

**MATT'S PLAYLIST: ECHOES OF THE FUTURE
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT**

Matthew Aucoin, conductor

January 25 and 27, 2019

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Excerpt from *It's Gonna Rain*

STEVE REICH (born 1938)

In 1964 Steve Reich – then only 25 – was experimenting with loops of magnetic tape. On those loops was a recorded excerpt of a street preacher, Brother Walter, giving a sermon on Noah and the Flood in Union Square, San Francisco. As part of that sermon, Brother Walter offered the ominous warning: “It’s gonna rain.” Reich played different loops of that recording simultaneously on different playback machines, but the machines went at slightly different speeds, and gradually the words “It’s gonna rain” went out of phase. Intrigued by the way these tape samples overlapped and began to create rhythms of their own, Reich proceeded to compose a piece for magnetic tape based on the idea of repetitive, out-of-phase sounds, specifically the refrain from Brother Walter’s sermon. (He also included the sound of flapping pigeon wings recorded in Union Square) The result, titled *It’s Gonna Rain*, premiered in January 1965; it has become a classic of its kind, one of the works that opened the door to both minimalism and ambient music (compositions that make use of the sounds a composer hears around him).

These Premises are Alarmed

THOMAS ADÈS (born 1971)

The Hallé Orchestra of Manchester, England, moved into its new venue in Bridgewater Hall in 1996. For its opening concerts, the English composer Thomas Adès contributed a brief piece that might be described as a curtain-raiser, but the composer put a more specific edge on his intentions in his own introduction to the piece: “The thrill of writing for a new, as yet unknown, acoustic was at the forefront of my mind in composing *These Premises are Alarmed*, and the central section of the piece is disguised to give as strong a sense as possible of the size and shape of the space it is played in...As for the title, I felt that any important new building must need adequate security, and what better way could there be of proofing a new concert hall than with brand new music?”

These Premises are Alarmed is a brilliant piece, distinctive for its range of sounds – at one moment the music sparkles and glitters, and instantly it can turn powerful, unleashing the sonic punch of a huge symphony orchestra. The tempo is very fast (quarter note=120), though Adès reins things back slightly for the middle section before the music then accelerates to the emphatic final chord.

“Introduction” from *The Creation*

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)

Haydn’s two visits to London during the 1790s brought the discovery of Handel’s music, and Haydn was almost struck dumb with admiration. To a friend he confided that he felt “as if I had been put back to the beginning of my studies and had known nothing up to that point,” and so Haydn returned to Vienna intent on writing music of similar grandeur. He found a suitably grand topic in the description of the creation of the Earth in the Book of Genesis, and between 1796 and 1798 he composed *The Creation*. That oratorio begins with an Introduction, also known as *The Representation of Chaos*, a musical depiction of the unformed void before God gave it shape. Haydn suggests this void with some – for him – almost shocking music. It is formless, wandering disconsolately and bleakly one moment, erupting with explosive energy and unexpected harmonies the next. After all this uncertainty, the music drifts into silence. Light and order will arrive shortly, but Haydn’s music does in fact leave us in darkest “chaos.”

Movement I from *Symphony No. 1 in C Major, Op. 21*

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Beethoven’s genial First Symphony, composed in 1799-1800, is a very straightforward late-eighteenth-century symphony, the product of a talented young man quite aware of the examples of Haydn and Mozart and anxious to master the most challenging musical form he had faced so far. One of the most impressive things about Beethoven’s First Symphony is just how conservative it is. It uses the standard Haydn-Mozart orchestra of pairs of winds plus timpani and strings, its form is right out of Haydn, and its spirit is consistently carefree. There are no battles fought and won here, no grappling with darkness and struggling toward the light – the distinction of the First Symphony lies simply in its crisp energy and exuberant music-making.

The key signature of this symphony may suggest that it is in C Major, but the first movement’s slow introduction opens with a stinging discord that glances off into the unexpected key of F Major. Only gradually does Beethoven “correct” the tonality when the orchestra alights gracefully on C Major at the *Allegro con brio*. Many have noticed the resemblance between Beethoven’s sturdy main theme here and the opening of Mozart’s *Jupiter* Symphony, composed 12 years earlier. This is not a case of plagiarism or of slavish imitation – only a young man’s awareness of the thunder behind him.

“Prologue” from *Crossing Suite*
MATTHEW AUCOIN (born 1990)

Matthew Aucoin’s opera *Crossing* was premiered in Boston in 2015. The opera’s title and inspiration come from Walt Whitman’s poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” During the Civil War Whitman worked as a volunteer nurse in hospitals that were treating wounded soldiers, and he kept a private journal of his reactions to the suffering, pain, friendship, sacrifice and patriotism he witnessed on his daily rounds. From these journals – and the questions posed in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” – Aucoin composed an opera in which Walt Whitman confronts not only the meaning of war but the larger question of how human beings relate meaningfully to each other. The composer has prepared an introduction to *Crossing*:

“What is it, then, between us?” With this resonant question at the climax of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman asks many things at once: what is his relationship to his contemporaries, his fellow men and women? What is his relationship to you, the reader, whoever you may be, whenever and wherever you may be reading his poem? And what is the relationship between the contradictory elements of his own self? The phrase “between us” itself has a double meaning: what is the relationship between us, and what stands between us, keeping us apart?

In the moment that Whitman asks this question, he is in a state of unknowing: he wants to know, and needs to know. *Crossing* emerges out of my sense that Whitman wrote his poetry out of need – that his poetry is not, or is not exclusively, a vigorous assertion of what he is, but rather the expression of a yearning to be what he is not, or to reconcile opposing aspects of his identity. The person/persona/personality “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs” is the living product of this need.

So, in *Crossing*, the Walt Whitman who walks the stage is not that familiar poetic persona. Rather, this is Whitman as I imagine he might have been to himself, starting from a midlife crisis which prompts his radical, heroic decision to drop everything and volunteer in war hospitals. Naturally, this Whitman is a fictional creation. *Crossing* is a musical fantasia which imagines and realizes the many forces – generosity, insecurity, longing, selflessness, bravery, unfulfilled sexual desire, a need to escape his own life, a boundless kindness – that caused a man named Walter Whitman, Jr. to forge an indelible embodiment of the American spirit in his poetry.

From the opera, Aucoin drew a five-movement concert suite, and this concert offers two of those movements. In the *Prologue*, which functions as the “overture” to the opera, Walt Whitman introduces himself to the audience, explains how he has ended up working in a hospital, and wonders what it is that he is searching for.

Movement IV from Symphony No. 4 in A minor, Op. 63
JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

Sibelius completed his Fourth Symphony in February 1911, intentionally paring back textures to bone-chilling extremes: “Instead of a cocktail, I gave them cold, clear water,” Sibelius said. “It has nothing, absolutely nothing of the circus about it.” The finale, marked simply *Allegro*, flashes to life with the violins ripping upward and then plunging back into a seething rush of energy – at moments this movement feels like a perpetual-motion. A feeling of barely-controlled energy runs through the finale: blocks of chords slam against each other, and strings scurry madly up and down the scale. Through this texture the bright sound of tuned bells rings like flashes of light. The music drives to what the ear senses will be a climax, but Sibelius will have none of it. The tempo slows, strings offer a series of dark A minor chords, and the Fourth Symphony vanishes in the same mystery that has driven every moment of this elusive music.

Spins and Spells

KAIJA SAARIAHO (born 1952)

In 1997 the Sixth Rostropovich Cello Competition in Paris asked Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho to contribute the test-piece for that year’s contestants, and she responded with *Spins and Spells*. *Spins and Spells* is a competition piece, so it is brief yet designed to be technically challenging and also to allow performers to demonstrate their skill. This music’s difficulties are compounded by Saariaho’s decision to require that the cello be re-tuned: instead of being tuned to the customary fifths, her radical re-tuning (scordatura) sets the strings in major sixths and minor thirds. In a note in the published score, Saariaho describes the significance of her title: “The title evokes the two gestures which are at the origin of the work: on the one hand the pattern which I call ‘spinning tops’ turning around on the one spot or undergoing changes, and on the other, timeless moments, centred on the sound colour and texture.” The emphasis in this

music is not just on technique but on the creation of a particular kind of sonority, and Saariaho notes that the music evokes the “instrumental colours of another age...seen and transformed again through my own universe.”

“Entrée de Polymnie” from *Les Boréades*
JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (1683-1764)

One of Rameau’s final operas, *Les Boréades* was rehearsed in Paris in 1763, but apparently not performed, and it had to wait until long after its composer’s death for a production. The opera tells of the abduction of Queen Alphise by the violent boréades, descendants of the North Wind. The “Entrance of Polymnie” comes from Act IV, when Polymnia – goddess of poetry, dance and eloquence – descends to encourage the despairing hero Abaris to set out to rescue Alphise. The music that accompanies her appearance is elegant and graceful, well-suited to the dignity and powers of this goddess.

Play: Level 1
ANDREW NORMAN (born 1979)

Andrew Norman studied composition and piano at USC and Yale and now teaches at the USC Thornton School of Music. *Play* was composed for the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, which gave the premiere of the original version on May 17, 2013. *Play* is a big work: it is in three sections (called “Levels” rather than movements), which span about 45 minutes. Norman has noted that the first and third Levels can be performed separately, and this concert presents Level 1. The composer has prepared a program note:

I am fascinated by how instruments are played, and how the physical act of playing an instrument becomes potent theatrical material when we foreground it on stage at an orchestra concert. I’m also fascinated by how the orchestra, as a meta-instrument, is played, how its many moving parts and people can play with or against or apart from one another. While the word “play” certainly connotes fun and whimsy and a child-like exuberance, it can also hint at a darker side of interpersonal relationships, at manipulation, control, deceit, and the many forms of master-to-puppet dynamics one could possibly extrapolate from the composer-conductor-orchestra-audience chain of communication. Much of this piece is concerned with who is playing whom. The

percussionists, for instance, spend a lot of their time and energy “playing” the rest of the orchestra (just as they themselves are “played” by the conductor, who in turn is “played” by the score). Specific percussion instruments act as triggers, turning on and off various players, making them (sometimes in the spirit of jest, sometimes not) play louder or softer, forwards or backwards, faster or slower. They cause the music to rewind and retry things, to jump back and forth in its own narrative structure, and to change channels entirely, all with an eye and ear toward finding a way out of the labyrinth and on to some higher level.

-Andrew Norman

“Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen” from *Rückert Lieder*

GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

In the summer of 1901 Gustav Mahler began his Fifth Symphony, but he was also drawn to song that summer, and he had been reading the work of the German poet Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866). He set a number of Rückert poems, and five of these have been collected under the general title *Rückert-Lieder*. “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen” (O garish world, long since thou hast lost me) has become one of Mahler’s best-known songs. Perhaps the most telling thing about this song is that Mahler would choose to set this text – with its longing for escape from the world – at precisely the moment he occupied one of the most important (and tumultuous) positions in the musical world, the directorship of the Vienna Opera. This is haunting music – it almost seems to exist outside time, and its lean textures, aspiring melodic lines and utter calm in the face of the frenzy of the world strike a chord in every listener. One of Mahler’s friends visited him during the summer of 1901 and quoted him on “Ich bin der Welt”: “He himself said of the uncommonly full and restrained character of this song that it was feeling from the heart right up into the lips but it never passed them! He also said this was himself!”

“The Shrove-Tide Fair” from *Petrushka* (1947 version)

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

Stravinsky was at work on *The Rite of Spring* when he was consumed by a new idea: “I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggi. The orchestra in turn retaliates

with menacing trumpet-blasts. The outcome is a terrific noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet.” This became a ballet about Petrushka, “the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries.”

The ballet comes to its grim climax in the *Part 4: The Shrovetide Fair*. A festive crowd swirls past, and Stravinsky offers a series of ballet set-pieces here: the *Dance of the Nurse-Maids*, *The Peasant and the Bear* (depicted by squealing clarinet and stumbling tuba), *Dance of the Gypsy Women*, *Dance of the Coachmen and Grooms* (who stamp powerfully) and *Masqueraders*. At the very end, poor Petrushka rushes into the square, pursued by the Moor, who kills him with a slash of his scimitar. As a horrified crowd gathers, the magician appears and reassures all that it is make-believe by holding up Petrushka’s body to show it dripping sawdust. As he drags the slashed body away, the ghost of Petrushka appears above the rooftops, railing defiantly at the terrified magician, who flees.

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” from *Crossing Suite*
MATTHEW AUCOIN

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry is not a setting of Whitman’s lengthy poem. Instead, it uses key lines from that poem as a structuring device: amidst the splendor of crossing a river on a beautiful day, the poet muses on the dark side of human nature and notes that those “dark patches” can fall not only on himself but on every one of us. The soloist in the two excerpts from Matthew Aucoin’s opera is baritone Rod Gilfry, who sang the part of Walt Whitman at the opera’s premiere.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger