

SVS Winter Concert 2012

Mozart: Overture to The Magic Flute K. 620 (1791)

While Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart struggled financially for most of his life, he finally had a big hit with *Die Zauberflöte - The Magic Flute* - one of his last substantial compositions. Sadly, though, the opportunity to enjoy better times was rudely cut short two months after the first performance in his home town of Vienna by sudden illness and untimely death at age 35. *The Magic Flute*, now the most widely performed opera in the world, is a delightful fairy tale full of wit, magic, and mischief. The overture to this beloved work opens with a grand proclamation: the principal three notes from the key of E flat. What follows is a lively complex sounding fugue cleverly based on a simple theme allegedly “borrowed” from Muzio Clementi, a rival with whom Mozart once sparred in a piano face off in front of Emperor Joseph II.

**Mozart: Papageno’s Song: Der Vogelfanger bin ich ja
from The Magic Flute (1791)**

This famous aria from *The Magic Flute* is sung by the birdcatcher, Papageno, who enters covered in bird plumage just after he has saved the prince Tamino from a serpent. He sings comically of catching girls in a manner not unlike that in which he catches birds in his net.

Puccini: Vissi d’arte, vissi d’amore from Tosca (1900)

At a crucial point in the story of Puccini’s opera *Tosca*, the central character is presented with a stark choice. Either *Tosca* must accept the amorous advances of Scarpia, chief of the secret police, or she will see her lover Cavaradossi put to death. In this aria she sings “I lived for art, I lived for love, never did I harm a living creature ... why, O Lord, why dost thou repay me thus?” As questions of life go, you don’t get much bigger than that.

**Leoncavallo: Decidi il mio destin
(duet) from Pagliacci (1892)**

In the story of *Pagliacci*, life and art become tragically intertwined, as we witness the jealous husband Canio, head of a troupe of actors, confuse his reality with the role of the clown he plays. The clown, *Pagliaccio*, discovers his wife is cheating on him only Canio reads this as evidence his real wife, *Nedda*, is untrue. The irony is that he is actually right but for the wrong reasons! She *is* cheating on him in real life too as becomes apparent in this romantic duet between *Nedda* and her lover *Silvio*. “Decide my fate” *Silvio* exclaims to *Nedda* as he pleads for her love. For those of us who are more familiar with *Seinfeld* than grand opera, think of the episode in which *Jerry* and his friends plan to see the opera *Pagliacci*. In a subplot “Crazy” *Joe Davola* is out to put the “kibosh” on *Jerry* and in a comedic parallel with the story of *Pagliacci*, *Joe Davola* dates *Elaine* only to develop a jealous obsession when she cools on him. Accusing her of infidelity while confusing her name with *Nedda* he dresses as a clown, causing consternation for *Jerry* and *Elaine* at the performance of *Pagliacci* when *Kramer* tells them he sold his ticket to “some nut in a clown suit”.

Sibelius Karelia Suite Op 11 (1893)

As the place where he would later spend his honeymoon, *Karelia*, a province in the south-

eastern corner of Finland, had a special place in Jean Sibelius's affections. The *Karelia Suite* consists of three pieces the composer took from a larger score he wrote for a historical pageant performed in Viipuri depicting scenes from Karelian history. The three movements consists of an *Intermezzo* featuring the sounds of a march-like procession with horn calls over *pianissimo* strings, a sombre *Ballade* reflecting the deposed figure of a Swedish king listening to a minstrel (sung by the cor anglais) at Viipuri castle, and the jaunty *All Marcia*, featuring the prelude to a battle siege. As one of his early works, the Karelia music shows little evidence for the remarkable and powerful new tonalities he developed as he transitioned into the 20th century but as the great conductor Herbert von Karajan pointed out in the *Intermezzo* "there is this sense of the "*Ur-Wald*" the primeval forest, the feeling of some elemental power, that one is dealing with something profound." As such, the music is unmistakably the work of the great Finnish composer and one that remains enduringly popular.

**Mozart: D'Oreste, d'Ajace
from Idomeneo (1781)**

Based on Greek mythology and set in the Island of Crete after the Trojan War, *Idomeneo* was composed by Mozart 10 years before *The Magic Flute*. Unlike the later comic opera which was sung in German, *Idomeneo* is a more serious affair sung in Italian. While most of the characters toward the conclusion come out all smiles and smelling of roses, the one exception is Electra, the daughter of the Greek King Agamemnon, who is furious that her beloved Prince Idamante, son of Idomeneo, has fallen into the arms of her arch rival. In this aria she exclaims against the injustice of her fate as she contemplates following her doomed brother Orestes into the infernal abyss.

**Rossini: Largo al factotum
from the Barber of Seville (1816)**

This aria, much parodied in animated cartoons from *Tom and Jerry* to *Bugs Bunny*, gives Figaro, the central character of this opera (and also of Mozart's earlier work *The Marriage of Figaro*), a chance to explain exactly why he's the most famous barber in Seville. Requiring the utmost skill to encompass its rapid 6/8 tempo and tricky lyrics laden with Italian superlatives, it's the perfect exemplar of bragging at its most bravissimo.

Intermission

Beethoven Symphony No. 7 in A major Op. 92 (1813)

Imagine time warping back to Vienna, 200 years ago but by some mishap we arrive in the year 1813, one year late! It's been more than two decades since Mozart's death but there's a new player in town, Ludwig van B. Fast cut to the local university where there's an important concert about to take place: a charity event held to honor soldiers wounded in battle against the armies of Napoleon at Hanau. In the orchestra, some of the leading musical luminaries of the day are powdering their wigs: among them on violin, Louis Spohr, and on timpani, the court composer Antonio Salieri (the central character who plots against Mozart in the movie *Amadeus*). At the helm is the composer himself, who despite near total deafness conducts with maniacal fire and energy. Suddenly we realize we are witnessing the premier performance of Beethoven's

seventh symphony.

The concert is a resounding success not least because of the overwhelming reaction to the symphony's gloriously inspired second movement. On first hearing of this movement, the audience are in uproar demanding an immediate encore. For a composer, you don't get much better than that and Beethoven knows it, remarking that this is indeed one his most successful compositions.

The first movement starts with an unusually long introduction featuring ascending scales - a characteristic touch for the man who somehow managed to breath life into a bunch of scales creating the world's most spiritually sublime violin concerto. The introduction leads by way of a series of 61 repeated E notes into a lively *Vivace* sprinkled with dance-like rhythms and abrupt dynamic changes.

The famous second movement, marked *Allegretto*, is the slowest of the four movements, but its quiet opening melody, which sounds like a funeral march, pulses with brooding energy. The theme starts in the violas, cellos, and basses, and gradually builds as we hear a second powerful theme enter, played simultaneously with the first. The two themes spiral around one another as they pass through different layers of the orchestra reaching a magisterial climax that launches us into a set of variations heralding periods of great tranquillity alternating with stark moments of ominous foreboding. In modern times the emotionally charged music from the *Allegretto* has been used in numerous movies and even formed the basis of an entire set of variations by the French jazz pianist, Jacques Loussier, otherwise famous for his unique take on the works of JS Bach.

The movement that follows the *Allegretto* completely blows the sombre mood out of the water. We are suddenly presented with a joyfully bucolic scherzo that the British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham jokingly compared to a bunch of yaks jumping about. But it's in the irrepressibly celebratory finale where we hear what Richard Wagner had meant when he described this symphony as the "apotheosis of the dance". Beethoven spins the rhythmic swirling figure that powers this movement with relentless abandon. Yet always on the look out for the unexpected, towards the end of the movement the composer introduces a dramatic passage where E and D sharp alternate and D sharp is played in unison with D natural. As Hector Berlioz later wrote admiringly "One might imagine that the result would be a dreadful dissonance, or at least a lack of harmonic clarity; yet this is not the case... Beethoven did not write music *for the eyes*. The coda, launched by this threatening pedal, has extraordinary brilliance, and is fully worthy of bringing this work to its conclusion – a masterpiece of technical skill, taste, imagination, craftsmanship and inspiration."

So the show is over and the audience, dazzled and delighted, leave. It's time to head back, as we say goodbye to Ludwig van B and his fellow musicians, to the 21st century.