--witness the sordidness of *Salome* (1905) with its lust, incest, decapitation, and necrophilia (including the controversial total nudity in the “Dance of the Seven Veils at the Metropolitan Opera, not long ago). On the other, few musical compositions are more beautifully romantic and serenely appealing than the *Four Last Songs* (all of which treat the graceful acceptance of death after a long and rich life) that he wrote in 1948, the year before his death.

*Death and Transfiguration* is a tone poem, a genre whose creation was largely spearheaded by Bedřich Smetana (composer of the opera, *The Bartered Bride*) and Franz Liszt. The musical premise is simple--write a single movement composition for orchestra that tells a story about something in the “real” world. The “stories” of Strauss’s tone poems vary: *MacBeth*; *Don Quixote*; the escapades of a medieval scamp; the life of an anonymous hero (read Strauss, himself, some would say); climbing a mountain in the Alps; and a musical depiction of several of the subsections of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*.

Strauss was a master of writing for the orchestra. He knew exactly how to extract the most from its instrumental resources--so much so that generations of players complained of the “difficulty” of his works. He thought nothing of depicting the silverware on his breakfast table or the sheep in *Don Quixote*. All of his music is a challenge to perform, but players now love to do so. The young composer started his active career as a composer somewhat in the relatively conservative style of Brahms and others. But, around the middle of the 1880s he, at the encouragement of his friend, the composer Alexander Ritter, fell under the influence of the tone poems of Liszt, and composed his first essay in the genre, *Aus Italien* (1886). *Don Juan* and *MacBeth* came in quick succession, and in 1889 he produced *Death and Transfiguration*.

The subject of the latter is a simple one, the depiction of an old artist, in his death throes, who struggles to live, reviews events in his life, and eventually succumbs and passes into the next world, in a “transfiguration” of his being. Well, it’s not a happy subject for most, but it is typical of the intensity of German Romanticism for a young man to focus on such. What is not typical is that the music came first, and then, at the request of Strauss, Ritter, also a poet, wrote a poem that follows the music and makes clear that which is depicted. The poem—and the music—is in roughly four sections that proceed through the narrative of this man’s life’s end. The opening *Largo* creates an atmosphere of life’s impending end, with soft repeating notes that sound like an ominous clock ticking, followed by a titanic struggle to forestall it in the *Allegro molto agitato*. The third section, quieter and more reflective, moderates the struggle as the dying man thinks of his long and active life—including happier times. Finally, starting softly, the last section depicts the transfiguration of his soul, and his departure from our world. In Strauss’s inimitable way, the main theme of transfiguration—three ascending stepwise notes followed by a soaring leap upward of an octave—begins quietly, but grows and builds in intensity, until in the stunning peroration, the full orchestra, brass filling the hall, shepherds the man’s soul into eternity.

The significance of that theme was central to the life and work of Strauss. Almost sixty years later, in 1948, as an old man of eighty-four, he returned to it. In his beloved, and stunningly beautiful, *Four Last Songs*—his last compositions, and all of which depict the serene acceptance of the inevitability of life’s end—he employs the transfiguration theme of his youth. In the last song, *Im Abendrot* (In Evening’s Rosy Glow) as the soprano softly sings “Is this perhaps death?” a solo horn softly plays the transfiguration theme in a “halo” of lush strings. The moment is incomparable and the circle is complete.

### *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*—Paul Dukas

Dukas is not alone in his misfortune in composing a piece whose overwhelming popularity has obscured other worthwhile compositions. While he is well known in France, and was an important composer, critic, and teacher in the early decades of the twentieth century, American audiences know him almost exclusively from his *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. He was not a particularly prolific composer, but was successful in France—largely owing to his dramatic works, especially the opera, *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*, as well a symphony and the ballet, *La Péri*. An intelligent and respected music critic, he wrote over four hundred articles and reviews. But, perhaps his most lasting contribution to French musical life was as a teacher at the leading French musical institutions. The list of those of his pupils who went on, themselves, to distinguished careers as composers is a long one, and replete with those who became well known to audiences worldwide.

In his own work, he was a meticulous craftsman (he destroyed many of his compositions which did not live up to his standards), distinguished by clear musical architecture and a mastery of orchestral color. He was not a musical prodigy, but worked hard, and by his early thirties, he wrote his only published symphony (1896), which garnered a mixed reception. He thereafter immediately set to work on his tone poem, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, and as they say, the rest is history. Its popularity has eclipsed

almost everything else that he accomplished in his life, and its reputation remains undiminished. But, the reputation is more than justified, for it not just a bit of programmatic fluff—a catchy story told well.

It is based on the famous poem by Goethe from 1797, *Der Zauberlehrling*. The poem is well known in Germany, and even the source of a popular saying about politicians who lose control of their supporters. Dukas' setting follows the poem faithfully: An old magician leaves a young apprentice in charge, with household duties to perform. A lazy lad, he tires of carrying buckets of water, and uses his imperfect command of magic spells to enlist the aid of a broom. The broom won't stop, water is overflowing everything. In a desperate attempt to stem the tide, the apprentice splits the broom with an axe, only to find there are now two, crazy, out-of-control brooms—working at double time. Disaster is looming, but the old sorcerer returns in time to set things right. His final homily is a universal one: Only those who have mastered the magic should invoke powerful, mysterious forces.

To be sure, Dukas' work owes much of its popularity to its engaging story, but its success is founded in the composer's marvelous ability to spin out phrases that are built upon simple musical ideas, but grow and expand with a logic and unity that bring the same skill of Beethoven to mind. The main theme of the work is a case in point, and it literally expands with the increasing tension of the drama. The other salient virtue is Dukas' mastery of orchestration—the story literally comes alive in sound.

While the story is cute and entertaining, everyone knows the underlying truth: humankind should not essay more than it can control and understand. As technology threatens to overwhelm us all, a good reflection on the lesson of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* is in order.