



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 3 – Mozart’s Jupiter

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***Quiet City*—Aaron Copland**

If there ever was an American “composer laureate,” then Aaron Copland is surely he. A native of Brooklyn, the son of Jewish immigrants of Lithuanian descent, he established what many call the “American Sound” in art music. He had gone to Paris, like so many during the 1920s, to study advanced composition, and his musical style when he returned was accordingly advanced, some would say “academic.” It certainly was often dissonant, and in no way exhibited the popular tunefulness that later made him the darling of mainstream America. But then, like so many other artists during the depression, he then turned to a simpler, more accessible style, rooted in the populism of the time. Thus, we have such evergreen compositions as *Appalachian Spring*, *Rodeo*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and *Billy the Kid*. Later, after the war, with the New Deal, the dust bowl, and the popularity of the communist party in America gone, he returned to the austere, more advanced musical style that previously had characterized his work. Nevertheless, most audiences today think of his “depression era” musical style when his name is mentioned.

Quiet City exemplifies Copland’s enormously popular compositions from those times. Scored for trumpet, English horn, and strings, it owes its origin to the incidental music that Copland had written for a play of the same name in New York in 1939. That music was scored for trumpet, saxophone, clarinet and piano. The success of his music led to suggestions that he rework the material into a composition for orchestra. In Copland’s words: “I borrowed the name, the trumpet and some of the themes from the original play.” He finished the work in 1940 and it saw its première in January of 1941.

The entire mood of the work stems from the eponymous play by Irwin Shaw, which is built around the evocation of the infinitude of personal and private thoughts by the many individuals of a metropolis. Copland was called upon to provide music “evocative of the nostalgia and inner distress of a society profoundly aware of its own insecurity.” The original incidental music featured a solo trumpet that served in some way as the playwright’s voice and that of the main character. The latter apparently had apparently abandoned his Jewish faith, and had given up artistic aspirations for the life of material success as a businessman. But, he was reminded of his sacrifice by the “haunting sound of his brother’s trumpet playing.” The English horn plays an equal rôle as the other character, and the interactions between their respective points of view carry the drama.

The poignant score is borne by the inimitable chords, voicing, and melodic style so familiar in all of those middle period words so beloved of Copland: “open,” sparse harmonies that contrast with thick, chordal “crunches.” *Quiet City* is informed by his disciplined economy of motifs, which appear in various guises, and a marvelous tonal ambiguity that avoids banal, superficial conclusions to ambiguous perspectives. Withal, it’s as if Charles Ives’ *The Unanswered Question* meets Copland’s *Our Town*. Cast into seven sections, the two more active, digressive interior ones are bookended by the

thoughtful, but enigmatic, opening ones. And at the end, no answers are there. All in all, it's a marvelous miniature masterpiece that packs more music and stimulating, existential questions than is largely the norm.

Crouching Tiger Concerto for Cello and Chamber Orchestra—Tan Dun

Tan is unquestionably one of the leaders of current American avant-garde composers. Perhaps the most recognized of those who seek to incorporate both cutting edge classical Western musical styles and traditional Chinese musical elements into his personal voice, he has composed a large body of work of stunning variety and originality. He has produced five operas, orchestral works, chamber works, film scores, and compositions that, in their uniqueness, defy easy placement in conventional genres. A master of traditional Western musical styles as well as traditional Chinese instruments and vocal traditions, he deftly combines them into a unique and fascinating *oeuvre*.

Born in Hunan, China, like so many Chinese from that time of Cultural Revolution, his personal interests in the rich traditions of Chinese music were repressed. But, after a time of working in the fields, he was ultimately able to attend the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. Along the way he learned to play various traditional musical instruments and performed in opera orchestras. Notwithstanding the insularity of the cultural repression of the times, at the conservatory he was able to encounter the music of many of the Western avant-garde. By the 1980s he was able to move to New York City and become a doctoral student at Columbia University, a protégé of the well-known composer and teacher, Chou Wen-chung. Immersed in the New York scene, he soon was influenced by progressive composers well known to the American musical public: Steve Reich, George Crumb, Philip Glass, John Cage, and others of that familiar ilk. Nevertheless, his compositions were completely and equally informed by all of the sounds, techniques, and values of traditional Chinese music. To Western genres and media, he incorporated Chinese stringed instruments—even instruments of stone and paper, as well as water! To that mix there comes the drama and sounds of traditional Chinese opera, as well as shamanistic rituals. Furthermore, Tan is fond of exploring video images as integral to some of his compositions. It's a formidable mélange of multicultural, multimedia elements. Some composers with these proclivities produce artistic hash. But, the impressive imagination, artistic discipline, and technical master of Tan succeed famously. Worldwide acclaim is now his.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon was a stunning cinematic hit of 2000. It was not your usual martial arts film, though, but rather one in an important Chinese tradition of chivalry and historical fantasy that is highly regarded as art and literature. The film, thoroughly Chinese in every way, was a worldwide smash, and among its many awards, it garnered ten Academy Award nominations, winning four. One of the winning Oscars was given to Tan Dun for his impressive musical score. The *Crouching Tiger Concerto* is based upon that film score, and saw its première in London in 2000, with Yo-Yo Ma as soloist.

While the movie and the concerto based upon it, taken from almost every viewpoint, are self-evidently Chinese, the cultural reality is somewhat more nuanced. Western audiences tend to visualize Chinese culture in somewhat dated and clichéd simplicities, but only some of these presumptions inform *Crouching Tiger, Hidden*

Dragon. In point of fact, much of the film, and Tan's musical inspirations, draw upon a province of China far removed from the old clichés about China and its putative cultures and geography. The old caravan route between the Orient and the Occident, often called the "Silk Road," snaked through many lands and cultures as it made its way from China, through central Asia, to Europe. An important departure point was the northwest Chinese province of Xinjiang. It's a bleak, sparsely occupied, desert and dry grassland region, home to a number of ethnic groups, including the Uyghur. The latter people, especially, have been subject to persecution by the Chinese government, in a series of human rights abuses. Some controversially accuse the Chinese authorities of genocide. It is the Uyghur culture and its musical traditions upon which Tan has based some important aspects of his concerto. So, the imagery is not all bamboo forests and pandas. Rather, think Mongolian camels and caravans.

In the concerto the solo 'cello is accompanied by string orchestra, harp, flute (doubling on alto flute and piccolo) and a substantial percussion ensemble. "Accompanied" is a bit misleading, for the accompaniment is in reality a significant partner in the work. Though subtle, the solo 'cello is amplified as an integral part of the conception of its sound, not because of any acoustic difficulties. In fact, to do so is not uncommon in some of the more recent avant-garde works featuring the instrument. There are six movements of modest length, each with an evocative title stemming from the scene associated with that portion of the original film score.

The first movement, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," begins with an introduction by the 'cello alone, in a ruminating, mysterious soliloquy that features *glissandi* and some opportunities for a bit of improvisation. The effect is to somewhat allude and reference the traditional Chinese fiddle, the *erhu*. Soon the orchestra joins with its own *glissandi*, while the alto flute takes up some of the solo 'cello's ideas, accompanied by bongo drums. The tempo picks up, sustained by a string *ostinato*, and the piccolo joins in. After a moment of calm, the alto flute returns, and at one point one can hear the solo 'cello plucking the strings with a guitar pick—again imitating a traditional ethnic instrument, now the *rewapu* of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang. The 'cello has its last word in a series of solo *glissandi*, and the incessant bongos lead into a more spirited tempo. The movement ends in a dynamic frenzy, the percussion section hammering away in music that accompanied a "night fight" in the film.

The second movement, "Through the Bamboo Forest," depicts warlike characters fighting while soaring above said forest. But here there's less intimation of violence, and more of sailing aloft. The screechy 'cello, flute, harp, punchy violas, and *glissando* strings create an atmospheric sheen of sound to suggest an image of the fantastical flight. The percussion joins as it all builds in intensity. As the repetitive, dissonant string accompaniment finally fades out, the solo 'cello ends the movement with a substantial meditative, unaccompanied passage built around a filigree of *glissandi*.

In the third movement, "Silk Road: Encounters," we are far from bamboo forests and are on the Silk Road plodding and lurching along in a caravan. There's clearly more of the Middle East than the Far East in this musical depiction. A novel effect, here, is the use of the traditional "talking" drum, the *tar*. The *tar* player moves up to take his place beside the 'cellist, and they perform as a duo throughout. The lyrical melody, alluding to flowers and the biblical Eve (the Uyghur are Muslim), is a traditional one from Xinjiang. Eventually, the pace quickens, and the thundering hooves of the desert horses of Xinjiang

are heard. Some dramatic strumming in the ‘cello over lyrical strings finally leads to an extensive, imaginative duet between the *tar* and the ‘cello soloist. The equestrian slowly disappears into the desert mist.

“Eternal Vow” follows—it is perhaps the focal movement, depicting, as it does, the love and affection of the central characters of the drama. And now, Tan scores what Westerners would call “real Chinese music,” (or at least what they think is so.) That verisimilitude is created by the marvelous opening duet for piccolo and harp. The main, lyrical theme soon follows and is elaborated in the ‘cello, ending with a most impressive cadenza that quotes material from other movements, and using just about every technique in a string player’s bag of tricks: pizzicato, double stops, *glissandi*, glassy harmonics, tremolos, extremes of registers. It’s a virtuoso *tour de force*.

“To the South” in some ways functions as the concerto’s *scherzo* movement, opening with scrambling, energetic interchanges between the strings and the soloist. The performers literally attack their instruments in a variety of startling ways, including literally “slapping” the strings with their palms. The ‘cellist leads the way, the strings answer, and the ‘cello responds with another idea, which the strings mimic, and so forth. To top this, the soloist starts a “jerky” new idea, but this time with the bow. The percussion and the strings quickly join in. This forms a foundation for the entrance of the piccolo, screaming in its highest register—now this sounds like a “real” Chinese flute! Led by the insistent piccolo, all careen faster and faster to the end.

The last movement, “Farewell,” features the piccolo and the solo ‘cellist, depicting the two major protagonists of the drama in a kind of love duet. It draws upon material from earlier movements, each instrumentalist playing discrete tunes. The somber mood is a perfect cinematic conclusion to this fantastic tale. Throughout, unlike most of the preceding movements, the strings provide a simple harmonic underpinning to the plaint of the ‘cello and the interwoven comments from the piccolo. The latter enhances the crepuscular effect by playing in its uncommonly heard lower register. It doesn’t last long, and this remarkable composition is over. In a time when the term is too frequently stretched and distorted beyond reasonable meaning, “multicultural” truly characterizes Tan Dun’s unique contribution to that concept.

Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K.551 “Jupiter”—Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart’s symphonies are generally conceded to surrender pride of place to his incomparable operas and piano concertos. Nevertheless, they still constitute one of the treasures of symphonic music. Admittedly, he began composition of symphonies when both he and the genre were practically in their respective infancies. He had not yet the models of achievement of the maturity of Joseph Haydn before him, but as Haydn gradually developed the modern symphony, Mozart grew along with the older colleague. They later became close friends in Vienna, and constituted a mutual admiration society. As with all his works, Mozart’s symphonies were generally written “upon demand,” for a specific purpose or event. But the “wunder” summer of 1788 produced a group of three symphonies that distinguish themselves from all of his others. Mozart was in the full bloom of his late genius—he had only three more years left. He was writing the masterpieces that best represent his unique talent. *Don Giovanni*, after a triumphal première in Prague the previous fall, had opened in Vienna in May. On the other hand, his financial position was obviously deteriorating. That summer he moved

to a more distant suburb of Vienna where rents were cheaper, and the embarrassing letters to his friends asking for support began. Yet, for unknown reasons he took the time out to write symphonies 39, 40 and 41. A group of symphonic works without equal, and that seemed to be motivated only by interior and personal reasons. They were written in the short space of about two months, amazingly at the same time of the composition of seven other significant works of his maturity.

No. 41 in C major, called the “Jupiter,” is the culmination of Mozart’s symphonic composition. The great commentator, Tovey, called the nickname one of the silliest injuries ever inflicted on great works of art, but it serves its purpose, for it alludes to an Olympian mastery of technique that characterizes Mozart’s late works. However, unlike many of those very late works, it bears no darkness, or presentiments of life’s precariousness. Rather, in the context of a sunny, but clearly detached mood--hence the title--Mozart reaches the summit of his symphonic works. It is cast in the usual four movements of the classical period: four movements, with the interior two consisting of a slow movement and a dance-like movement.

While the music of Mozart is famously infused with some of the world’s memorable melodies, what is of great interest in this last, great symphony is the degree to which the composer chooses concise, indeed, incisive motives with which to generate the composition. One might usefully think of the first movement of Beethoven’s famous fifth in this context. And it is just that aspect of Mozart’s melodic style, here, that is the locus of the most well-known and revered movements of this symphony. The last movement is literally a *tour de force* of that most “austere” of musical textures: counterpoint. The careful listener will discern not just one or two important melodies in the finale, but five! One by one they appear, short and easily identifiable--and then in a most unassuming and musical way Mozart combines them all simultaneously. Theorists call this amazing feat “quintuple invertible counterpoint.” It usually takes a J.S. Bach to pull this off, and then in an earlier and more severe style. But, Mozart almost throws it off casually--and like all works of great genius, you don’t even have to appreciate these stunning details to enjoy the whole show immensely. It is a Jovian farewell from this most musical of human beings.

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