

Grand Opera Meets the Kotzschmar Organ – April 9, 2016 PROGRAM NOTES

by Linda Russell

Prelude to *Die Meistersinger* Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

While on a train excursion in 1862, Richard Wagner composed the Prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. This ten-minute composition pre-dates completion of the full opera (1868) and is “unique in his catalogue—pure, uncomplicated optimism.” (Counts) The spectacular music introduces the most important themes of *Die Meistersinger*. This is the only opera for which Wagner created an original story; it has an historical, rather than mythical setting.

Bell Chorus Ruggero Leoncavallo (1856-1919)

Villagers welcome a troupe of minstrels as they sing “Din, don—suona vespero,” imitating the pealing bells that call the faithful to Vespers. The lively “Bell Chorus” comes from Leoncavallo’s (1856-1919) *Pagliacci*, his only composition still performed in the standard operatic repertory. Leoncavallo stated that the plot of *Pagliacci* was based on a court case adjudicated by his father when Ruggero was a child. The case involved a love triangle and the murder of a Leoncavallo family servant.

Sul fil d’un soffio etesio Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

After his collaboration with Giuseppe Verdi on *Otello*, Arrigo Boito convinced him to compose *Falstaff*, premiered in 1893 when Verdi was almost 80. Boito’s libretto adapts Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and scenes from *Henry IV*. In “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio” (On the breath of an etesian breeze), Nannetta, disguised as the Queen of the Fairies, invokes the fairies to dance, hoping to entice the lecherous Falstaff.

Pilgrim's Chorus Richard Wagner

Wagner based *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* (1845) on two German legends (about Tannhäuser) and a song contest (held in Wartburg). Myths abound about the title character, a poet-composer, but few facts are known. In the opera Tannhäuser accompanies a group of Pilgrims to Rome in order to receive the Pope’s pardon. As the Pilgrims return, they sing a “Pilgrim’s Chorus,” which begins quietly and builds to a climactic Hallelujah, dying away as they pass by.

Procession of the Nobles Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908)

Nationalist Russian composer and master orchestrator Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov composed “Procession of the Nobles (Cortège)” in 1889. The march, the best-known excerpt from his opera-ballet *Mlada*, paints a picture of colorful banners and “swaggering princes astride their matchless Arab steeds.” (Van Ausdall) *Mlada*, based on a Slavic myth, was Rimsky-Korsakov’s first composition to show the influence of Richard Wagner. “Procession” was used as the theme music for PBS’s public affairs program *Inside Washington*.

The Angel's Farewell

Edward Elgar (1856-1934)

Edward Elgar completed *The Dream of Gerontius*, scored for mezzo-soprano, chorus and orchestra, only three months before its premiere at the 1900 Birmingham Music Festival. Several factors—the complexity of the choral writing, the sudden death of the chorus master, and soloists in poor voice—rendered the first performance a near disaster. This masterpiece tells the story of a man's journey from deathbed to judgment. Elgar brings *The Dream of Gerontius* to a serene close with the poignant "Softly and gently, dearly ransomed soul." As the Angel leads the Soul to Purgatory, the Angel and chorus of Angelicals sing a song of farewell, which ends with overlapping Amens. At the end of his manuscript, Elgar quoted John Ruskin:

This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved and hated, like another: my life was as the vapor and is not; but *this* I saw and knew; this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory.

Triumphal March

Giuseppe Verdi

Isma'il Pasha, Khedive of Egypt, commissioned Verdi to compose an opera commemorating the opening of the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo. *Aida* premiered in Cairo in 1871 to great acclaim. In the "Triumphal March" Radames parades the Egyptian army before the pharaoh, celebrating victory over the Ethiopians.

Finale, Act I

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti (All Women Behave That Way, or the School for Lovers) is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's third opera on a libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte. In 1789 Mozart needed money, hastily composed *Così* in four months and conducted the premiere in 1790.

Mozart lavished his finest inspiration on *Così*. For prodigal musical richness, for clear-eyed portrayal of the human condition, the world has never seen a more glorious—and profound and unsettling—soap bubble. (Ellison)

Ferrando and Guglielmo bet that their fiancées, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, will be unfaithful. Rejection, jealousy, a dramatic "poisoning," magnetic therapy, disguises, and romantic manipulation: all play a part in the ruse. The philosopher Don Alfonso and Despina, the maid, add to the mayhem.

Chorus of Hebrew Slaves

Giuseppe Verdi

Verdi's *Nabucco* (1841) tells the biblical story of the conquered Jews, exiled from their homeland by the Babylonian King Nabucco (Nebuchadnezzar). Verdi noted, "This is the opera with which my artistic career really begins. And though I had many difficulties to fight against, it is certain that *Nabucco* was born under a lucky star."

"Va pensiero, sull'ali dorate" (Fly, thought, on golden wings) or the *Chorus of Hebrew Slaves* is the best-known song from the opera. It paraphrases Psalm 137, a lamentation by the Israelites upon their exile. At Verdi's funeral a crowd of mourners spontaneously sang "Va, pensiero;" twentieth-century Italy viewed it as an unofficial national anthem for a unified country.

Pensa alla patria

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Gioachino Rossini, best-known for his Italian comedic operas, earned the nickname “The Italian Mozart” because of his lyrical melodies; he was considered the most popular opera composer of his era. He composed *L’Italiana in Algeri*, a two-act opera *drama giocoso*, in only eighteen days when he was 21 years old. Isabella, searching for her lover Lindoro, is shipwrecked; Prince Mustafa wants to marry Isabella and pawn his current wife off to a slave (Lindoro). Isabella sings *Pensa alla patria* to the slaves (who she plans to lead to freedom) while preparing to honor Mustafa as a “Pappataci,” a spoof award which she invented to require him to obey her instructions.

Adele’s Laughing Song

Johann Strauss (1825-1899)

A new genre called operetta emerged in Europe in the 1860s. Incorporating spoken dialogue, dancing, and more down-to-earth characters, operetta was more fun than conventional nineteenth-century opera. Johann Strauss composed 15 operettas, including the popular *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat, 1874). The action centers on a masked ball given by Prince Orlofsky. The operetta includes a couple with marriage problems, the wife’s lover, a maid, a prison warden, and, of course, comedic examples of mistaken identity. Adele, the maid, poses at the ball as an actress named Olga. When her disguise is questioned, she mocks her accuser with “The Laughing Song,” asking if a lady’s maid ever possessed her figure, profile and elegance of dress.

Habanera

Georges Bizet (1838-1875)

Georges Bizet, a child prodigy and talented pianist, lived a short, productive life. Bizet based *Carmen* (1875), perhaps the best-known opera in the world, on a novelette by Prosper Mérimée. In the opening scene the gypsy Carmen seduces a soldier, Don José, by singing the sultry *Habanera*, comparing love to a beautiful, rebellious bird (“L’amour est un oiseau rebelle”). The chorus responds with “Prends garde a toi!” (Take care, young man!)

March of the Toreadors

Georges Bizet

The theater management at the Paris Opéra Comique feared that

the lust and violence of the plot (of *Carmen*) would lose them the *PG* rating they enjoyed at the time; after all, a character dying violently onstage in the final scene was hardly family fare. (Fancher)

Despite the controversy, *Carmen* played for 33 performances in Paris before Bizet’s death, and quickly became popular throughout Europe and the world. Bullfight music is the underpinning for “Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre,” the “March of the Toreadors,” sung by the torero Escamillo, who makes his first appearance in Act 2 when he attempts to woo Carmen.

Easter Hymn

Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945)

Pietro Mascagni heard news about an opera competition in 1888, sponsored by the Milanese music publisher Edoardo Sonzogno. Unknown young Italian composers were invited to submit a one-act opera; the best three would be staged in Rome at Sonzogno's expense. Mascagni heard about the competition only two months before the deadline, quickly asked a friend to provide a libretto, submitted *Cavalleria rusticana* on the final day, and won. He never wrote another opera that achieved the success of *Cavalleria rusticana* and said, "It is a pity I wrote *Cavalleria rusticana* first...I was crowned before I became king."

On Easter morning in Sicily a church choir sings "Regina coeli" (Queen of Heaven), calling the villagers to church. Tragic love is the focus of the opera: Santuzza loves Turiddu, a soldier, but he is having an affair with Lola, wife of a local teamster. The chorus sings praise for the resurrection, "Let us sing hymns to Him, He is not dead! He is radiant; He has risen from the grave! We hail the risen Lord, today ascended to the glory of Heaven!" Santuzza's soaring descant counterpoints the reality of the impending tragedy.

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