

Liberty Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

October 26, 2013

Prologue to Mephistofeles – Boito

Arrigo Boito's (1842–1918) reputation derives primarily from his superb librettos for Giuseppe Verdi's final pair of masterpieces, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, those magnificent operatic "translations" of Shakespeare — and for that composer's Simon Boccanegra. Still, performances of Boito's own opera, *Mephistofele*, crop up enough to remind us that he had some potent compositional blood flowing in his veins. In the powerful prologue to this Goethe-based take on the Faust legend, the Devil wagers with the Almighty that he can win Faust's soul in the aria "Ave Signor." In Act I, the Evil One appears in Faust's den and announces himself in "Son lo spirito" ("I am the Spirit"). Later, the Devil sings "Ecco il mondo" ("Here is the world"), in which he points out to Faust how worthless the world is, before throwing down a glass globe and conjuring an image of Faust's beloved Marguerite wearing a blood-red necklace while evil witches dance furiously close by. © Seattle Symphony

Ichabod Rhapsody - Bartling

There have been many variations and adaptations of this story, but my own *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* is a descriptive work based on the original short story by Washington Irving. It is in three movements, but we will only be hearing the first and the third movement. The first movement, titled *Ichabod Rhapsody*, portrays both the character of Ichabod Crane, who is the protagonist of the story, and the village of Sleepy Hollow. This is a spooky, secluded place whose inhabitants have an overactive imagination and whose conversations are dominated by assorted ghosts and spectres. The favorite of which is the ghost of a soldier who supposedly had his head blown off by a cannonball in the Revolutionary War, but still rides forth into battle with his head in his hands. In this piece, one hears a tenuous opening section of spooky hexatonic harmonies in the brass and an ostinato in the violins. The piece then merges into a more definite, rhythmic character in somewhat of an old-fashioned formal style. This is supposed to represent the harsh, stringent character of Ichabod Crane, who was a schoolteacher who followed strict morals in the classroom. Under this formalism, though, one hears the dissonance of Crane's other side – an immoral, superstitious, gluttonous, and hedonistic man who's only motive is his own gratification, and who is known to make rivals among the inhabitants of sleepy hollow.

After a harvest party filled with food, dancing, and ghost stories, originally portrayed by the second movement, Ichabod Crane comes into contact with the dreaded Headless Horseman. The third movement contains all of the braying, bucking, and galloping that is meant to describe this final scene of the story. All of the orchestral forces join in to create Ichabod's midnight chase outside of Sleepy Hollow, where he is then "spirited away" and never heard from again. But, as we learn from the story, the horseman may just have been one of Ichabod's rivals who utilized the opportunity to chase Ichabod out of town.

Danse Macabre Op. 40 – Saint-Saens

Camille Saint-Saens (1835–1921) was one of the most prolific and successful French composers of his time writing in virtually all genres, including opera, symphonies, concertos, songs, sacred and secular choral music, solo piano, and chamber music.

A child prodigy, he began piano lessons at two-and-a-half and by the age of four was composing pieces for the piano. At seven he studied composition and at ten he gave a remarkable debut recital in which as an encore he offered to play any of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas from memory. In 1848, he entered the Paris Conservatory and studied organ and composition. By his early twenties, following the completion of two symphonies, he had won the admiration and support of many prominent composers such as Berlioz, Liszt and Rossini.

Saint-Saens was one of many young musicians who received encouragement and artistic support from Franz Liszt and Liszt's influence is apparent in many of his works. Liszt is credited with the creation of the symphonic, or tone, poem in 1853 and Saint-Saens was the first Frenchman to compose in that genre.

The *Danse Macabre* was the third of Saint-Saens' four tone poems and while it is his most frequently performed orchestral work, it was not originally conceived in orchestral terms. It was adapted from one of his songs for voice and piano incorporating a poem of the same name by Henri Cazalis. In 1874, he expanded and reworked the piece into a tone poem, replacing the vocal line with a solo violin.

Cazalis' poem is based on an old French legend. In that legend, every Halloween when the clock chimes midnight, the figure of Death appears, first tuning his violin then playing an eerie waltz. As he plays, skeletons come out of their graves and dance to the music. The xylophone makes the sound of the dry bones dancing. The strings make the sound of the wind blowing and the skeletons laughing as they dance. The dance gets faster and faster, louder and louder. A rooster crows as the morning dawns, Death plays one last sad tune and the skeletons must return to their graves until the next year.

The use of the xylophone to portray the rattling of the bones was something of a novelty at the time since the instrument had only recently been developed. Realizing that orchestras might have trouble locating a specimen, he arranged that one would be available for his publisher to lend with the orchestral parts.

When *Danse Macabre* was premiered in Paris, it was immediately encored in full. Since then, it has remained one of Saint-Saens' most popular pieces with films and television providing endless opportunities to hear it again in sound tracks.

Star Wars Imperial March - Williams

In a career that has spanned almost six decades, John Williams has composed some of the most recognizable film scores in the history of motion pictures. He has won five Academy Awards, four Golden Globes and 21 Grammy Awards. Of the nearly 90 films Williams has scored, 45 have received Academy Award nominations. He is the second most nominated person after Walt Disney. Other notable works by Williams include theme music for four Olympic Games, the NBC Nightly News and numerous classical concerti. He also served as the principal conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra from 1980 to 1993. However, to the general public, his most memorable pieces will be the scores for the *Star Wars* double trilogy, the *Indiana Jones* series and the first three films of the *Harry Potter* series.

In 1974, Williams was approached by director Steven Spielberg to compose the music for his feature directorial debut, *The Sugarland Express*. Spielberg was convinced that Williams could compose the musical sound that he desired for any of his films. They teamed up again a year later for Spielberg's second film, *Jaws*. The film scores ominous two-note motif has become synonymous with sharks and approaching danger. The score for *Jaws* earned Williams his second Academy Award, his first for an original composition. Williams would go on to score all but two of Spielberg's films.

During the same period, Spielberg recommended Williams to his friend and fellow director George Lucas, who needed a composer to score his ambitious space epic, *Star Wars*. Lucas originally intended to use classical music for the soundtrack, as Kubrick had done with **2001: A Space Odyssey**. He had assembled a "temp score" from his favorite orchestral pieces. John Williams convinced Lucas to allow him to compose original music, preserving the *feel* of the temp tracks while also creating an overall musical cohesion and unique musical identity for the film.

Star Wars often is credited as the beginning of a revival of grand symphonic scores for films in the late 1970s. Williams' use of a technique called "leitmotif" was a particular influence in this revival. A leitmotif (little motive) is a musical theme which represents a character or idea, a technique found most often in operas. Once an audience has learned the set of leitmotifs, a composer can suggest complex and subtle relationships between characters and ideas by playing those leitmotifs at different tempos, with different instruments and in different combinations. Leitmotifs are particularly effective because people tend to have a much stronger emotional reaction to information conveyed through music than the same information conveyed through spoken word. This technique is most famously associated with the operas of Richard Wagner. As a student of the Wagnerian leitmotif, Williams used the technique throughout the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* and *Harry Potter* episodes writing strong melodies to distinguish individual characters, locations and themes.

In *Star Wars*, the Main Theme appears in all episodes and is the anthem of the saga, easily the most recognisable melody and is associated with Luke, heroism and adventure. It is heard over the opening crawl at the beginning of all the films and forms the basis of the end-title as well. *Princess Leia's Theme* represents the romanticized, somewhat naïve idea of the princess. It is most often heard in Episode IV, but is also used in the next two films when she is acting on her own or when she is particularly vulnerable. The *Imperial March* or *Darth Vader's Theme* represents the totalitarian Galactic Empire as a whole and Darth Vader specifically. The March has attained an iconic status in the Western consciousness as a general 'evil theme'. Musical features include relentless martial rhythm and dark, non-diatonic harmonic support. *Yoda's Theme* is a gentle melody for the Jedi Master who appears in five of the six films along with his music. The theme is closely associated with his teachings and abilities. In the *Throne Room* and end title pieces, Williams created an extended version of the triumphant, ceremonial music heard at the end of the original film.

Night on Bald Mountain – Modest Mussorgsky

Mussorgsky (1839 – 1881) along with fellow Russian composers Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Cui and Borodin formed a group referred to as The Mighty Five. It was the groups aim to produce a specifically Russian kind of music, rather than one that imitated European music or relied on the European style of conservatory training. The members of this group influenced or taught many of the great Russian composers including Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Shostakovich and French composers Ravel and Debussy. For Mussorgsky, the development of a uniquely Russian musical expression lay in the countries legends, literature and in the primitive earthiness of Russian folk music.

Having received a military education, he lacked the degree of musical sophistication other composers attained in conservatory studies. As a result, his composition reflects an unrefined style based on self instruction and instinct rather than formal training. However, though his lack of training did not impede his compositional energies, the technical limitations which he endured frustrated him immensely, and ultimately contributed to his death at 42 from alcoholism.

After Mussorgsky's death, Rimsky-Korsakov took it upon himself to put his friend's chaotic musical portfolio in order. He completed several unfinished compositions and revised a number of others. One of these revisions was the tone poem *Night on Bald Mountain*.

While in his teens, Mussorgsky became interested in composing a work based on Nikolai Gogol's short story, *St. John's Eve*. The story relates the Russian legend of a witches' Sabbath, believed to occur on a barren mountaintop each year on St. John's Night, near the summer solstice.

He originally envisioned the story as a three-act opera. However, because of the compositional difficulties in giving his inspiration form, the operatic project failed. By 1867, the idea settled into being an orchestral tone poem. Mussorgsky was pleased with the piece but his fellow composers were highly critical of the work's bold orchestration and audacious harmonies. Consequently, he withdrew the piece and never heard it performed. He later made two attempts to salvage some of the work. In 1872 he adapted parts of the score for an aborted ballet project and near the end of his life he reworked portions of it as a scene in an unfinished opera.

After Mussorgsky's death in 1881, the score was revised by Rimsky-Korsakov. It was first performed in 1886 with Rimsky-Korsakov conducting and was received with great acclaim. It was the first work that earned for Mussorgsky the popular success that had been denied him during his lifetime.

Many people became acquainted with *Night on Bald Mountain* through Walt Disney's animated 1940 film *Fantasia*, which used an arrangement of Rimsky-Korsakov's revision by Leopold Stokowski.

Mars, the Bringer of War - Holst

Gustav Holst (1874 - 1934) was an English composer, arranger and teacher whose portfolio contains nearly 200 works including operas, chamber, vocal, and orchestral music. His compositions encompassed many different styles and were based on subjects as varied as folk songs, Tudor music, Sanskrit literature, astrology, and contemporary poetry. He is best known for his orchestral suite *The Planets*.

Holst came from a family of professional musicians and had hoped to become a pianist. Unfortunately, he suffered from a number of health issues which plagued him his entire life. Pain from neuritis in his arms eventually prevented him from playing piano and violin. He had developed asthma as a child and as a form of therapy he studied trombone. Physical disabilities prevented his ambitions as a performer but they encouraged him to pursue composition. In 1893, he entered the Royal Academy of Music where he met fellow composer Ralph Vaughan Williams who became his lifelong friend.

He left the Royal Academy in 1898 but unable to support himself by his compositions, he played the trombone professionally with the Scottish Orchestra and other groups. In 1904, wanting to devote more time to composition, he quit the orchestra to become a music teacher at St. Paul's Girls School, a position he held until his death.

Holst started to compose his first and only work for a large orchestra, *The Planets*, in 1914. The work is not a symphony but a suite of seven subtly interrelated tone poems or, as Holst preferred to call them, "mood pictures."

The Planets, op. 32 (1914-16)

- Mars, the Bringer of War
- Venus, the Bringer of Peace
- Mercury, the Winged Messenger
- Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity
- Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age
- Uranus, the Magician
- Neptune, the Mystic

The suite was written as a result of Holst's interest in astrology and the astrological influence of the planets on man's character. He didn't include the Earth and Pluto had yet to be discovered.

The first movement, *Mars, the Bringer of War*, describes the ancient association between Mars and war. Its rhythm is brutal and remorseless. It creates a sound of frightening power, relentless marching and suggests the terrible destruction which war brings. Holst insisted that *Mars* should be performed at a quick tempo, faster than a normal march, enhancing the idea of mechanized warfare and inhuman forces.

Holst completed *Mars* several months before the outbreak of World War I in August, 1914. The remaining movements were completed over the next 2 years and the first performance was given in London in September, 1918.

Movements from *The Planets* have been used repeatedly in film, television and advertising soundtracks. Although it remains Holst's most popular work, he did not consider it among his best creations. Later in life he complained that its popularity had completely surpassed his other works.