

Orchestra Toronto Concert Programme Notes

Afternoon at the Opera

2023 April 16th

Landmarks of Note

Programme Notes by Trevor Rines

Listening Landmarks are in boldface

Appropriately enough, our concert begins with an overture. **Opening with dramatic & attention grabbing triple blasts of trombone & tuba chords**, it really is the perfect concert opener. As the curtain rose, at its troubled 1862 St. Petersburg premiere, *La Forza del Destino* (*The Force of Destiny*) opened with only a short prelude. This **overture** replaced it seven years later, at a very successful Milan production. **Giuseppe Verdi** had spent those years extensively revising the opera. He even changed the ending, allowing Don Alvaro to survive. Plagued by illness & censorship, the premiere had to be postponed nine months, establishing its reputation as a cursed opera. Luciano Pavarotti refused to perform it, due to the curse, & others perform rituals before each performance. Now, every production which encounters bad luck just reinforces this legend.

Next comes more **Verdi**, with an emotional duet from *La Traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*). Despite the audience turning on its 1853 Venice premiere, after revisions, cast changes, & a title change (from *Violetta*), the opera quickly became a huge, albeit controversial, success. Now the most popular of his 28 operas, it was initially dismissed as “*a prurient story prettily acted*”. Queen Victoria refused to attend it, because of its scandalous subject. It’s based on Alexandre Dumas fils’ popular novel & play, *La Dame aux camélias* (*The Lady of the Camélias*). Violetta’s bourgeois lover, Alfredo, convinces her to leave her life as a famous Parisian courtesan, to live in a country house with him. In this scene, she’s visited by Alfredo’s father, Giorgio, who demands that she end her scandalous relationship with his son. Her reputation has jeopardised his daughter’s engagement. Initially protesting that she loves Alfredo too much to end the relationship, **she reluctantly agrees, singing**, “*Tell your daughter (**Dite all giovine**), so lovely & pure, that a poor & wretched woman, who has but one precious thing in life, will sacrifice it for her, & then will die.*” She knows that she’s dying of consumption & that this was her only chance at happiness. Moved by her noble sacrifice, **listen for Giorgio singing, sympathetically, “Piangi, piangi, o misera.”** (*Weep, weep, poor girl. I see now that the sacrifice I asked could not be greater.*)

And now, at long last, our own much anticipated world premiere, commissioned by Orchestra Toronto. You’re the first audience to hear the brand new one-act comic opera, *Romance of the Gods*. This is Composer-in-Residence **Elizabeth Raum**’s sixth opera. (Discover more about her other operas & compositions at www.elizabethraum.com) The story is that of Persephone & Demeter, but it may not be exactly the Greek myth you’ve heard before. Raum has decided to transform the well known myth into a romantic comedy. Now, rather than kidnapping Persephone (as he does in the myth), Hades, god of the underworld, does his best to woo the beautiful young maiden. Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest & fertility, who has kept away all men from her beloved Persephone. Zeus, king of the gods, is

Persephone's father. Unbeknownst to Hades, his wooing attempt is being assisted by Zeus & his wife, Hera. They feel that Persephone senses that something is missing from her life, but can't quite put her finger on what that is. They also feel sorry for the lonely Hades, who just doesn't understand why he's so often rejected. Hera & Zeus decide to weave a spell, which helps Hades to win the heart of Persephone, who returns with him to Hades' kingdom. All have forgotten about Persephone's mother, Demeter, who loves her daughter above all else. Demeter despairs, & refuses to attend to her duties as goddess of the harvest & fertility, with devastating consequences. The misery & famine, caused by the failing of the harvests, makes Zeus & Hera realise their mistake. Their proposed solution is a compromise. Persephone would spend half of the year with Demeter, whose joy would bring the Earth to life, causing Spring & Summer. For the other half of the year, Persephone would be with Hades, in the underworld, & Demeter's sadness would cause Autumn & Winter. All agree to this plan & join together, to sing a final joyful chorus.

INTERMISSION

When the novel, *The Story of the Chevalier des Grieux & Manon Lescaut*, was published, in 1731, it was immediately banned in France. Naturally, its scandalous reputation fed the public's curiosity & led to the wide distribution of unauthorised copies. The author, Antoine François Prévost, eventually agreed to soften the more controversial parts & to adding the warning that it's "a terrible example of the force of passions." Nearly 300 editions later, this novel is now considered to be the most reprinted French literary work. **Giacomo Puccini** was not the first to bring this popular story to the stage. It had already been turned into a ballet & two operas. He was aware of Massenet's version, only nine years earlier, but explained that he'd be taking a different approach. "*Massenet feels it as a Frenchman, with powder & minuets. I shall feel it as an Italian, with desperate passion*" His Italian approach had a hugely successful Turin premiere, in 1893, & this is the work which put Puccini on the map. It's the story of another courtesan, but this one is not nearly so noble as Verdi's Violetta. A Chevalier falls madly in love with Manon, who leads him astray, exploiting him & many other men to feed her appetite for a luxurious lifestyle, leading them to ruin. This instrumental **Intermezzo** comes between Acts 2 & 3, after Manon's arrest, & before their exile to a Louisiana penal colony. **At first, a viola despairs alone, until other instruments join in, hinting at, then fully stating, the falling Fate Motif.**

Manon Lescaut was Puccini's third opera, & he'd go on to write nine more. What's remarkable is that seven out of Puccini's 12 operas are still regularly performed today. One can hear the influence of Wagner, whom **Puccini** greatly admired, in his early opera, *Manon Lescaut*. By the time he wrote **Gianni Schicci**, the final opera which he completed (he left *Turandot* incomplete), he had long since found his own compositional voice. Travel in 1918 was risky, so Puccini didn't attend the New York premiere of his new set of three one-acts (one tragic, one religious, & one comic), *Il trittico*. The other two operas were overshadowed by the audience's utter delight with the bubbly comedy, *Gianni Schicci*. They demanded an encore of "**O mio babbino caro**" (*O my beloved daddy*), even though encores were strictly forbidden at the Metropolitan Opera. You may recognise this aria from the 1985 film, *A Room with a View*. **This charming short aria is the simple plea of the daughter, Lauretta, not to be separated from the boy she loves.**

The story of *Faust* selling his soul is a familiar one, because Goethe's dramatic poem has inspired a great many other works of music & drama. **Charles Gounod** wrote his *Faust*, the most popular of his 12 operas, over 50 years after the publication of Goethe's dramatic poem. In spite of its lukewarm 1859 Paris premiere, Gounod's opera quickly gained international popularity. The elderly scholar, Faust, makes a deal with the demon Méphistophélès, to regain his youth, in exchange for his soul. Once young & handsome, he falls in love with Marguerite, a beautiful young woman, & has the demon deliver a casket of jewels to her garden. The **Jewel Song** scene opens with her discovering & opening the casket. "*Ah! je ris de me voir si belle en ce miroir*" (*Ah, I laugh to see myself so beautiful in this mirror*) She can't resist trying on the jewels. Admiring herself in the handmirror (which she also found in the casket) she remarks how Faust, whom she just met, would now think her beautiful. **Listen for this showy & sparkling (& vocally demanding) aria to end on a soaring high note.**

Georges Bizet said, "*Wagner is Verdi with the addition of style.*" One doesn't often see both Verdi & Wagner on the same concert programme, so now's your chance to compare them for yourself. Queen Victoria may have agreed, shunning Verdi's *La Traviata*, but greatly admiring *Tannhäuser*. Wolfram von Eschenbach sings this heartfelt aria, near the end of the opera, asking the evening star to lead the way for his love's soul to find heaven. "*O Du mein holder Abendstern*" (*O thou sublime sweet evening star*). The character is based on an actual 12th century German knight by that name, who was also a Minnesinger (a Medieval writer & performer of love poetry & love songs, much like a troubadour). **Richard Wagner** himself conducted the 1845 Dresden premiere, to mixed reviews, leading him to extensively revise the opera. When Emperor Napoleon III requested that the opera be performed at the prestigious Paris Opéra, 16 years later, the production was sabotaged by the audience cat-calling & blowing whistles, causing Wagner to close it after only three performances. After 30 years of revisions, the modern version, as it's now performed, was first seen in Vienna; however, Wagner still wasn't satisfied with it. Three weeks before his death, in 1883, he told his wife that he still owed the world *Tannhäuser*.

What follows is the rousing **Prelude to Act 3 of Lohengrin**, **Wagner's** next opera, which premiered in Weimar, just five years after *Tannhäuser*. The premiere was conducted by Franz Liszt, who chose Goethe's birthday (August 28th) as the concert date, to honour Weimar's famous former resident. Only 2 years his senior, Liszt was well established & did what he could to boost Wagner's career, even sheltering him from Prussian soldiers. Perhaps that's why *Lohengrin* is dedicated to Liszt. This Prelude generates **a sense of excitement & anticipation**, for the final act of the opera. **The strings & woodwinds swirl about like playful zephyrs & cymbals crash like waves, while the brass roar out the thundering Wagnerian melody.** Parts of this Prelude may remind you of the *Wedding March (Here Comes the Bride)*. That's because that familiar piece also comes from *Lohengrin*, & this Prelude introduces it. In the opera, the orchestra goes straight into the *Bridal Chorus* without stopping, as newlyweds walk onstage.

You may recognise **Song to the Moon** from the 1989 film *Driving Miss Daisy*. This heartwrenching aria is near the beginning of Czech composer **Antonín Dvořák's** opera, **Rusalka**, **opening with a gentle harp solo, setting a quiet, contemplative mood.** The story is similar to Hans Christian Andersen's, *The Little Mermaid*. Rusalka is a water nymph, who sings to the moon of the prince, who visits her lake, & with whom she's fallen in love. "*Měsíčku,*

postůj chvíli, řekni mi, řekni, kde je můj milý.” (Tell him, silvery moon, that I am embracing him.) Humans cannot see her, so this aria is her fervent prayer, asking the moon to reveal her love to the prince. Rusalka is the ninth of Dvořák’s 10 operas. He was 60 years old, at its triumphant 1901 Prague premiere, which was at the same theatre where he had played viola in pit orchestras, in his youth.

We also have Liszt to thank, for **Camille Saint-Saëns’** operatic masterpiece, *Samson & Dalila*. Saint-Saëns abandoned the piece for several years, largely due to negative feedback from those to whom he showed the early drafts. The general public in France were also concerned about him staging a Biblical subject (which was banned) & considered him to be merely a Symphonist (not a real opera composer). It was Liszt who encouraged him to finish the opera & who produced its 1877 premiere in Weimar, in a German translation. Despite its immediate success, it was another 13 years before it was performed in France, at last sung in the original French. While we often hear his instrumental works, such as *The Carnival of the Animals & Danse Macabre*, this is the only one of his 13 operas which is performed regularly. Dalila sings her aria, **“Mon coeur s’ouvre à ta voix”** (*My heart opens to your voice*), in the middle of the opera. She sings to Samson, the leader of a revolt of the Hebrew slaves against their oppressors, the Philistines. He has just admitted that he loves her. This is her attempt to seduce him, so that she can manipulate him into revealing the secret behind his enormous strength. She succeeds & Samson is blinded & shackled, having been stripped of his power by removing his long hair.

We then jump ahead, to near the end of the opera. The Philistine crowds have assembled in the temple of Dagon, to enjoy the humiliation of Samson. Before he’s led into the temple, they enjoy the orgiastic **Bacchanale**. **Saint-Saëns** loved exotic sounds & **has the orchestra imitate Arabic instruments & play in an Asian sounding scale. Listen for unexpectedly wider gaps between some notes. It opens with an oboe solo (impersonating a shawm), played over a drone. Alternating between wild abandon & moments of calm, the Bacchanale steadily builds, accelerating & crescendoing in waves.** Named after Bacchus, the Greek god of religious ecstasy & wine, this sensuous dance whips the Philistines into a frenzy, as Samson finally appears, & our concert ends.